

## Excerpts of Chapters 5, 6, and 7 from *Behind the Scenes*

Elizabeth Keckley

### Excerpt of Chapter 5: “My Introduction to Mrs. Lincoln”

*Elizabeth Keckley moves to Washington, D.C. with the singular hope of working in the White House as a modiste. Elizabeth makes a dress for a friend of Mrs. Lincoln, the First Lady of the United States at the time, and the work on the dress is so impressive it catches Mrs. Lincoln’s eye at a time when she is in need of a dress for a reception following President Lincoln’s inauguration. Mrs. Lincoln asks her friend who made the dress and whether she would recommend the dressmaker to her. Mrs. Lincoln’s friend does recommend Elizabeth Keckley, who is asked to visit the White House.*

1        Tuesday morning, at eight o’clock, I crossed the threshold of the White House for the first time. I was shown into a waiting–room, and informed that Mrs. Lincoln was at breakfast. In the waiting–room I found no less than three dressmakers waiting for an interview with the wife of the new President. It seems that Mrs. Lincoln had told several of her lady friends that she had urgent need for a dressmaker, and that each of these friends had sent her dressmaker to the White House. Hope fell at once. With so many rivals for the position sought after, I regarded my chances for success as extremely doubtful. I was the last one summoned to Mrs. Lincoln’s presence. All the others had a hearing, and were dismissed. I went upstairs timidly, and entering the room with nervous step, discovered the wife of the President standing by a window, looking out, and engaged in lively conversation with a lady, Mrs. Grimsly, as I afterwards learned. Mrs. L. came forward, and greeted me warmly.

2        "You have come at last. Mrs. Keckley, who have you worked for in the city?"

3        "Among others, Mrs. Senator Davis has been one of my best patrons," was my reply.

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4 "Mrs. Davis! So you have worked for her, have you? Of course you gave satisfaction; so far, good. Can you do my work?"

5 "Yes, Mrs. Lincoln. Will you have much work for me to do?"

6 "That, Mrs. Keckley, will depend altogether upon your prices. I trust that your terms are reasonable. I cannot afford to be extravagant. We are just from the West, and are poor. If you do not charge too much, I shall be able to give you all my work."

7 "I do not think there will be any difficulty about charges, Mrs. Lincoln; my terms are reasonable."

8 "Well, if you will work cheap, you shall have plenty to do. I can't afford to pay big prices, so I frankly tell you so in the beginning."

9 The terms were satisfactorily arranged, and I measured Mrs. Lincoln, took the dress with me and returned the next day to fit it on her. A number of ladies were in the room, all making preparations for the reception to come off on Friday night. These ladies, I learned, were relatives of Mrs. L.'s,—Mrs. Edwards and Mrs. Kellogg, her own sisters, and Elizabeth Edwards and Julia Baker, her nieces.

10 I was hard at work on the dress, when I was informed that the reception had been postponed from Friday night till Tuesday night. This, of course, gave me more time to complete my task. Mrs. Lincoln sent for me, and suggested some alteration in style, which was made. She also requested that I make a waist of blue watered silk for Mrs. Grimsly, as work on the dress would not require all my time.

11 Tuesday evening came, and I had taken the last stitches on the dress. I folded it and carried it to the White House, with the waist for Mrs. Grimsly. When I went upstairs, I found the ladies in a terrible state of excitement. Mrs. Lincoln was protesting that she could not go down, for the reason that she had nothing to wear.

12 "Mrs. Keckley, you have disappointed me—deceived me. Why do you bring my dress at this late hour?"

13 "Because I have just finished it, and I thought I should be in time."

14 "But you are not in time, Mrs. Keckley; you have bitterly disappointed me. I have no time now to dress, and, what is more, I will not dress, and go downstairs."

15 "I am sorry if I have disappointed you, Mrs. Lincoln, for I intended to be in time. Will you let me dress you? I can have you ready in a few minutes."

16 "No, I won't be dressed. I will stay in my room. Mr. Lincoln can go down with the other ladies."

