

ELEANOR ATKINSON

LINCOLN'S
LOVE STORY

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Lincoln's Love Story

In the sweet spring weather of 1835, Abraham Lincoln made a memorable journey. It was the beginning of his summer of love on the winding banks of the Sangamon. Only one historian has noted it as a happy interlude in a youth of struggle and unsatisfied longings, but the tender memory of Ann Rutledge, the girl who awaited him at the end of it, must have remained with him to the day of his martyrdom.

He was returning from Vandalia, Illinois, then the capital, and his first term in the state legislature, to the backwoods village of New Salem that had been his home for four years. The last twenty miles of the journey, from the town of Springfield, he made on a hired horse. The landscape through which he rode that April morning still holds its enchantment; the swift, bright river still winds in and out among the wooded hills, for the best farming lands lie back of the gravelly bluffs, on the black loam prairie. But three-quarters of a century ago central Illinois was an almost primeval world. Settlements were few and far apart. No locomotive awoke the echoes among the verdant ridges, no smoke darkened the silver ribbon of the river, no coal-mine gashed the green hillside. Here and there a wreath of blue marked the hearth-fire of a forest home, or beyond a gap in the bluff a log-cabin stood amid the warm brown furrows of a clearing; but for the most part the Sangamon River road was broken through a sylvan wilderness.

There were walnut groves then, as there are still oaks and maples. Among the darker boles the trunks of sycamores gleamed. In the bottoms the satin foliage of the cottonwood shimmered in the sun, and willows silvered in the breeze. Honey-locusts, hawthorn and wild crab-apple trees were in bloom, dogwood made pallid patches in the glades and red-bud blushed. Wild flowers of low growth carpeted every grassy slope. The earth exhaled all those mysterious fragrances with which the year renews its youth. In April the mating season would be over and the birds silent, a brooding stillness possess an efflorescent Eden.

It was a long enough ride for a young man to indulge in memories and dreams. A tall, ungainly youth of twenty-six was this rising backwoods politician. He wore a suit of blue jeans, the trousers stuffed in the tops of cowhide boots; a hat of rabbit-fur felt, with so long a nap that it looked not unlike the original pelt, was pushed back from his heavy black hair. But below primitive hat and unruly hair was a broad, high forehead, luminous gray eyes of keen intelligence, softened by sympathy and lit with humour, features of rugged strength, and a wide mouth, full and candid and sweet. His wardrobe was in his saddle-bags; his library of law books, most of them borrowed, in a portmanteau on his saddle-bow; a hundred dollars or so of his pay as a legislator in his belt, and many times that amount pledged to debtors. His present living was precarious; his only capital reputation, courage, self-confidence and a winning personality; his fortune still under his shabby hat.

But this morning he was not to be dismayed. Difficulties dissolved, under this fire of spring in his heart, as the snow had melted in the sugar groves. The sordid years fell away from him; debts no longer burdened his spirit. That sombre outlook upon life, his heritage from a wistful, ill-fated mother, was dissipated in the sun of love.

It was on such an April morning as this, four years before, that he had first seen Ann Rutledge. She was in the crowd that had come down to the mill to cheer him when he got the flat-boat he was taking to New Orleans safely over New Salem dam. Ann was eighteen then, and she stood out from the villagers gathered on the bank by reason of a certain fineness of beauty and bearing. Her crown of hair was so pale a gold as to be almost flaxen. Besides always being noted as kind and happy, her

eyes are described as a dark, violet-blue, with brown brows and lashes. Her colouring was now rose, now pearl, changing like the anemones that blow along the banks of the Sangamon.¹

Hero of the day, the raw youth was taken up the bluff and over the ridge into the busy town of twenty log-houses and shops. He was feasted in the eight-room tavern of hewn logs owned by her father, James Rutledge, and for an hour entertained a crowd of farmers, emigrants, and shopkeepers with droll stories – stories that, unknown to him, would be repeated before nightfall over a radius of twenty miles. He was beginning to discover that men liked to hear him talk, and to wonder if this facility for making friends could be turned to practical use. But as a young man whose fancy had fed on a few books and many dreams, it may have meant more that this beautiful girl waited on the table, laughed at his jokes – too kind of heart, too gentle of breed, to laugh at his awkwardness – and praised his wit and cleverness and strength.

When he pushed his boat off, Ann waved her kerchief from the bank. He looked back at her outlined against the green bluff, to fix it in a memory none too well-furnished with such gracious pictures. He might never see her again. Poor, obscure, indifferently self-educated, unaware of his own powers, he saw before him, at that time, only the vagabond life of a river boatman, or the narrow opportunities of a farm labourer. But he displayed such qualities on that voyage as to win his employer. In July he returned to New Salem as a clerk in Denton Offutt's store.

