

Abraham Lincoln
From the book Historical Plays for Children
By Grace Bird & Maud Starling

CHARACTERS:

Abraham Lincoln
Father
Stepmother
Neighbor Brown
Jack Armstrong
Peter Roger
Mr. Jenkins
Judge
Prisoner (Jack Armstrong's brother)
Jury
-Foreman
Witness
Prosecuting Attorney
Mrs. Armstrong (Mother of the brothers)
Extras in the court
Secretary
An Old Man

SCENE I

(Set in a little log hut in Indiana. Three sides are enclosed; the fourth is shut in by Bearskins. Abraham is reading in front of the open fire, on one side of which sits his Father, on the other, his Stepmother.)

FATHER: Abraham, you will spoil your eyes reading by that flickering light.

ABRAHAM: No, Father, I can see very well; and I am anxious to finish this story that neighbor Brown lent me.

STEPMOTHER: The boy is a great student. I will make him a tallow dip to read by.

FATHER: He had better turn his attention to something more practical than books.

STEPMOTHER: Many a great man has been a lover of learning. Let him study if he likes. *(In the meantime, she has been preparing the tallow dip, which she now places near the boy.)*

ABRAHAM: Thank you, Mother. You are always doing something for me.

STEPMOTHER: That is because you are a good boy, Abraham.

(A knock is heard on the side of the house.)

FATHER: *(Rising and pushing aside the bearskins covering the open side of the hut.)* Come in.

(Neighbor Brown enters, shakes hands with the family, and sets down a lantern he is carrying.)

FATHER: We are glad to see you, Brown. Is the snow drifting badly?

BROWN: *(Stamping his feet.)* Yes, there is quite a heap out there in the path.

STEPMOTHER: Come and get warm at the fire. *(They step aside and make room for the visitor.)*

BROWN: Thank you. A fire is good on a cold night likes this. *(He draws near to the fire and rubs his hands together.)* I see you are still at your books, my lad. *(He pats Abraham on the shoulder.)* Well, I have brought you another. I got it from a friend of mine just so that I could give it to you. *(He takes a book from inside his coat and hands it to Abraham, who eagerly takes it.)*

STEPMOTHER: What do you say for it, Abraham?

ABRAHAM: I thank you very much. I have quite a library now.

BROWN: I didn't look at the name of the book, but I suppose, for people who like to read, a book is a book, no matter what it is called. I believe in encouraging learning, but reading is too slow work for me. I would rather chop wood.

(All laugh.)

ABRAHAM: *(Examining the book.)* It is a copy of the Statutes of Indiana. I am glad to get it.

FATHER: What are "statutes"?

ABRAHAM: Why, laws, Father. It tells all about the laws of this state.

BROWN: Well, now, that is a pretty good thing to know about.

FATHER: It sounds more practical than what he has just been reading. What do you call that story, boy?

ABRAHAM: Robinson Crusoe. It tells of a man who was shipwrecked and cast away on an island. It is wonderful to read about the things he did.

BROWN: (*Looking at the other books arranged on a rude shelf.*) What else have you? Here's the Bible. That is the best book.

STEPMOTHER: Yes, he never gets tired of reading it over and over. It is full of so many noble thoughts and good stories.

ABRAHAM: (*Touching the books one by one.*) Here are "Aesop's Fables," "Pilgrim's Progress," "The Life of Washington," and a history of the United States. That is a good many for a boy to have.

BROWN: Indeed it is, and if I can get you any more, I will.

STEPMOTHER: Abraham writes out different things he wants to learn by heart and takes them into the woods to study while he is chopping.

BROWN: Where does he get the paper?

ABRAHAM: (*Laughing.*) Here is my paper. (*He takes a shingle down from the book shelf.*) I write on one of these and carry it with me. I make my ink of roots. (*He picks up a bottle of ink and shows it to Brown.*) And this is my pen. (*He exhibits a goose quill.*)

STEPMOTHER: He does his arithmetic examples for school with a burnt stick on the back of a shovel. (*She shows the shovel.*)

BROWN: You have a smart boy here, Neighbor Lincoln.

FATHER: He ought to learn a trade, I think. He is tall and strong and would make a good blacksmith.

ABRAHAM: I should like to be a lawyer. That is why I am so glad to get the book you brought me, Neighbor Brown.

STEPMOTHER: He is a fine rail-splitter already.

BROWN: I know that. There is not a grown man around here that can beat him.

STEPMOTHER: Whatever he is best fitted for, no doubt he will do.

BROWN: Yes, that is so. It is getting late now, so I think I had better be starting home.

FATHER: Well, come again, Brown; we are always glad to see you.

BROWN: I will. Come and see us. Goodbye.

OTHERS: Goodbye.

(Brown goes out.)

FATHER: The fire is low, and it is time to go to bed. *(He yawns.)* Abraham, we must get up at sunrise tomorrow and begin chopping trees early.

ABRAHAM: All right, Father. Good night, Mother.