17 "But there is plenty of time for you to dress, Mary," joined in Mrs. Grimsly and Mrs. Edwards. "Let Mrs. Keckley assist you, and she will soon have you ready."

18 Thus urged, she consented. I dressed her hair, and arranged the dress on her. It fitted nicely, and she was pleased. Mr. Lincoln came in, threw himself on the sofa, laughed with Willie and little Tad, and then commenced pulling on his gloves, quoting poetry all the while.

19 "You seem to be in a poetical mood tonight," said his wife.

20 "Yes, mother, these are poetical times," was his pleasant reply. "I declare, you look charming in that dress. Mrs. Keckley has met with great success." And then he proceeded to compliment the other ladies.

21 Mrs. Lincoln took the President's arm, and with smiling face led the train below. I was surprised at her grace and composure. I had heard so much, in current and malicious report, of her low life, of her ignorance and vulgarity, that I expected to see her embarrassed on this occasion. Report, I soon saw, was wrong. No queen, accustomed to the usages of royalty all her life, could have comported herself with more calmness and

dignity than did the wife of the President. She was confident and self-possessed, and confidence always gives grace.

22      This reception was a brilliant one, and the only one of the season. I became the regular modiste of Mrs. Lincoln. I made fifteen or sixteen dresses for her during the spring and early part of the summer, when she left Washington; spending the hot weather at Saratoga, Long Branch, and other places. In the meantime I was employed by Mrs. Senator Douglas, one of the loveliest ladies that I ever met, Mrs. Secretary Wells, Mrs. Secretary Stanton, and others. Mrs. Douglas always dressed in deep mourning, with excellent taste, and several of the leading ladies of Washington society were extremely jealous of her superior attractions.

**Excerpt of Chapter 6: “Willie Lincoln’s Death-Bed”**

1        Mrs. Lincoln returned to Washington in November, and again duty called me to the White House. The war was now in progress, and every day brought stirring news from the front—the front, where the Gray opposed the Blue, where flashed the bright sabre in the sunshine, where were heard the angry notes of battle, the deep roar of cannon, and the fearful rattle of musketry; where new graves were being made every day, where brother forgot a mother's early blessing and sought the lifeblood of brother, and friend raised the deadly knife against friend. Oh, the front, with its stirring battle-scenes! Oh, the front, with its ghastly heaps of dead! The life of the nation was at stake; and when the land was full of sorrow, there could not be much gayety at the capital. The days passed quietly with me. I soon learned that some people had an intense desire to penetrate the inner circle of the White House. No President and his family, heretofore occupying this mansion, ever excited so much curiosity as the present incumbents. Mr. Lincoln had grown up in the wilds of the West, and evil report had said much of him and his wife. The polite world was shocked, and the tendency to exaggerate intensified curiosity. As soon as it was known that I was the modiste of Mrs. Lincoln, parties crowded around and affected friendship for me, hoping to induce me to betray the secrets of the domestic circle. One day a woman, I will not call her a lady, drove up to my rooms, gave me an order to make a dress, and insisted on partly paying me in advance. She called on me every day, and was exceedingly kind. When she came to take her dress away, she cautiously remarked:

2        "Mrs. Keckley, you know Mrs. Lincoln?"

3        "Yes."

4        "You are her modiste; are you not?"

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5 "Yes."

6 "You know her very well; do you not?"

7 "I am with her every day or two."

8 "Don't you think you would have some influence with her?"

9 "I cannot say. Mrs. Lincoln, I presume, would listen to anything I should suggest, but whether she would be influenced by a suggestion of mine is another question."

10 "I am sure that you could influence her, Mrs. Keckley. Now listen; I have a proposition to make. I have a great desire to become an inmate of the White House. I have heard so much of Mr. Lincoln's goodness that I should like to be near him; and if I can enter the White House no other way, I am willing to go as a menial. My dear Mrs. Keckley, will you not recommend me to Mrs. Lincoln as a friend of yours out of employment, and ask her to take me as a chambermaid? If you will do this you shall be well rewarded. It may be worth several thousand dollars to you in time."

