

Lincoln and Lamon: Partners and Friends

By

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CHAPTER I

The scene was the office of the Charleston hotel, in Charleston, South Carolina, March 25, 1861. A broad-shouldered giant, 6 feet 2 inches in height, had just entered the lobby, when a seedy looking individual, kicking a rope into the center of the room, approached the visitor and pointing to the hempen strand, asked: "Do you think that is strong enough to hang a damned Lincoln hireling?"

There were words—momentous words—back and forth and it appeared that mob rule would score another victim, when—but let the hero tell the story:

"... Hon. Lawrence Keitt, who approached me, and laying his hand familiarly on my shoulder, said,

"'Why, Lamon, old fellow, where did you come from? I am glad to see you.'

"The seedy looking individual showed great astonishment. 'Keitt! said he, 'do you speak to that Lincoln hireling?'"

"'Stop,' thundered Keitt, 'you insult Lamon and you insult me. He is a gentleman and my friend. Come, Lamon, let us take a drink.'—*Recollections of Lincoln*, by Ward Hill Lamon.

And they did.

And that was neither the first nor the last time that our hero violated what today is the law of the land. He was an ante-bellum Virginia gentleman, suh, and as such he loved his "likker." During a most colorful career there are frequent interludes when he accepted or extended the invitation to have a drink, and, truth to tell, if alone he acted the dual role of host and guest—and drank them both. He, however, never forgot that he was a Virginia gentleman, and he always took them standing.

It was in 1847 when Ward Hill Lamon arrived in Danville, Illinois, then a settlement of size and a county seat in the Old Eighth Judicial Circuit. He was then 19 years of age, having been born near Winchester, Virginia, January 6, 1828. At the age of 2, with his parents, he had removed to the little town of Bunker Hill in what is now the state of West Virginia. Here he received a common school education and for two years studied medicine.

He had trekked Westward in response to glowing letters from his cousin, Dr. Theodore Lemon—note the spelling—whose professional card in the *Danville Patriot* of that year proudly declared that he was

“prepared to practice Physic and Surgery by appointment.” He also had been urged to locate in the state by an uncle, James Lemen—note the spelling—who was a Baptist minister in Monroe county, and who later had his brief day in the public eye, after Abraham Lincoln’s untimely death, by bobbing up with a claim that for twenty years he had been the martyr’s spiritual advisor, and even exhibited a written prayer which he claimed he had transcribed which Abe, then a member of the legislature at Vandalia, had delivered “with gusto and earnestness.” The statement has been doubted.

A contrary lot, these Lamons, if we are to judge by their spelling. It would seem that each family of the clan had some special reason for the distinguishing name. In the politics of the day, too, there was discord. James Lemen was an abolitionist, the son of James Lemen Sr., who claimed to have had his move to Illinois financed by Thomas Jefferson that he might organize the settlers to resist the efforts of southern emigrants to make Illinois a slave state. Dr. Theodore Lemon was a last-ditch Jackson Democrat, with the courage of his convictions to single-handed face a mob of furloughed soldiers during the War Between the States in defense of his opinion. Even today when men and women of Danville are wont to meet and reminisce the story of the doctor’s daring will hold attention. He, too, gets a place in Lincoln lore by reason of a dissertation on “milk-sickness” in which he gives his method of treatment and which finds a place in several of the many Lincoln biographies, for, be it remembered, it was the ravages of that disease that gave old Tom Lincoln an excuse to leave Gentryville, Indiana, and migrate to Illinois. One could imagine it was the cousin, Ward Hill, who had conceived the cure, for besides including calomel, castor oil and quinine, with blisters on the stomach, it demanded, best of all, “brandy or good whisky freely administered throughout the disease.”

When making his political affiliations Ward Hill found the field restricted if he was to follow the family tradition and took the only course possible by becoming an ardent Whig and this he remained until he followed his friend Lincoln into the ranks of the newly-founded Republican party in 1856.

The fall of 1847 found the hero comfortably established as a boarder in his cousin’s home in Danville, the owner of two fine saddle horses, with sufficient money coming from home to meet his needs and a knowledge that he did not want to become a doctor. It accordingly was arranged that he should begin the study of law in the office of Judge Oliver L. Davis. It also found him a Cavalier among the ladies, a champion wrestler, a demon of courage in rougher combat, a perpetrator of rough jokes, a lusty chorus leader and in town affairs a Rotarian before Rotary. A versatile chap, this Virginia Cavalier, and through it all he could—and did—drink divers and sundry, and as a gentleman should, he always took them standing.