STEPMOTHER: Good night. I hope you will get a good sleep. I stirred up the leaves in your mattress today to make it softer.

ABRAHAM: You are as kind to me as if you were my own mother. *(He starts to climb the peg ladder to the loft.)*

FATHER: I believe I will go out and fasten the edges of the bearskins a little tighter. I see the snow is sifting in.

STEPMOTHER: I will go with you and hold the light, so that you can see.

(They go out.)

SCENE II

(Set in a general store in New Salem, Illinois. Lincoln is behind the counter. Jack and Peter are sitting idly by the store. Mrs. Jenkins comes in with a wet umbrella, which she leans against the counter.)

LINCOLN: Good evening, Mrs. Jenkins. This is a rainy night for such a long trip.

MRS. JENKINS: When I started it was only sprinkling, but it is pouring now. I needed some things for breakfast, so I decided to come. My married son is going to drive me back home.

LINCOLN: I will carry them over to his house for you.

MRS. JENKINS: Oh, no, thank you. It is only a step, and all I want is a pound of sugar and half a pound of tea. I never can eat my breakfast without a cup of hot tea.

(Lincoln weighs out the sugar and tea and gives them to her.)

MRS. JENKINS: How much are they all together?

LINCOLN: Forty-four cents.

MRS. JENKINS: Can you change a bill?

LINCOLN: *(Laughing.)* Yes, as long as it is not too large.

MRS. JENKINS: I never have very large ones. It is only a dollar.

(Lincoln takes the bill and hands back the change. She puts it in her purse without counting it.)

LINCOLN: *(Smiling.)* You had better count your change, Mrs. Jenkins. I may have cheated you.

MRS. JENKINS: There is no danger of that. If you cheat anybody, it will be yourself.

LINCOLN: You are very kind to have such a good opinion of me.

(Mrs. Jenkins takes packages and umbrella and starts to go.)

LINCOLN: Wait, I will put up your umbrella for you. *(He goes out of the door with her and returns at once.)*

JACK: Well, as I was going to say before the lady came in, I have forgiven you for the beating you gave me yesterday, because anybody that is stronger than I am has my respect.

LINCOLN: All right, Jack, I would not have touched you if you had not started the fight. We will shake hands and bury the hatchet.

JACK: That suits me. *(They shake hands.)* Peter, here, can act as witness. If anyone ever tries to hurt you, he has me to reckon with.

LINCOLN: Same here. *(Starting up suddenly)* Oh, say, boys, I cheated Mrs. Jenkins out of six cents. Do you suppose I could catch her before she starts home?

JACK: No, I don't believe so. Her son's horse was already hitched when I came in a few minutes ago, and he drives like the wind.

PETER: Oh, let it go until you see her again. She didn't count her change, and she will never miss it. Think what a surprise it will be when you tell her!

LINCOLN: No, I must return that money at once.

JACK: You will have a run of nearly three miles, and it is raining harder than ever.

LINCOLN: There will not be any more customers here tonight. I will start now.

PETER: Wait until morning and give it to her son.

LINCOLN: No, I must return it to her. I gave her only fifty cents change.

JACK: You will never get rich, Abe—you ware too honest.

LINCOLN: That is all talk, Jack. You fellows would not cheat any more than I would.

PETER: Maybe not, but we would not walk five miles this chilly night for six cents. Here, take my umbrella, if you are determined to go. It may keep off some of the biggest drops.

LINCOLN: No, thank you. I have never used an umbrella in my life. When I get wet, I wait until I get dry again. *(He takes keys out of pocket to lock store door.)* I don't want to hurry you, boys. If you would like to keep store until I get back, I will not lock up.

PETER: No, thank you; I am too sleepy to sit up much longer. We will go when you do; but I think you are foolish to take such a tramp after a hard day's work.

LINCOLN: I was going to read law for a while, but I will go for a walk instead.

PETER: *(Slapping Lincoln on the shoulder as all three go out.)* Abe, you are the hardest worker in town. If you are not a great man yet, I don't know what I am talking about.

(Lincoln laughs good-naturedly, and they all go out.)

SCENE III

(Set in a court room. The prisoner, Jack Armstrong's brother, the jury, witnesses, attorneys, and others, including the prisoner's mother, and neighbor Brown are all present)

JUDGE: *(To Lincoln.)* You may continue your examination of the witness.

LINCOLN: You say that you saw Armstrong commit the murder.

WITNESS: I did.

LINCOLN: At what time did it happen?

WITNESS: Eleven at night.

LINCOLN: How could you see at that hour of the night?

WITNESS: The moon was shining.

LINCOLN: Just how large was the moon?

WITNESS: About full.

LINCOLN: Were there any clouds in the sky?

WITNESS: No, the sky was perfectly clear, and it was almost as light as day.

LINCOLN: You are sure of that?

WITNESS: Yes, perfectly sure.

LINCOLN: (*Taking an almanac from his pocket*). What was the date of the murder?

WITNESS: August twelfth.