11 I looked at the woman in amazement. A bribe, and to betray the confidence of my employer! Turning to her with a glance of scorn, I said:

12 "Madam, you are mistaken in regard to my character. Sooner than betray the trust of a friend, I would throw myself into the Potomac river. I am not so base as that. Pardon me, but there is the door, and I trust that you will never enter my room again."

13 She sprang to her feet in deep confusion, and passed through the door, murmuring: "Very well; you will live to regret your action today."

14 "Never, never!" I exclaimed, and closed the door after her with a bang. I afterwards learned that this woman was an actress, and that her object was to enter the White House as a servant, learn its secrets, and then publish a scandal to the world. I do not give her name, for such publicity would wound the sensitive feelings of friends, who

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would have to share her disgrace, without being responsible for her faults. I simply record the incident to show how I often was approached by unprincipled parties. It is unnecessary to say that I indignantly refused every bribe offered.

15      The first public appearance of Mrs. Lincoln that winter was at the reception on New Year's Day. This reception was shortly followed by a brilliant reception. The day after the reception I went to the White House, and while fitting a dress to Mrs. Lincoln, she said:

16      "Lizabeth"—she had learned to drop the E—"Lizabeth, I have an idea. These are war times, and we must be as economical as possible. You know the President is expected to give a series of state dinners every winter, and these dinners are very costly; Now I want to avoid this expense; and my idea is, that if I give three large receptions, the state dinners can be scratched from the programme. What do you think, Lizabeth?"

17      "I think that you are right, Mrs. Lincoln."

18      "I am glad to hear you say so. If I can make Mr. Lincoln take the same view of the case, I shall not fail to put the idea into practice."

19      Before I left her room that day, Mr. Lincoln came in. She at once stated the case to him. He pondered the question a few moments before answering.

20      "Mother, I am afraid your plan will not work."

21      "But it will work, if you will only determine that it shall work."

22      "It is breaking in on the regular custom," he mildly replied.

23      "But you forget, father, these are war times, and old customs can be done away with for the once. The idea is economical, you must admit."

24      "Yes, mother, but we must think of something besides economy."

25 "I do think of something else. Public receptions are more democratic than stupid state dinners—are more in keeping with the spirit of the institutions of our country, as you would say if called upon to make a stump speech. There are a great many strangers in the city, foreigners and others, whom we can entertain at our receptions, but whom we cannot invite to our dinners."

26 "I believe you are right, mother. You argue the point well. I think that we shall have to decide on the receptions."

27 So the day was carried. The question was decided, and arrangements were made for the first reception. It now was January, and cards were issued for February.

28 The children, Tad and Willie, were constantly receiving presents. Willie was so delighted with a little pony, that he insisted on riding it every day. The weather was changeable, and exposure resulted in a severe cold, which deepened into fever. He was very sick, and I was summoned to his bedside. It was sad to see the poor boy suffer. Always of a delicate constitution, he could not resist the strong inroads of disease. The days dragged wearily by, and he grew weaker and more shadow-like. He was his mother's favorite child, and she doted on him. It grieved her heart sorely to see him suffer. When able to be about, he was almost constantly by her side. When I would go in her room, almost always I found blue-eyed Willie there, reading from an open book, or curled up in a chair with pencil and paper in hand.

29 Finding that Willie continued to grow worse, Mrs. Lincoln determined to withdraw her cards of invitation and postpone the reception. Mr. Lincoln thought that the cards had better not be withdrawn. At least he advised that the doctor be consulted before any steps were taken. Accordingly Dr. Stone was called in. He pronounced Willie better, and said that there was every reason for an early recovery. He thought, since the invitations had been issued, it would be best to go on with the reception. Willie, he



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insisted, was in no immediate danger. Mrs. Lincoln was guided by these counsels, and no postponement was announced. On the evening of the reception Willie was suddenly taken worse. His mother sat by his bedside a long while, holding his feverish hand in her own, and watching his labored breathing. The doctor claimed there was no cause for alarm. I arranged Mrs. Lincoln's hair, then assisted her to dress.

