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*The Cordelia Harvey Manuscript:  
“Reflections of Hospital Life, and Personal  
Interviews with President Lincoln.”  
Part I*

EDITED BY ROBERT C. BRAY

**Section One: “There is not a more difficult task  
than that of relating simple facts”**

*This edition of Cordelia Harvey’s manuscript was done from the original, with permission from the owner, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Thanks to Christopher Schnell, Curator of Manuscripts at the ALPL, for his kind professional assistance.*

Description of the manuscript: pp [1]–61; ruled stationery, 7.5 by nearly 10 inches; heart and star mark engrossed in upper left corner; holograph of Cordelia Harvey; almost entirely written in brown ink, excepting some few overwrites and penciled markings, most likely by another hand (these will be discussed in the interpretive essay, Part II); two rectangular marks at the top of each page, with small round holes in their middles, indicating that the ms. was at one time bound.

In a darker ink, top of pg. 1: ‘Cordelia Perrine Harvey wife of Gov. L. P. Harvey of Wis;/ Also sister of Mrs. R M Benson./ Also Aunt of Mrs G E Schaub.’

Most likely provenance: from author to her niece; then purchased by or donated to the Illinois State Historical Library (now Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library) probably in 1934 but possibly as early as 1915. Authenticity: comparison of the handwriting with a signed autograph letter of Cordelia Harvey’s, while inconclusive to these inexperienced eyes, offers no reason to think they are not the same; I have proceeded under a strong presumption that she wrote this document, which appears to be a fair copy, herself. Other ms. copies: none known. Known typescript copies: Wisconsin Historical Society; Sterling Library, Yale University. Date of ms.: none given in the ms., probably

late 1865 or early 1866 (see Section 2 below); dates of Mrs. Harvey's interviews with Lincoln at the White House: September 6–9, 1863.

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[[1]] Perhaps it is not well to open too frequently the deep wells of past sorrows that we may drink the bitter draughts which memory offers. Still, we would not forget the past; our glorious past! with all its terrible trials, its untold sufferings, its unwritten history.

The Christian never forgets the dying groans on Calvary, that gave to him his souls salvation; neither can an American citizen forget the great price paid for the life and liberty of this nation. Next to love of God is love of Country.

It is not my object to awaken any morbid feelings of sentimental sorrow; or again to open the deep [2] wounds which time has healed. Neither do I wish to serve up to an unhealthy imagination a dish of fearful horrors from which a healthy organization must turn away. I would only ask you to look at the shadows a little while, that the light and life, of peace and plenty which now fill our land may by contrast impress upon your hearts a picture more beautiful than any artist could ever [struck through] place on canvas. Shadows always make the light more beautiful.

In the fall of 1862 I found myself in Cape Girardeau, where hospitals were being improvised for the immediate use of the sick, and dying, then being brought in from the swamps by the returning Regiments; and up the [3] rivers in closely crowded hospital boats. These hospitals were mere sheds filled with the cots as thick as they could stand with scarcely room enough for one person to pass between them. Pneumonia Typhoid and Camp fevers; and that fearful scourge, of the Southern swamps and rivers chronic diarrhea occupied every bed. A surgeon once said to me 'there is nothing else there; here, I see Pneumonia and there fever and on that cot another disease and I see nothing else! You had better stay away, the air is full of contagion: and contagion and sympathy do not go well together'. One day, a woman passed through these uncomfortable, illy ventilated, hot [4] unclean, infected wretched rooms; and She saw something else there, a hand reached out and clutched her dress. One caught her shawl and kissed it, another her hand and pressed it to his fevered cheek, another in wild delirium cried 'I want to go home! I want to go home! Lady, take me in your chariot, take me away'; this was a fair haired, blue eyed boy of the



Figure 1. Mrs. Cordelia A. P. Harvey, cdv image 1860s, courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society. In 1862–63 she made her way south along the Mississippi from St. Louis to Vicksburg (and perhaps farther) as she nursed and supervised sanitary conditions for Union sick and wounded, especially those from Wisconsin. Accounts of her meetings with Lincoln about those events will appear in Part II of this article.