In mildewed letters of the belles and beaux of long ago, telling of the social life of the town, there are frequent and friendly mention of the Cavalier as the life of the parties, whether at the home of Dr. John Scott, where exhilarating liquors were served, or in the

manse of Elder Enoch Kingsbury, where the more godly were wont to foregather in decorous revelry.

There are other records of the activities of the Cavalier. It has been found that when the town had attained the distinction of a city magistrate his first entry on the docket was *The People vs. Ward Hill Lamon and James D. Kilpatrick, disorderly conduct, on complaint of Jacob Schatz, grocer*. It is believed that they were guilty, as they so pleaded, and were mulcted \$1 and costs. Tradition has it that the arrest was the outcome of a beating the two had given the worthy merchant when he refused them an added supply of liquor on a credit basis. But "Chickamauga Jim" Kilpatrick, who now sleeps in the Soldiers' Circle in Springhill cemetery, then the editor of a town weekly newspaper, always contended that the assault was a godly act, because in his own newspaper two weeks later there appeared the following paid advertisement:

"QUIT SELLING WHISKEY.

"I wish to inform the people of this vicinity that I have concluded to deal no more in the article of WHISKEY. No person need apply to me for any hereafter, because I am determined to sell no more.

JACOB SCHATZ."

There are written records of his Rotarianism in the mildewed pages of the proceedings of the first county fair, held in the fall of 1850 in the river bottoms near Danville. It is stated that the meeting to organize for this great event was in response to a call signed by Lamon, John W. Vance—pioneer salt maker—and James Millikin—then a local sheep raiser who later was to move to Decatur, Illinois, become a banker and leave a great university as a memorial. The Cavalier had returned that spring from Louisville, Kentucky, where, as a classmate of "Black Jack" John A. Logan, he had spent the winter attending law school, from which he graduated and had been admitted to the Kentucky bar before returning to Danville and receiving a similar honor. The fair was a two-day event and Lamon was not only the promoter but furnished most of the entertainment. The secretary's record tells that he paid \$2 for the privilege of exhibiting a "monkey in a tent" and that in the contest for speed his trotting horse was the only entry. In order that the yeomenry who had traveled from the various settlements might not be disappointed, it was arranged that the steed, trotting under saddle, should contest against his own record. It is gravely stated in the archives that he won and was awarded a purse of \$5.00.

Knowing Ward Hill, it is safe to assume that that night he and kindred spirits celebrated the victory by many draughts from a bottle of Cole & Spencer's Best at the Old McCormick house, where by order of the county commissioners, who granted the tavern license, it must be sold for 18¾ cents a quart.

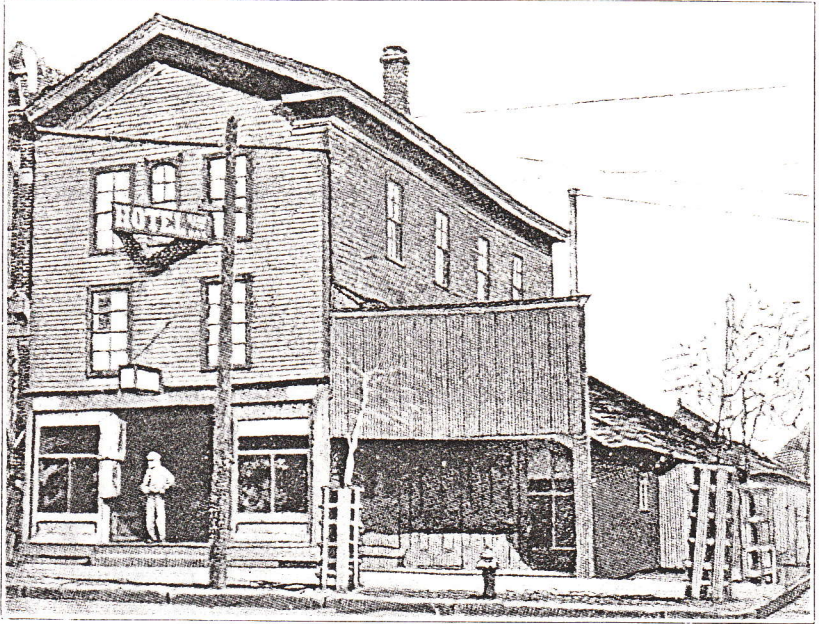
And be it known, it was a mark of honor to be invited to spend a night in revelry with the gallant young Virginian, who already had become a man of affairs in the growing town. Not only was he known as a lawyer with a future, but he also had the distinction of being a member of the only firm of real estate brokers in the county. His partner was Ehud Turner, late of Jefferson county, Virginia, who had

