

Excerpt from  
**Better Angels**

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A Full-Length Play

by

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### Cast of Characters

Mr. Lincoln

A man "writhing, elusive, tormented." 54.

Mrs. Harvey

A widow. Courageous, gracious, and granite-willed, with a vulnerable streak. She is in every way Lincoln's match. 39.

John Hay

Lincoln's secretary. Puckish, shrewd, and a little callow. 26.

### Scene

Lincoln's office at the White House.

### Time

October, 1863.

### Notes

"Better Angels" is a work of historical fiction based on Mrs. Harvey's contemporaneous account as originally published in J. G. Holland's *Life of Lincoln* (1866) and later in Carl Sandburg's *The War Years, Part III*. The piece incorporates historic fact and found text, but frequently departs from both to suit dramatic intent.

The play should not be approached by attempting to animate an iconic Lincoln. The character speaks in plain southern Indiana dialect, but other than this the actor playing him should reflect his circumstances and inner life without attempting to replicate the 16th President's physical aspects or an assumed theatrical vocal quality. The audience should see and hear a man they do not appear to know, as if for the first time.

Lincoln's style of speaking was intimate and personal. He never declaimed, never spoke oratorically, even when making a speech. In fact, he did not make speeches in the usual sense. He spoke to a crowd as if he were conversing privately in a living room, working out his problems, revealing his inmost thoughts.

Hay moves in and out of time, and occasionally speaks as an old man at the end of his life, delivering a lecture.

*Oh go through the walls; if you must, walk on the ledges  
Of roofs, of oceans; cover yourself with light;  
Use menace, use prayer.....  
My sleepers will flee toward another America.*

Jean Genet

## ACT I

### Scene 1

SETTING: Lincoln's office at the White House.

AT RISE: SOUND: Music, which will also play in the transitions; something of the period, pensive and troubled, perhaps a single instrument, such as piano or violin. LIGHTS slowly reveal the shadowy figure of LINCOLN hunched in a chair reading, his legs stretched out on a table. The large room is furnished with any of the following: two hair-covered sofas, chairs covered with green worsted, a large oak table, a marble fireplace, a desk. On the back wall: military maps, a portrait of Andrew Jackson, two high windows with a table between. A door to either side. Downstage to one side a lectern with an American flag (circa 1900) adjacent. MUSIC quiets. HAY, an old man with a cane, enters and proceeds to the lectern. HE and LINCOLN are oblivious of one another. AREA LIGHT rises on the lectern. HAY clears his throat and speaks haltingly.)

#### HAY

Sorry to be late. Forgive an old man's legs. A beautiful flag, is it not? Forty-five stars. I've come here tonight to make amends for a swindle. You've been swindled. I swindled you. They say when the bond between heaven and earth is broken only a story can mend it. Well tonight I've got a story for you, about a lady and a great man whose secretary I once was. What is this? Let me see, 1909. Twenty years since Mr. Nicolay and I wrote his biography. Nearly 100 years since his birth. Another century. Another America. Why should you care about ancient history? Well, the lady will be news to you. But the man, you see, is as familiar as the penny in your pocket. Taken for granted. That is the swindle. We -- I, it pains me to say, forgot that you .. didn't know him. We gave you the man on the penny not the living man, who had a mountain to climb every day. He will bring news, but only if you look at him as I did, because when I knew him he was unfinished, as I am unfinished, and you are unfinished. We are all hammered out, flint on steel, encounter by encounter. And I promise you that for both the man and the lady, there was no day in their lives in which they were not wiser and better than they had been the day before.

LINCOLN

Ha!

(Beat. LIGHTS rise in the office. SOUND: it is suddenly 1863; army wagons rumbling in the street, the occasional clatter of cavalry.)

Ha ha!

(beat)

Ha ha ha!

(He howls and wheezes, convulsed, scratching himself on his elbows.)

Mr. Hay!

HAY

Sir?

LINCOLN

What are you going on about?

HAY

Nothing of note.

LINCOLN

Git in here, Johnny. Listen to this! Haaaaa!

(Convulsed again. It doesn't stop this time, but goes on past restraint, past decency, a positive mania; a Niagara of hysterics. HAY starts away from the lectern, then stops as a thought occurs. Confidentially:)

HAY

(to audience)

He was prone to this anytime. Even at cabinet meetings.

LINCOLN

Johnny!

HAY

Coming.

(HAY joins LINCOLN in his office, in the process becoming a young man in his twenties.)

LINCOLN

Listen!

(reading from a pamphlet in a backwoods  
accent, he is a superb actor)

"I sees in the papers the government hez institooted a draft. I know not wat others may do  
but ez for me, I can't go.