30      The reception was a large and brilliant one. Some of the young people had suggested dancing, but Mr. Lincoln met the suggestion with an emphatic veto. The brilliance of the scene could not dispel the sadness that rested upon the face of Mrs. Lincoln. During the evening she came upstairs several times, and stood by the bedside of the suffering boy. She loved him with a mother's heart, and her anxiety was great. The night passed slowly; morning came, and Willie was worse. He lingered a few days, and died. God called the beautiful spirit home, and the house of joy was turned into the house of mourning. I was worn out with watching, and was not in the room when Willie died, but was immediately sent for. I assisted in washing him and dressing him, and then laid him on the bed, when Mr. Lincoln came in. I never saw a man so bowed down with grief. He came to the bed, lifted the cover from the face of his child, gazed at it long and earnestly, murmuring, "My poor boy, he was too good for this earth. God has called him home. I know that he is much better off in heaven, but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die!"

31      Great sobs choked his utterance. He buried his head in his hands, and his tall frame was convulsed with emotion. I stood at the foot of the bed, my eyes full of tears, looking at the man in silent, awe-stricken wonder. His grief unnerved him, and made him a weak, passive child. I did not dream that his rugged nature could be so moved. I shall never forget those solemn moments—genius and greatness weeping over love's idol lost. There is a grandeur as well as a simplicity about the picture that will never

fade. With me it is immortal—I really believe that I shall carry it with me across the dark, mysterious river of death.

32 Mrs. Lincoln was so completely overwhelmed with sorrow that she did not attend the funeral. Willie was laid to rest in the cemetery, and the White House was draped in mourning. Black crape everywhere met the eye, contrasting strangely with the gay and brilliant colors of a few days before. Party dresses were laid aside, and everyone who crossed the threshold of the Presidential mansion spoke in subdued tones when they thought of the sweet boy at rest.

33 Previous to this I had lost my son. Leaving Wilberforce, he went to the battlefield with the three months troops, and was killed in Missouri—found his grave on the battlefield where the gallant General Lyon fell. It was a sad blow to me, and the kind womanly letter that Mrs. Lincoln wrote to me when she heard of my bereavement was full of golden words of comfort.

**Excerpt of Chapter 7: “Washington in 1862-1863”**

1 In the summer of 1862, freedmen began to flock into Washington from Maryland and Virginia. They came with a great hope in their hearts, and with all their worldly goods on their backs. Fresh from the bonds of slavery, fresh from the benighted regions of the plantation, they came to the Capital looking for liberty, and many of them not knowing it when they found it. Many good friends reached forth kind hands, but the North is not warm and impulsive. For one kind word spoken, two harsh ones were uttered; there was something repelling in the atmosphere, and the bright joyous dreams of freedom to the slave faded—were sadly altered, in the presence of that stern, practical mother, reality. Instead of flowery paths, days of perpetual sunshine, and bowers hanging with golden fruit, the road was rugged and full of thorns, the sunshine was eclipsed by shadows, and the mute appeals for help too often were answered by cold neglect. Poor dusky children of slavery, men and women of my own race—the transition from slavery to freedom was too sudden for you! The bright dreams were too rudely dispelled; you were not prepared for the new life that opened before you, and the great masses of the North learned to look upon your helplessness with indifference—learned to speak of you as an idle, dependent race. Reason should have prompted kinder thoughts. Charity is ever kind.

2 One fair summer evening I was walking the streets of Washington, accompanied by a friend, when a band of music was heard in the distance. We wondered what it could mean, and curiosity prompted us to find out its meaning. We quickened our steps, and discovered that it came from the house of Mrs. Farnham. The yard was brilliantly lighted, ladies and gentlemen were moving about, and the band was playing some of its sweetest airs. We approached the sentinel on duty at the gate, and asked what was going on. He told us that it was a festival given for the benefit of the sick and wounded soldiers in the

city. This suggested an idea to me. If the white people can give festivals to raise funds for the relief of suffering soldiers, why should not the well-to-do colored people go to work to do something for the benefit of the suffering blacks? I could not rest. The thought was ever present with me, and the next Sunday I made a suggestion in the colored church, that a society of colored people be formed to labor for the benefit of the unfortunate freedmen. The idea proved popular, and in two weeks "the Contraband Relief Association" was organized, with forty working members.