South, who had left family and friends forever obeying his country's call he enlisted under the stars and stripes because he could not be a traitor. He was therefore disowned, and was now dying among strangers, with his Mother and Sisters not twenty miles away, and they knew that he was dying and would not come to him. Father forgave them they knew not what they did.' [sic]

[5] As this woman passed these diseases as the surgeon called them whispered and smiled at each other and even reached out and took hold of each others hands, saying 'she will take us home.' I know her, she will not leave us here to die' not dreaming that hovering just above them was a white robed one, who in a short time would take them to their Heavenly Home.

This woman failed to see on these cots ought but the human they were to her the sons, brothers, husbands and fathers of anxious weeping ones at home, and as such she cared for, and thought of them. Arm in arm with health, she day by day visited every sufferers cot doing, it is true, very little, but always taking with her from the outside [6] world fresh air, fresh flowers, and all the hope and comfort she could find in her heart to give them. Now and then, one would totter forth into the open air his good constitution having overcome

disease, and the longings for life so strong within him that he grasped at straws determined to live. If perchance he could get a furlough, in a few weeks a strong man would return and greet you with 'How do you do I am on my way to my regiment.!' Who this stranger could be, you would never imagine until reminded by him of the skeleton form and trembling steps you had so recently watched going to the landing homeward bound. But, if as was too frequently the case they were sent to convalescent camps, in a few weeks they were returned to hospital, and again to camp [7] and thus to vibrate between camp and hospital until hope and life were gone. This was the fate of thousands. On a steamer from Cape Girardeau to Helena at table one day when the passengers were dinning [*sic*] among whom were several military officers. I heard a young major of the Regular Army very coolly remark that it was much cheaper for the government to keep sick soldiers in hospitals on the river than to furlough them. A lady present quietly replied 'that is true Major if all were faithful to the Government but unfortunately a majority of the surgeons in the army have conscientious scruples and verily believe it to be their duty to keep these sick men alive as long as possible. To be sure their uneaten rations increased the hospital fund and so enabled your surgeons to generously provide all needed delicacies for the sick, but the pay was drawn by the soldiers from the [8] government all the same. Don't you think Sir, it would be a trifle more economical continued the lady to send these poor fellows north for a few weeks to regain their strength that they might return at once to active service? the laughter of his brother officers prevented my hearing his reply.

This young officer was the medical director at Helena where I found over two thousand graves of northerners. Two thirds of these men ~~could~~ might [<sup>superscript</sup>] have been saived could they have been sent north. The surgeon in charge of the General Hospital when asked why he did not furlough some of the men from his overcrowded hospitals replied that he had at one time and another made out certificates of disability for furlough for nearly every man in his hospital and for hundreds who rest on yonder hill [9] but when sent for the signatures & approval of the Medical Director had invariably been returned disapproved. that he had also permitted the men themselves to go with their papers only to have them severely reprovded and ordered back to hospital and said he, (with tears in his eyes) many of them

never returned for broken hearted they have lain down by the roadside and died, another good illustration of the great difficulty of procuring furloughs I once heard a [illegible superscript] person [illegible insertion in different ink] who had been instrumental in giving [illegible superscript] a dying boy to his mother that she might nurse him back to life[period inserted in different ink] [following two clauses (12 words) struck out in different ink] relate the way it was done. how red tape is sometimes severed The Mother had succeeded in getting her son as far as St Louis where his papers were to be sent. They came in the usual way to the [10] Medical Director of that department, were all wrong of course—not made out according to army regulations and must therefore be returned to his regiment which was somewhere with Sherman and could not be reached; the Mother received the papers with that fearful word disapproved written upon them, there was nothing to be done but to place her sick son in a St Louis hospital and leave him there to die: She must return to her family. She told her story ~~to this friend~~ with streaming eyes and a broken heart. The woman impulsively said give me the papers, and off she went to the Medical Directors office. He was a man full six feet high over fifty years of age a head like Oliver Cromwell's a face stern as fate, and of the Regular Army. ~~She~~ ['I' overwritten] entered his presence, seated herself [sic] [11] and waited to be spoken to. Soon it came with, what do you want! To talk with you a moment Genl she replied—No time for talking—I will wait she said. He wrote a few moments then said—may as well hear it now as ever what is it? I would like to ask you, if you had a son in this volunteer service, sent up from the South as far as St Louis sick and like to die and some ignorant careless officer had made out his furlough papers wrong. What do you want! would you not be glad if you were away if your poor boy could find a friend. 'What do you want I say? This is nothing to the purpose Do you not think that friend ought to do all she could to save your boy? What is all this nonsense['?' perhaps] only this, a poor Mother is at the Soldiers home with her dying [12] son. The physicians say he may live if he is sent North, but will surely die if left here. His furlough papers have been sent on, and I have seen them and know they were wrong. His regiment is with Sherman on the march. Cannot something be done for the boy—for his Mother? We have the Army regulations we cannot go behind them—you know if I do they will rap me over the knuckles