come west when the Cavalier had wed his daughter, Angeline, in September, that year. That business methods seldom change and real estate men always put the best foot forward is evidenced by their advertisement in the town weekly that their place of business was in "Office Room No. 1 and Office Room No. 2 in the Barnum Building." It also had been noticed that at the October term of the Circuit Court Mr. Lincoln, who was the most popular lawyer who rode the circuit, had showed a marked interest in the young Virginian and had appeared with him in several cases. Two years later—in November, 1852—a partnership was formed.

CHAPTER II

This partnership, which was effective only in the territory served by the Vermilion county court, was really the culmination of a friendship that began in the spring of 1848, when Lincoln made his first appearance over the entire Eighth circuit. No two men ever were more unlike than Lincoln and Lamon: One the quiet teller of stories—the other the boisterous singer of sentimental ballads and the so-called "comic" songs of the '50s; one the joker whose pranks never went farther than to place the victim in a ridiculous position—the other whose sense of humor was not satisfied unless there was an element of danger to the recipient of his attention; one who delighted in a solitary evening wrestling with the problems of Euclid—the other the sport, ever ready to participate in a horse race, foot race, wrestling match or to back his skill with real money in a friendly game of Old Sledge or Whist; one who only tasted intoxicants when by doing so it might cement a future political friend or attract a possible client—the other who bought his liquor by the gallon and served it out of a pitcher in the law office in the Old Barnum building to all who cared to call. But the friendship did exist and was to endure until that April night when to Lincoln life's mystery became an open book. It has been said that Lincoln gave full confidence to no one, but Judge David Davis is authority for the statement that "Abe trusted Lamon more than any other man." Lamon repaid this trust with a devotion that would inspire a classic on friendship.

Just what quality caused Lincoln to be attracted to the young Virginian will ever remain a mystery, but the printed records show he never faltered in his trust. Even during the darkest days of the War between the States, when a hostile Senate demanded Lamon's removal as Marshal of the District of Columbia, Lincoln stood firm. Perhaps he saw in him that same quality that endeared the Emancipator to his old law partner, Drunken Billy Herndon, of Springfield, who abstained from his cups long enough to give to the world the one real picture of the martyred president in the days when he was in the making. It is possible that in Lamon he noted some of the qualities that held his loyalty to General Ulysses S. Grant in the face of an almost universal demand that he be retired from command of an army because it was said he was drunk during the slaughter on Shiloh field. Or it may have been his sense of tolerance, as shown when he said,



Barnum Building, Danville, Illinois, where Lincoln and Lamon maintained their Law office.

"Don't you bother about Andy's drinking; he made a bad slip the other day, but I've known Andy Johnson a great many years and he's no drunkard," when the old Tennessean celebrated his elevation from a Greeneville tailor shop to the second highest office in the gift of the people by appearing at his own inauguration gloriously lit up.

Lincoln stood true and Lamon paid with a devotion during those four harrowing years in Washington that left him a giant with shattered health when the Lincoln story became a closed book.

The close association between the two, which began with the formation of their partnership in 1852, was to last until 1857, when Lamon became prosecuting attorney for the Old Eighth Judicial district. Even then the tie was so strong that Lincoln to aid his former associate waived his rule not to prosecute in a criminal case and joined with the Cavalier in the handling of *The People vs. Wyant* on an indictment for murder, that had been venued from DeWitt to McLean county. The defense, conducted by Leonard Swett, was insanity and many experts were called. The trial attracted vast crowds and resulted in an acquittal. It is possible that the verdict came because of the weakness of the prosecution rather than the vigor of the defense. Lamon never was vindictive in prosecuting murder cases and Lincoln's antipathy to the handling of criminal matters is well known. There are several instances where he refused to be associated even in the defense in murder trials because, as he told Judge Davis and Leonard Swett, if his client was found guilty it gave him great mental anguish.