3 In September of 1862, Mrs. Lincoln left Washington for New York, and requested me to follow her in a few days, and join her at the Metropolitan Hotel. I was glad of the opportunity to do so, for I thought that in New York I would be able to do something in the interests of our society. Armed with credentials, I took the train for New York, and went to the Metropolitan, where Mrs. Lincoln had secured accommodations for me. The next morning I told Mrs. Lincoln of my project; and she immediately headed my list with a subscription of \$200. I circulated among the colored people, and got them thoroughly interested in the subject, when I was called to Boston by Mrs. Lincoln, who wished to visit her son Robert, attending college in that city. I met Mr. Wendell Phillips, and other Boston philanthropists, who gave me all the assistance in their power. We held a mass meeting at the Colored Baptist Church, Rev. Mr. Grimes, in Boston, raised a sum of money, and organized there a branch society. The society was organized by Mrs. Grimes, wife of the pastor, assisted by Mrs. Martin, wife of Rev. Stella Martin. This branch of the main society, during the war, was able to send us over eighty large boxes of goods, contributed exclusively by the colored people of Boston. Returning to New York, we held a successful meeting at the Shiloh Church, Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, pastor. The Metropolitan Hotel, at that time as now, employed colored help. I suggested the object of my mission to Robert Thompson, Steward of the Hotel, who immediately raised quite

a sum of money among the dining-room waiters. Mr. Frederick Douglass contributed \$200, besides lecturing for us. Other prominent colored men sent in liberal contributions. From England<sup>1</sup> a large quantity of stores was received. Mrs. Lincoln made frequent contributions, as also did the President. In 1863 I was re-elected President of the Association, which office I continue to hold.

4 For two years after Willie's death the White House was the scene of no fashionable display. The memory of the dead boy was duly respected. In some things Mrs. Lincoln was an altered woman. Sometimes, when in her room, with no one present but myself, the mere mention of Willie's name would excite her emotion, and any trifling memento that recalled him would move her to tears. She could not bear to look upon his picture; and after his death she never crossed the threshold of the Guest's Room in which he died, or the Green Room in which he was embalmed. There was something supernatural in her dread of these things, and something that she could not explain. Tad's nature was the opposite of Willie's, and he was always regarded as his father's favorite child. His black eyes fairly sparkled with mischief.

5 The war progressed, fair fields had been stained with blood, thousands of brave men had fallen, and thousands of eyes were weeping for the fallen at home. Sometimes the very life of the nation seemed to tremble with the fierce shock of arms. In 1863 the Confederates were flushed with victory, and sometimes it looked as if the proud flag of the Union, the glorious old Stars and Stripes, must yield half its nationality to the tri-barred flag that floated grandly over long columns of gray. These were sad, anxious days to Mr. Lincoln, and those who saw the man in privacy only could tell how much he suffered. One day he came into the room where I was fitting a dress on Mrs. Lincoln. His

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<sup>1</sup> The Sheffield Anti-Slavery Society of England contributed through Mr. Frederick Douglass, to the Freedmen's Relief Association, \$24.00; Aberdeen Ladies' Society, \$40.00; Anti-Slavery Society of Edinburgh, Scotland, \$48.00; Friends at Bristol, England, \$176.00; Birmingham Negro's Friend Society, \$50.00. Also received through Mr. Charles R. Douglass, from the Birmingham Society, \$33.00.

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step was slow and heavy, and his face sad. Like a tired child he threw himself upon a sofa, and shaded his eyes with his hands. He was a complete picture of dejection. Mrs. Lincoln, observing his troubled look, asked:

6        "Where have you been, father?"

7        "To the War Department," was the brief, almost sullen answer.

8        "Any news?"

9        "Yes, plenty of news, but no good news. It is dark, dark everywhere."