(convulses, then pushes on as the character,  
utterly vivified)

Upon a rigid eggsaminashen of my physicle man, I find it wood be madness for me to  
undertake a campaign, to wit: One. I'm baldheaded, and hev ben obliged to wear a wig  
these 22 years. Two. I hev dandruff in wat scanty hair still hangs around my venerable  
temples."

(HE howls and cannot go on.)

HAY

(to audience)

The chief magistrate had a fondness for satire.

LINCOLN

That man is going to split my sides. Oh, I'd give up all I have to write like that.

(The laughter is spent. An enormous sigh,  
and:)

I should find this place unbearable without laughter, Hay.

(Every shred of humor leaves his face. HE is  
now grave and troubled and tired.)

Well. Are they all gone, Johnny? Can we close up shop? I must make a start on this speech  
before the day is out or give it up altogether.

HAY

There's one more.

(to audience)

Twice a week the president opened his door to all comers. As he put it:

LINCOLN

They are my public opinion baths. The people hired me. I cannot very well keep them out.  
So, let him in then.

HAY

I'm afraid it's a lady.

LINCOLN

A woman!

(which is not a good thing)

LINCOLN (cont'd)

At least she will not ask for a position. No doubt her husband or son has run off from his regiment and she has brought a pardon for me to sign. Oh, not one more pardon, not one more today. Mr. Stanton will not like it. Have her come back tomorrow.

HAY

She's brought a letter.

(HE offers the letter.)

LINCOLN

Give it to me. I will inscribe a pardon on the back. For which Mr. Stanton will be angry and say I am a fool. And so I must be for Mr. Stanton is very nearly always right.

HAY

(to audience)

Mr. Stanton, you will recollect, is our war secretary.

(to LINCOLN)

She doesn't want a pardon.

LINCOLN

Then what's she come for?

HAY

A hospital.

LINCOLN

A hospital.

(This is new.)

A hospital! What is her name!

HAY

Mrs. Cordelia Perrine Harvey, of Wisconsin.

LINCOLN

Harvey. Harvey. I know that name.

(But he cannot place it.)

Why does she come to the president? She must go to the Surgeon General. Must I run the whole shebang and be the Surgeon General as well?

HAY

I will tell her.

LINCOLN

Haven't I enough of senators and editors, governors, generals and cabinet and congressmen and what all else, without a woman, a *woman* coming to me for a hospital? What does this say.

(LINCOLN peruses the letter.)

HAY

(to audience)

It is a petition for a hospital in Wisconsin, where the men and boys of that state wounded in campaigns on the Mississippi may, instead of remaining in a field infirmary, be sent home to convalesce.

LINCOLN

(still perusing the letter)

This has been talked of before.

HAY

(to audience)

And dismissed. Soldiers sent home to get well are thought reluctant to revisit the south on their recovery.

LINCOLN

(to himself)

I do not understand women. I do not pretend to understand women. I do not even understand Mrs. Lincoln.

(to HAY)

But you will not remind me of that fact if we are to remain on cordial terms.

HAY

(to audience)

This is the perfect truth. If you met his wife you would know. No man who understood women would have married that harpy.

(HAY starts to go out the office door, then pauses.)

HAY

(to audience)

That was unfair, I know. Mr. Nicolay--the president's other secretary--Mr. Nicolay and I did use that term conversing with each other in private. You will think it cruel. But remember I am only twenty-five now, and cruelty is a folly of youth. I will be wise. Later.



(HAY leaves. LINCOLN tosses the letter away. He looks out his window for some time, and outside his window is the war. HE picks up his satire again and reads absently. MRS. HARVEY enters. SHE is dressed with elegant simplicity. There is no pretense in her. She radiates an open heart and quiet strength. LINCOLN does not see her.)

LINCOLN

(he reads as the character again)

“I am afflicted with chronic diarrhea and am ruptured in nine places.

(he laughs)

I am entirely enveloped with trusses.”

(HE convulses for a time, pounds his fist on a convenient surface, then sees MRS.

HARVEY. HE starts and tries to swallow down his laughter. HE is unprepared either for her presence in the room or, even more, her beauty.)

LINCOLN

Mrs. Harvey!

MRS. HARVEY

Your excellency.

LINCOLN

I'm glad to see you. Be seated, please.

MRS. HARVEY

I couldn't help but notice that you too enjoy Rev. Nasby's letters.

(a beat)

LINCOLN

Perhaps it's better for me to remain silent on this point and be thought a fool rather than to speak now and remove all doubts.

