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THE EMBITTERED YOUTH

With the exception of the recent work by Beveridge, no study of Lincoln has been so widely announced as the biography by Emil Ludwig. One year ago last February, after having spent a few weeks in the United States, the famous German writer made known that his "Napoleon" would be followed by a "Lincoln." American editors at that time questioned his ability to make a worth while interpretation of the Emancipator, with so limited a knowledge of the actual environment in which Lincoln moved. Their prediction is fully justified by the contents of the first instalment of the biography, which appears in the September issue of the *Cosmopolitan*.

The glaring inaccuracies in dramatizing the atmosphere in which the Lincolns lived, the lack of orientation which causes many significant blunders in distances and directions, the inability of the author to present a sympathetic interpretation of pioneer life and customs, must be passed by in order that the limited space for this review may be used to discuss the main theme of Lincoln's early life, as it is set forth by the author.

The editorial foreword, introducing "Ludwig's Story of Lincoln," informs the reader that he will meet first of all, *The Embittered Youth*. The attention of the reviewer will be focused on the characters with whom Abraham Lincoln came in contact during this early period, and his reaction towards them. The reader may then conclude whether or not the circumstances warrant such a strange characterization of the lad.

One would have difficulty in recognizing Lincoln's parents in the author's sketches of them. The father becomes a veritable Robinson Crusoe. He is dressed in skins made from the game he had shot, and with gun on his shoulder and dog by his side he is featured as "the hunter." In appearance he is "tall, dark, and bearded." The old charges of illiteracy, laziness, and ne'er-do-well are again rehearsed, although reliable authorities have long since discarded these characteristics as exaggerations. Those who knew Thomas Lincoln claim he was of medium height, with grey or light blue eyes, and was always clean shaven. He was most certainly not a hunter, in the pioneer sense of that word, and the minor political offices he filled reveal him to

have been a substantial citizen of the community. His economic welfare was equal to, if not above, that of the average pioneer as shown by the tax reports.

The mother fares no better than the father in the author's presentation of her. He says "she has the wonderful memory of an illiterate and sometimes tells Bible stories to her children." In the Scripps biographical sketch, which was reviewed and apparently approved by President Lincoln himself, she is set forth as a ready reader and the Bible was habitually read in the presence of the children. Not only does the author question her intelligence but reflects on her strict religious attitude by claiming she could not dance the other women in the community, an unpardonable sin in the pioneer church of which she was a member. Her social standing in the community is lowered by several degrees when the author sends her out to work among the neighbors. The most unjust reference of all is the supposition that she was not her husband's real sweetheart but his second choice as a wife. Her knowledge of this fact, the author claims, helped to give her a melancholy spirit.

Sarah Johnston Lincoln, second wife of Thomas, is also presented in an unfavorable light when her marriage relations are considered. The author says she married her first husband, Johnston, because he was "better off" than her other suitor, and that three months after this first husband died she married Thomas Lincoln. The facts here as revealed by court records show that Johnston was much poorer than his rival and that he had been dead over three years and a half before his widow married Lincoln. Other statements about her family and possessions are unreliable.

The author again engages in pure speculation when he attempts to explain the relation of Nancy Hanks to the Sparrow family. The Aunt Sparrow who appears to be the one enlightened and truly intelligent woman associated with the boy Lincoln, was in fact according to sworn affidavits of her Kentucky neighbors, wholly illiterate. Yet, this humble woman who, in the imagination of the author, blossoms into an attractive, dignified, grey-haired matron who has traveled far afield and witnessed some of the struggles of the Revolutionary War, passes away on "a leaf bed in a pole shed."

These exaggerated sketches help to pave the way for the presentation of *The Embittered Youth*. When Abraham was but nine years of age, although his own mother was still living, he seeks out his aunt to make some inquiries about his mother's maiden name. "He must have detected Aunt Sparrow's embarrassment when he questioned her about this" is the author's conclusion. When, at the age of seventeen, "he is told the amazing truth" that his mother, dead

for eight years, was not a natural born child, "his temperamental melancholy is intensified into depression" and his whole young life is blighted and embittered.

As a sequel to this crushing blow, the author introduces the unknown grandfather of Abraham Lincoln, his mother's father. He describes him as a Revolutionary soldier, a Southerner, a gentleman, and possibly a slave owner. From this unnamed progenitor Abraham Lincoln is said to have inherited his peculiarities and gifts. Evidently the author does not feel that Abraham's mother, the alleged daughter of this gifted citizen, shared in the inheritance which came to her own son. She is reduced to a nonentity with the exception of having "a lovely voice," and even this characteristic she was not allowed to pass on to her son. The only good word which the author has to say about Nancy Hanks Lincoln is that she was kind to her children. Thomas Lincoln is roughly brushed out of the picture when Abraham is but nine years of age, as the author says, "The father is no longer dear to him." Child psychology suffers from this deduction, as the Robinson Crusoe type of man is usually worshipped at this period in a boy's life.

When the author alleges that the main cause of Lincoln's embittered youth rests upon the knowledge of his mother's illegitimacy, he is building his whole structure on an untenable tradition. The author is correct in tracing to Dennis Hanks some stories about the Hanks family, but Dennis Hanks denied emphatically to his dying day that Lincoln's mother was a baseborn child. Whatever Dennis may have told Abraham Lincoln at any time about his mother, he did not tell him she was illegitimate because he did not believe it. When Dennis Hanks was sixty-five years of age, William Herndon interviewed him and asked him to straighten out the lineage of Lincoln's mother. With no family Bible to aid him, and with no opportunity to talk with any of the Hanks sisters for the past forty-seven years, he was asked to set down marriage contracts which were made from six to fifteen years before he was born. That he made some mistakes would seem quite natural.

On William Herndon and not on Dennis Hanks must rest the responsibility of the original charge of illegitimacy against the mother of Abraham Lincoln. Instead of taking Dennis' unwavering testimony to the contrary, he works out of the confused genealogical data gathered by Dennis, a theory of his own. Sixteen years before Herndon had occasion to make note of the incident, he claims that Abraham Lincoln told him his mother was an illegitimate child. Through all those years Herndon had not forgotten that the obscure grandmother's name was Lucy and that the father of her child was a well-bred Virginia farmer or planter. It will be remembered that this informant once brought the same charge of illegitimacy against Abraham Lincoln. It is to be regretted that a biographer with the reputation of Emil Ludwig will now bring into Abraham Lincoln's own early experience, an influence based on pure tradition, which would cause Lincoln to be known as *The Embittered Youth*.