It is not probable that Lincoln was conscious of a pang when he heard that Ann Rutledge was engaged to marry John McNeill, proprietor of the best store in the town and of rich farming lands. Daughter of the mill and tavern owner, descended from a family of South Carolina planters that boasted a Signer of the Declaration, a Chief Justice of the Supreme Court under President Washington, and a leader in an early Congress, she was far above the penniless, undistinguished store-clerk. In the new West ability and worth could push itself to the front as nowhere else in the world, but pioneer society was not so democratic but that birth and wealth had their claims to consideration.

Most girls, at that time, were married at eighteen, but Ann was still studying under the Scotch schoolmaster, Mentor Graham. Lincoln met her often at the "spell-downs" with which the school closed the Friday afternoon sessions. When he returned from an inglorious Indian campaign the next year, he went to the Rutledge tavern to board. He had risen rapidly in public esteem, had captained a local company in the war, made a vigorous campaign for the legislature, and betrayed a wide and curious knowledge of books and public questions. A distinguished career was already predicted for him.

He and Ann were fast friends now, and for the next year and a half he saw her daily in her most endearing aspects of elder sister and daughter. It was a big, old-fashioned family of nine children, and Ann did the sewing and much of the spinning and weaving. At meal times she waited on the long tables, bringing platters of river fish, game, and pork from the kitchen fire-place, corn and wheat bread and hominy, milk and butter, honey and maple sugar, pots of coffee, and preserves made from wild berries and honey. Amid the crowds of rough men and the occasional fine gentleman, who could not but note her beauty and sweetness, Ann held an air of being more protected and sheltered in her father's house than was often possible in a frontier tavern.

The meal over, she vanished into the family room. One chimney corner was hers for her low chair of hickory splints, her spinning wheel, and her sewing table, with its little drawer for thread and scissors. About her work in the morning she wore a scant-skirted tight-fitting gown of blue or brown linsey. But for winter evenings the natural cream-white of flax and wool was left undyed, or it was coloured with saffron, a dull orange that glorified her blond loveliness. She had wide, cape-like collars of home-made lace, pinned with a cameo or painted brooch, and a high comb of tortoise-shell behind the shining coil of her hair, that made her look like the picture of a court lady stepped out of its frame. Not an hour of privation or sorrow had touched her since the day she was born.

¹ See Note.

On the women whom Lincoln had known and loved – his mother, his stepmother, and his sister – pioneer life had laid those pitiless burdens that filled so many early, forlorn graves. Ann's fostered youth and unclouded eyes must have seemed to him a blessed miracle; filled him with determination so to cherish his own when love should crown his manhood.

The regular boarders at the tavern were a part of that patriarchal family – Ann's lover McNeill, Lincoln, and others. The mother was at her wheel, the little girls had their knitting or patchwork, the boys their lessons. The young men played checkers or talked politics. James Rutledge smoked his pipe, read the latest weekly paper from St. Louis or Kaskaskia, and kept a fond eye on Ann.

The beautiful girl sat there in the firelight, knitting lace or sewing, her skilful fingers never idle; but smiling, listening to the talk, making a bright comment now and then, wearing somehow, in her busiest hour, an air of leisure, with all the time in the world for others, as a lady should. In the country parlance Ann was always spoken of as "good company." Sweet-natured and helpful, the boys could always go to her with their lessons, or the little sisters with a dropped stitch or tangled thread. With the latest baby, she was a virginal madonna. Lincoln attended the fire, held Mrs. Rutledge's yarn, rocked the cradle, and told his inimitable stories. When he had mastered Kirkham's Grammar he began to teach Ann the mysteries of parsing and analysis.

After the school debate one night a year before, Mentor Graham, one of those scholarly pedagogues who leavened the West with learning, had thrilled him with ambition by telling him he had a gift for public speaking, but that he needed to correct many inaccuracies and crudities of speech. Text books were scarce, but he knew of a grammar owned by a farmer who lived seven miles in the country. Lincoln got up at daylight, filled his pockets with corn dodgers, and went for that grammar. He must have bought it, paying for it in work, for he afterward gave it to Ann – his single gift to her, or at least the only one that is preserved. Her brother Robert's descendants have to-day this little old text-book, inscribed on the title-page in Lincoln's handwriting:

Ann M. Rutledge is now learning grammar.

How eloquent that battered, faded, yellow-leafed little old grammar is of the ambitions and attainments that set these two apart from the unrecorded lives in that backwoods community! Ann was betrothed, and her content and trust in her lover were something beautiful to see, but McNeill's figure is vague. There is no description of him, few facts about him are remembered, except that he had prospered and won Ann Rutledge's love. In the stories of the region, that have now taken on the legendary haze of cherished romance, Lincoln is the hero, long before he appears in the character of chivalrous suitor.

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