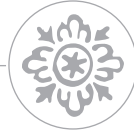


FROM

Courting Mr. Lincoln

BY LOUIS BAYARD



They had a notion of running upstairs to Mary's bedroom and mending themselves before the looking glass. But the back stairs were blocked by kegs, and Mercy was anxious about leaving Mr. Conkling alone for too long, and so they were just inching back into the main hall when a gentleman guest, leaning indolently against the wall, chose that moment to swivel round.

"Why, there you are, Miss Todd," he said.

Joshua Speed's coat fit him as lightly as feathers. His boots looked as if they had been blacked at the door. But what struck Mary most forcibly was his hair, which had lain hidden from view during their last encounter and which now rippled in chestnut waves down to his collar. A prodigal mane that had the effect of both lengthening and poeticizing his face. Yes, she thought, this must have been how Lord Byron looked, training his gaze upon some Alpine lass.

"Good evening," she remembered to say. She slid a damp tendril off her face and glanced into the empty space where Mercy had just stood.

"I fear I've come too late to make it onto your program," he said.

"Oh." She stared at the tiny book still dangling from her wrist. "I believe I have a waltz open. . . ."

"Then," he said, "the night is not lost." He bent over the program, wrote out his name in a light, casual hand. "How those flowers become you."

"I regret to inform you they are silk. Give me a few more weeks, and I shall have real ones to conjure with."

"I hope you will set one aside for me, then."

She smiled and shifted her eyes just to the west of him. An attitude of maidenly abstraction, refined over some years, that had the usual effect of calling out another compliment, more lavish than the previous. In this case, Mr. Speed said only: "There's someone you should meet."

He swung his head around in an arc of expectation—only no one was there. With no great delicacy, he leaned in the direction of the foyer and beckoned with his arm. Against all expectations, a figure came lumbering toward them.

Her first impressions arrived singly, refusing to be reconciled. An El Greco frame, stretched beyond sufferance. A mournful well of eye. A face of *bones*, all badgering to break through.

From here, all was confusion. Mr. Speed, who gave every sign of wanting to remain, was being called away, and Mary was reaching out a hand to stay him, and at the same time, this other man's hand—massive and elemental—was extending toward her, and it was *this* hand in which her hand now unaccountably rested, like a starfish on a boulder, and Mr. Speed was already slipping from view, and Mr. Speed's friend, scarcely audible, was saying something to her. He was saying . . .

"I know who you are."

But the effect of being recognized was not so tonic as it had been with Mr. Speed. Now it only discomposed her.

"You must forgive me," she said. "I failed to catch your name."

"Lincoln."

"Ah."

Her brain went scrambling; her smile, by way of compensation, stood still.

"I believe you are known to me as *well*. By repute. . . ."

Think.

"I mean my *cousin* has spoken of you. John Stuart, yes?"

He nodded, with such an emphatic motion that his chin came nearly to his chest.

"You . . ." She ventured an inch further on the limb. "If I'm not mistaken, you are partners, are you not? In Cousin John's law practice. . . ."

"Guilty." He was silent for a time, then roused himself enough to add, "I'm glad you mention Congressman Stuart. I owe him a great deal."

“Well, he—speaks very highly of you, Mr. Lincoln.” Was that true? “He tells me . . .” What? “He says you are quite the *force*. In the courtroom, I think.”

“Oh. Well.” He gave the punch bowl a stare. “I don’t have a great deal of book learning, so I expect I’m able to speak to juries at their own level.”

“Ah.”

The silence came rolling back. Sulfurous.

“But of course,” she rallied, “my cousin is a fine judge of *character*, so it may be that you . . . you *undervalue* yourself. . . .”

Perhaps Cousin John had actually said that.

“Isn’t it funny?” she said, galloping ahead. “We have never met before and yet you—you surely live here in Springfield.”

“That is so.”

“And I have been in your charming city since only—”

“Last fall,” he said.

“Well, yes.”

He studied the flounce of her dress. “The thing is, Miss Todd, I’m on the circuits quite a bit.”

“Oh, yes. Like Mr. Conkling.”

“And then, you know, I’ve got that pesky body politic’s interests to attend to.”

It was such an oblique way to come at the subject that she was a long time following him there.

“Of course,” she said, with something like release. “You are one of Ninian’s comrades in arms. In the statehouse.”

“Guilty again.”

“I believe, in fact, you are a member of the Long Nine.”

The first stirrings of a smile on his face. “The *longest* of the nine.”

“So I see,” she answered, in a lighter voice. “It seems that, whenever I pass our new capitol, I shall have you to thank for bringing it here.”

His head tipped toward his shoulder, and the words came scattering out like loose pennies.

“I’m sorry?” she said.

“I said it was a whole *team* of oxen. Dragging that particular plow.”

“Ah, well. Let us hope we can”—she plucked softly at her throat—“devise a better metaphor for you, Mr. Lincoln, than oxen.”

“I think the plainer you come at me, the better.”

Silence once more. A great cloud of it, leaching out their last native spark. He had just enough volition left to mutter the words “very pleased to” . . . but not enough to finish them. With a bow, he angled his body away and then left the room, maneuvering around each guest in the manner of a barge navigating sandbars.

Elizabeth sidled up a minute later, her arm softly hooking through her sister’s.

“I despair of you,” she whispered. “You turn up your nose at a Webb and take up with a Lincoln.”

“Take *up*? Heaven shield me, I was making conversation. Under great duress, I might add.”

“I have told you before that, if you don’t wish a man to be your suitor, you must confine yourself to the fewest possible words.”

“And so I did.”

“Let us hope so.”

With a single motion, Elizabeth unhooked her arm and tacked straight for the foyer. Leaving behind a trail of some mystery. Why was she being so preemptive? Had Mary missed, perhaps, some essential fact about the stranger? A foundational bit of gossip? Were the hens of Springfield even now clucking in timbres outside her range of hearing?

For the next two hours, she alternated between dancing and eyeing the periphery, waiting for the Longest of the Nine to rise up once more, but he never reemerged. Impossible, surely, that he should be able to conceal himself. More likely that he had hied himself home. Wherever that was.

Mr. Speed showed up promptly for his dance at seven minutes to ten. There was a touch of self-mockery, she thought, in the way he bowed his head and led her to the floor. She had deliberately left open the waltz to see how he would respond to close quarters. But if his hands were longing to tighten their grip on hers or curl more tightly around her waist or draw her closer with each measure, they held off. The only suggestion of pleasure she could find was in his eyes, which were as agreeable as at the moment of their meeting.

“What did you think of Lincoln?” he asked.

She pondered for three turns before answering.

“I can only hope that, his waters being so very still, they also run deep.”

She could not tell if she had erred, for Mr. Speed said nothing.

“How is it that you are acquainted?” she pressed.

“He sleeps in the room over my store.”

“Does he? And is that fit lodging for a state legislator?”

“I keep a clean inn.”

Again, that light note of self-deprecation, not at all unattractive.

“It does sound like a peculiar arrangement,” she allowed. “But I suppose you should be grateful for having such a quiet tenant.”

“You haven’t heard him snore.”

Then, quite unexpectedly, Mr. Speed laughed. Not a giggle, not a guffaw, not a snort. A perfectly polished and calibrated sound that extended so far and no further and left them just four measures short of the waltz’s end. When at last the strings died out, he asked her if she would take refreshment, and when she declined, he conducted her back to her seat and said, “Thank you, Miss Todd, for this great honor.” She bowed in reply and was about to turn away when he added: “If it’s agreeable, might we pay you a call?”

COURTING MR. LINCOLN

by Louis Bayard

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