10       He reached forth one of his long arms, and took a small Bible from a stand near the head of the sofa, opened the pages of the holy book, and soon was absorbed in reading them. A quarter of an hour passed, and on glancing at the sofa the face of the President seemed more cheerful. The dejected look was gone, and the countenance was lighted up with new resolution and hope. The change was so marked that I could not but wonder at it, and wonder led to the desire to know what book of the Bible afforded so much comfort to the reader. Making the search for a missing article an excuse, I walked gently around the sofa, and looking into the open book, I discovered that Mr. Lincoln was reading that divine comforter, Job. He read with Christian eagerness, and the courage and hope that he derived from the inspired pages made him a new man. I almost imagined that I could hear the Lord speaking to him from out the whirlwind of battle: "Gird up thy loins now like a man: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me." What a sublime picture was this! A ruler of a mighty nation going to the pages of the Bible with simple Christian earnestness for comfort and courage, and finding both in the darkest hours of a nation's calamity.

11       Frequent letters were received warning Mr. Lincoln of assassination, but he never gave a second thought to the mysterious warnings. The letters, however, sorely

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troubled his wife. She seemed to read impending danger in every rustling leaf, in every whisper of the wind.

12 "Where are you going now, father?" she would say to him, as she observed him putting on his overshoes and shawl.

13 "I am going over to the War Department, mother, to try and learn some news."

14 "But, father, you should not go out alone. You know you are surrounded with danger."

15 "All imagination. What does any one want to harm me for? Don't worry about me, mother, as if I were a little child, for no one is going to trouble me;" and with a confident, unsuspecting air he would close the door behind him, descend the stairs, and pass out to his lonely walk.

16 For weeks, when trouble was anticipated, friends of the President would sleep in the White House to guard him from danger.

17 Robert would come home every few months, bringing new joy to the family circle. He was very anxious to quit school and enter the army, but the move was sternly opposed by his mother.

18 "We have lost one son, and his loss is as much as I can bear, without being called upon to make another sacrifice," she would say, when the subject was under discussion.

19 "But many a poor mother has given up all her sons," mildly suggested Mr. Lincoln, "and our son is not more dear to us than the sons of other people are to their mothers."

20 "That may be; but I cannot bear to have Robert exposed to danger. His services are not required in the field, and the sacrifice would be a needless one."

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21 "The services of every man who loves his country are required in this war. You should take a liberal instead of a selfish view of the question, mother."

22 Argument at last prevailed, and permission was granted Robert to enter the army. With the rank of Captain and A. D. C. he went to the field, and remained in the army till the close of the war.

23 Mrs. Lincoln's love for her husband sometimes prompted her to act very strangely. She was extremely jealous of him, and if a lady desired to court her displeasure, she could select no surer way to do it than to pay marked attention to the President. These little jealous freaks often were a source of perplexity to Mr. Lincoln. If it was a reception for which they were dressing, he would come into her room to conduct her downstairs, and while pulling on his gloves ask, with a merry twinkle in his eyes:

24 "Well, mother, who must I talk with tonight—shall it be Mrs. D.?"

25 "That deceitful woman! No, you shall not listen to her flattery."

26 "Well, then, what do you say to Miss C.? She is too young and handsome to practise deceit."

27 "Young and handsome, you call her! You should not judge beauty for me. No, she is in league with Mrs. D., and you shall not talk with her."

28 "Well, mother, I must talk with someone. Is there anyone that you do not object to?" trying to button his glove, with a mock expression of gravity.

29 "I don't know as it is necessary that you should talk to anybody in particular. You know well enough, Mr. Lincoln, that I do not approve of your flirtations with silly women, just as if you were a beardless boy, fresh from school."



30 "But, mother, I insist that I must talk with somebody. I can't stand around like a simpleton, and say nothing. If you will not tell me who I may talk with, please tell me who I may not talk with."

31 "There is Mrs. D. and Miss C. in particular. I detest them both. Mrs. B. also will come around you, but you need not listen to her flattery. These are the ones in particular."

32 "Very well, mother; now that we have settled the question to your satisfaction, we will go downstairs;" and always with stately dignity, he proffered his arm and led the way.

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