LINCOLN: The almanac shows that there was no moon that night. Two days later there was a new moon.

WITNESS: That must be a mistake.

(*All laugh.*)

JUDGE: (*Rapping with a gavel.*) Order in the court!

LINCOLN: A man who sees a moon when there is no moon is not a reliable witness. That is all, your Honor.

JUDGE: We have heard the evidence. We will now listen to the plea of the prosecuting attorney.

PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: Your Honor and Gentlemen of the Jury, though the evidence has been, for the most part, circumstantial, the crime is shocking, the character of the prisoner is not good, and his associates are evil. That should be sufficient.

JUDGE: We will now listen to the plea of the counsel for the defendant.

LINCOLN: Your Honor and Gentlemen of the Jury, it is unnecessary to say anything further in defense of the prisoner. He did not commit the crime, and the evidence of the only eyewitness declares that he saw the murder in the moonlight, when there was no moon.

(*All laugh.*)

JUDGE: (*Pounding with gavel.*) Order in the court! (*To the Prisoner*) Have you anything further to say?

PRISONER: Nothing, your Honor, except that I am not guilty.

JUDGE: The jury has heard all the evidence, and will now withdraw to prepare the verdict. Remember to weigh each point carefully.

(Jury goes out.)

MRS. ARMSTRONG: *(To Lincoln.)* How can I ever reward you for defending my son so ably?

LINCOLN: I was glad to defend him. I believe him innocent.

JACK ARMSTRONG: If he is freed, we have you to thank.

(The jury returns.)

JUDGE: We will now listen to the verdict of the jury.

FOREMAN: Not guilty, your Honor, by unanimous vote.

JUDGE: The case is dismissed, and the prisoner is free.

PRISONER: *(To Lincoln.)* You have saved my life. I have no money now, but I will pay you if it takes me fifty years.

LINCOLN: I was glad to do it. Your mother was kind to me once when I was poor and friendless.

MRS. ARMSTRONG: God bless you. A man with your good heart and ability should be President of the United States.

JUDGE: *(Shaking hands with Lincoln.)* That is very true. You did well, young man, and you have a brilliant career before you.

BROWN: It was a lucky night when I gave you that book on the laws of Indiana. You have made good use of it.

LINCOLN: You are all very kind. It is a great satisfaction to aid the innocent.

(All go out.)

SCENE IV

(Set in the office of the President of the United States, at Washington. Lincoln is sitting before a table strewn with papers. He is reading a dispatch and rumpling his hair in perplexity.)

LINCOLN: *(To himself.)* I wish this cruel war could be brought to an end. So many brave men have been killed on both sides. But the Union must be preserved, and the slaves must be freed.

SECRETARY: *(Entering.)* An old man wants to see you. Shall I dismiss him? You must be tired after this long day's work.

LINCOLN: What time is it?

SECRETARY: *(Looking at his watch.)* Nearly eleven o'clock.

LINCOLN: What does the old man want?

SECRETARY: He will not tell; but he seems to be in great distress, and is weeping.

LINCOLN: I should spend a sleepless night if I turned away any one in distress. Send him in, and I will find out his errand.

(Secretary goes out. Lincoln busies himself with the papers before him. The Secretary returns with a bent and feeble old man.)

LINCOLN: *(Pointing to a chair.)* Sit down and tell me what I can do for you.

OLD MAN: Mr. President, I have come to ask you to pardon my only son.

LINCOLN: What has he done?

OLD MAN: He slept at his post, and he is to be shot at sunrise.

LINCOLN: How old is he?

OLD MAN: Eighteen, and he has always been a good boy. He enlisted for love of his country.

LINCOLN: Sleeping at one's post is a grave offense. If a night attack should be made by the enemy, it might mean death to a whole regiment.

OLD MAN: He was so worn out that he fell asleep standing up. They found him leaning against a tree.

LINCOLN: That is an unusual case. He did not lie down?

OLD MAN: He would have died first.

LINCOLN: I am sorry for you, but I do not see how I can do anything for him. Hear what General Butler has just telegraphed to me: "President Lincoln, I pray you not to interfere with the court-martials of the army. You will destroy all discipline among our soldiers." Now you see how the matter stands.

OLD MAN: His mother is ill, and the shock will kill her. Wouldn't you be willing to let me die for the boy? Say yes, Mr. President, and I will gladly take his place.

LINCOLN: No, I could not do that. *(He thinks for a moment, then gets up and walks across the floor.)* Butler or no Butler, I will pardon your boy. Give my secretary his name and regiment. *(To the Secretary)* Send me a dispatch that the lad is not to be shot without further orders from the President.

(To the Old Man) If your son does not die until orders come from me to shoot him, he will live to be much older than Methuselah.

OLD MAN: All that I can say is, God bless you! God bless you! *(He goes out with the Secretary.)*

LINCOLN: Now I can go to bed content, when I think how happy the mere signing of my name will make that boy's mother. *(He goes out.)*

THE END