The partnership was destined to be successful and profitable. Lamon, a brilliant and resourceful lawyer, enjoyed a local popularity excelled by none and his open-handed hospitality in the matter of the well-filled pitcher of cheer that always decorated the table in his office gave him a following that furnished clients. Lincoln, the partner, also was a business getter with an appeal to the more serious minded citizenry.

CHAPTER III

In the free and easy days of the '50s it was the custom of Judge David Davis, of Bloomington, who presided over the court, to arrive from Urbana, each May and November, for the holding of the Vermillion County Circuit court, followed by the lawyers, who rode the circuit with him on the off chance that they might pick up a fee in some case. They would arrive in the county-seat in the afternoon, after the thirty-five mile overland trip, and put up for the term at the old McCormick house, where they would be met by Lamon, Samuel McRoberts, afterwards senator from Illinois; Isaac P. Walker, later a senator from Wisconsin, and Daniel Voorhees, he of the silver tongue, then a country lawyer in Covington, Indiana, who later was to be driven from the obscurity of that Hoosier town to the greater opportunities of Terre Haute and become a Senator from that commonwealth, because he refused to prosecute a murder charge against a brother of Senator Ned Hannegan.

Judge Davis, who ruled over the circuit riders like a potentate of old, would be the first to enter the hostelry, and as befitted his station, would be assigned to the "parlor," which for the occasion would be fitted up as a bedroom. Later would follow his entrance in state into the dining room, where on a long table the evening meal would be laid. Here in a stout hickory chair that would hold his 300 pounds the jurist would seat himself at the head of the board. Then would follow the scramble of all the attorneys for the chance to get coveted seats near the Judge—that is, all save Lincoln, who could be found well down toward the foot, where prospective jurors or clients might be met. There was no reason why Lincoln of Springfield should fawn on the Bloomingtonite when a client might be secured. With his inexhaustible fund of stories he always could placate the irate old Tartar for any act of lese majesty later in the evening.

Supper over and the settlement took on new life. Court week was at hand. Sometimes the event was celebrated by a serenade to the Judge and other visitors by Billy Reynold's Brass band—organized in 1840—the first in Illinois. The Old McCormick house was sending the overflow of guests around the corner to the Pennsylvania, which not only boasted a ballroom but also afforded the luxury of a dinner bell mounted on a pole at the sidewalk edge. A better hostelry by the standards of comfort but it lacked the prestige. Judge Davis preferred the McCormick house, where they gave him the parlor, with its wood fire and door opening on the street, as befitted his exalted idea of his own importance, and of course the knowing circuit-riders were of one mind as to their choice of a transient home. It did not pay to disagree with this autocrat, even in the matter of a tavern. Leonard Swett dared do it once, and the unfair rulings that his clients suffered during that trip over the circuit was a scandal to be whispered about by the other lawyers.

In the taproom of the tavern chairs would be circled around the open fire and soon Lincoln would be surrounded by an admiring throng, with the judge in the place of honor, flanked by the other attorneys, prospective jurors and sometimes even by men who were under bond to be tried later on criminal charges. In those times public opinion did not condemn until the victim had had his day in court. How the evening would speed! There was Lincoln with his stories, Usher P. Linder with his tales of life down Egypt way, Oliver B. Ficklin with his denunciation of his political enemies, and Davis, always jealous of his status as the Judge, directing the proceedings.

Down the street in the Barnum building there would be sounds of greater revelry. Here it was that Ward Hill Lamon and his cohorts were to be found. Here it was that the younger blades of the law and others who had been attracted to town by court week, would be found gathered around the famous pitcher. Here there was no evidence of the judicial dignity that must be observed at the tavern. Here as the hours advanced might be heard the "comic" songs of Hill Lamon, or maybe the sentimental ballads of John J. Brown, then a young Danville lawyer, who later was to become one of the great leaders of the Chicago bar and finally succumb to the appetite he formed as a member of this



McCormick House, Danville, Illinois. Headquarters for Lincoln and other Circuit Riders when attending Court.

pitcher club; or perhaps Dan Voorhees had driven over from Covington and would deliver in mock heroics one of the addresses which later he was to use so effectually in criminal cases or when engaged in the hustings. Great nights these, when good fellows got together and Ward Hill Lamon—a Virginia Cavalier, suh, always—was both the host and the cheer leader.