(SHE laughs.)

MRS. HARVEY

I had not come prepared to laugh today.

LINCOLN

Laughter becomes you. But I see from your letter that you are a serious woman.

(Is HE flirting with her? SHE lets herself be charmed, and shows it.)

MRS. HARVEY

I am glad you read it.

LINCOLN

(realizing)

You are Governor Harvey's wife.

MRS. HARVEY

Yes.

LINCOLN

(with unspeakable empathy)

I'm very sorry for your loss.

MRS. HARVEY

Thank you.

LINCOLN

(intimately and with simple sincerity)

I hope you're well.

(MRS. HARVEY is a little thrown by the plain humanity of this gesture. SHE feels somehow naked.)

MRS. HARVEY

Yes.

(beat)

I'm well.

(LINCOLN nods, finds her letter and peruses it. HE runs his fingers through his hair. HAY wanders in and sits, apparently unnoticed.)

LINCOLN

Madam, this matter of northern hospitals has been talked of a great deal, and I thought it was settled; but it seems this is not the case. What have you got to say about it?

MRS. HARVEY

Simply this. Many soldiers sick in our western army must have northern air or die.

LINCOLN

We have hospitals in the south.

MRS. HARVEY

There are thousands of graves along the Mississippi that were made by these hospitals. I have myself been a patient in such a hospital. The air is fetid. There is sewage in the drinking water. The government is responsible -- ignorantly, undoubtedly. But this ignorance must not continue.

LINCOLN

Come here, please.

(HE motions her to join him at a window,  
which HE opens. The rumbling SOUND of  
wagons.)

Those are hospital wagons. They pass here every day beneath this window with the wounded and dying. Do you think I am ignorant of the sound of their groans?

MRS. HARVEY

Your excellency, if you allowed the men to recuperate north of union lines there would be ten living where you have one now.

LINCOLN

Yes, yes. I understand you.

MRS. HARVEY

I think you do.

LINCOLN

But you do not comprehend the whole of it. If they go north they will desert and where is the difference?

MRS. HARVEY

Dead men cannot fight, and they may not desert.

LINCOLN

A fine way to decimate the army! We should never get a man back. Not one. Not one.

MRS. HARVEY

Pardon me, but I believe you are mistaken. You do not understand our people. They are as true and as loyal to the government as yourself. The loyalty is among the common soldiers, and they are the chief sufferers.

LINCOLN

I do not understand our people!

HAY

(to audience)

I could not help, overhearing this exchange, thinking that I perhaps had erred in letting her in. The ancient--that is what Mr. Nicolay and I called him--rarely lost his temper. Unless he was under great strain or tired from lack of sleep or demanded upon by everyone, which was nearly always.

LINCOLN

(to MRS. HARVEY)

That is *your* opinion!

HAY

(to audience)

I had myself gone to witness the first battle of the war  
(LIGHT SHIFT suggesting something  
nightmarish. SOUND: Distant rifle fire, the  
cries of men.)

which was at a small stream called Bull Run, 27 miles south of the capitol near the Virginia city of Manassas, on July 21, 1861. Most of the Washington elite, dressed for a holiday, journeyed south by horse and buggy to picnic and watch the excitement. It was presumed the war would soon be over.

LINCOLN

(to HAY)

Alas, it is proving to have no bottom.

HAY

On that particular day, two armies of inexperienced boys clanged together and left 750 dead, 2500 wounded, 1500 missing. There was no ambulance corps.

LINCOLN

There has never been an ambulance corps in any war.

HAY

In the panic anyone who could -- soldiers and spectators alike -- hightailed it back to the capitol. The injured simply lay where they fell, choking on their vomit and blood, their wounds soon becoming infected. Surgeons went hacking from one limb to the other using the same bloody instruments, passing the infection along.

LINCOLN

This slaughter is repeated in battle after battle!

HAY

As we went bounding from one emergency, one disaster to the next. And Mr. Lincoln bore the responsibility.

(a beat as he fights for control)

It ... ate away at him. Like acid.

LINCOLN

Under the skin.

HAY

So to be accused of not understanding the suffering of our people --

(LIGHTS as before.)

LINCOLN

Mrs. Harvey --

HAY

was not fair.

MRS. HARVEY

Yes?

LINCOLN

How many men of the Army of the Potomac do you suppose the government was paying at the battle of Antietam? And how many do you suppose could be got for active service at that time?

MRS. HARVEY

I know nothing of the Army of the Potomac, except that it has made some noble sacrifices.

HAY

(to audience)

Meaning, to that point it had lost every battle.