CHAPTER IV

Thus the years rolled along—1851—1852—until 1857—and all the time the bond between these two, Lincoln, the cautious politician, and Lamon, the audacious Virginian, who called a spade a spade, became closer, with never a rift in the lute of their friendship save the constant bickering because of, according to Lincoln, the excessive charges Lamon insisted on making for their services. This finally culminated in an open rupture when the firm was retained by Dr. John Scott—the same Dr. Scott at whose home the ungodly were wont to congregate in gleeful abandon and where liquor was served to the guests—and further, where—if we are to believe Belle, the gracious spouse of the medical man, Lincoln was welcomed, and on occasion said, as he sipped a glass of seductive port: “I by no means oppose the use of wine. I only regret that it is not more in universal use; I firmly believe if our people were to habitually drink wine, there would be less drunkenness in the country.”

The doctor was resisting the efforts of a suitor of his sister, a girl of unsound mind, to have him removed as her conservator and thus get possession of her money. It was anticipated that the trial would be long drawn out and there was an agreed fee of \$250. When it came to a hearing the suit was won in twenty minutes. Dr. Scott was satisfied and paid promptly. Lincoln, ever fair, refused to take any part of it because he said it was excessive. Lamon was obdurate, proved by other lawyers and even by Dr. Scott that the fee was just, and finally appealed to Judge Davis. This was a welcome opportunity to the old tsar. Still smarting from the recollection of Lincoln’s rebellion the previous fall, when, in response to a written protest from the other circuit riders offered in open court during the term in Tazewell county, he had summoned the Springfield attorney before the bar and publicly reprimanded him for his small fees, “which tended to place brother lawyers in disrepute.”

“Lincoln,” almost shrieked the jurist, “I have been watching you and Lamon. You are impoverishing this bar by your picayune fees and the lawyers have reason to complain of you. You are now almost as poor as Lazarus, and if you don’t make people pay you more for your services you will die as poor as Job’s turkey.”

Lincoln was unmoved. “That money,” he said, “comes out of the pocket of a demented girl and I would rather starve than swindle her. I never want the reputation enjoyed by those shining lights of the profession ‘Catch ’em & Cheat ’em.’”

The Cavalier returned one-half the fee and the firm of Lincoln & Lamon once more was functioning.

But the matter was not to end. That night at the McCormick house the circuit riders got together and tried Lincoln before a moot tribunal called the "Ogmathorial Court." Here he was charged with the crime of robbing his brother lawyers by his precedent of small fees, was found guilty and fined one gallon of whisky, which he paid, and then kept the crowd in high good humor until midnight with his stories. The night also is memorable because it was one of the occasions when no light gleamed from the windows of Lincoln & Lamon's office in the Barnum building. Free whisky was flowing in the taproom at the tavern.

It was in 1857 that the partnership was dissolved, because of Lamon's election to the office of district prosecuting attorney. That it was a successful combination is attested by the business handled. No other attorney or firm could boast of as many clients and the old records show that at one session of the Vermilion county court the firm was retained by one or the other litigants in every civil case on the docket.

The dissolution found Lamon with a reputation as a lawyer firmly established and it was a new Lincoln who now rode the circuit. When the partnership was formed Lamon was unknown and Lincoln, still smarting from his retirement as congressman, was collecting the tangled ends of his business and struggling to provide funds to meet the demands of the Kentucky belle whom he had married. In the beginning of their friendship the blustering blatant, boisterous Virginian was a necessary foil to the morbid Lincoln, who could weep over the reading of Gray's "Elegy" and who, alone of all the circuit riders, never took advantage of an interlude in the holding of the traveling courts to spend a day at home because of the shrewish tongue of an embittered and disappointed wife. Lamon, as an officer of the court, spent his days fighting the battles for law and order and his nights in gay revelry, but the Man from Sangamon now had become militant and was giving most of his time to the welfare of the newly-formed Republican party. Lincoln again was in politics and this was a game in which he was a master. Clients and lawsuits took second place, and although he still continued to ride the circuit until November, 1859, most of his time and money was given to campaigning and writing letters to build up the organization. It was in 1858 that he made his bid for the presidency by participating in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and it was in November, 1859, when he signed the contract that led to the Cooper Union speech in New York City, that he took the decisive step that led to his selection as the nominee in the Chicago convention. It was that speech that convinced the republican leaders in the East that this man from Springfield had the qualifications for leadership. It belied the advance notice in the New York Times, in announcing the meeting, which said, "Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer with some local reputation in Illinois."

CHAPTER V

In 1858 Lamon removed to Bloomington, in McLean county, that he might be nearer the center of his district. The fact that this also