at Washington. Oh that your knuckles were mine I would be willing to have them skinned—the skin would grow again you know. Where are these papers? he sharply said. I have them in my pocket. Let me see them! The woman took them slowly out the blank side upwards and gave them to him. He turned them his face flushed as he said Why I have had these and disapproved them this is my signature, [13] ~~She~~ [<sup>‘I’</sup> overwritten] replied trembling I know it, but forgive me. I thought maybe when you knew about it General—and the Mother was weeping so, with the skeleton arms of the boy around her neck, I thought may be you would do something or tell me something to do Suppose I do approve these papers it will do no good, the General in command will stop them and censure me. But you will have done all you could have obeyed the Higher Law. In the mean time this truly noble man had firmly crossed out his own words and signature, and rewritten it under words of approval & in a quick harsh tone said, take it, and dont you come here again to-day. As the woman raised her eyes to thank him she saw a scowl on his brow, a smile [14] on his lips, but a tear in his eye. The Genl in command, said he, never went behind the medical Director’s signature. They boy started for home with his Mother that night full of hope. [spaces] Not long after this incident occurred showing how easily man yields to the Higher Law when once he makes humanity his stand-point. [spaces] An erring boy of nineteen who had deserted from a Minnesota Reg<sup>t</sup> changed his name, enlisted in the Gun Boat service from which he again deserted, again changed his name and reenlisted in a Wisconsin Reg<sup>t</sup>, a little unsteady to be sure but still a soldier. He was wounded in battle, honorably discharged from the service, and paid off. [spaces] On Saturday night he reached St Louis and found his way to one of the lowest dens. was drugged, and robbed of every thing he possessed. On Monday he was found tossing from side to side stricken by disease. His surroundings were terrible, lying on an old filthy mattress which [15] had been thrown into the open hall by the frightened inmates[<sup>‘:’</sup> inserted in darker ink], [carat: <sup>‘he was’</sup> superscript insertion] screaming with pain & at times delirous. [spaces] As soon as [<sup>‘h’</sup> overwritten] however, as he heard the soothing tones of a human voice, and recognized the hand of human kindness on his burning brow, he cried, Mother! Oh Mother, forgive me God forgive me! I have sinned. What shall I do! What shall I do! Conscience, and disease were doing their work. Softly speaking to him

words of hope and comfort, our friend released herself from his grasp, promising to return in half an hour, and take him away.

This was easier, said, than done. This soldier was now a citizen, and could not therefore be admitted to a Military hospital. His disease [ill. strikethroughs in 'disease,' letters 2, 3 and 5] was of such a nature, that in all probability he must die, but his widowed Mother far away must she hear that her darling soldier had died in such a place. God forbid, an order must be had to place him in a Military Hospital.

[16] The woman goes to her old friend the Medical Director and tells her story in as few words as possible, saying now Gen<sup>l</sup> write an order quick to the Surgeon in charge of the 5<sup>th</sup> St Hospital, that the boy may be received, I also want an ambulance mattrass, and bedding, and some me to help me move him. Yes! Yes! But listen I can't do this I have no right—I know—I know but please do hurry, I promised to be back in half an hour, and the boy will expect me. The Gen<sup>l</sup> calling an orderly and imitating her voice said hurry, hurry boy, get the best ambulance we have, a good mattrass and bedding, and some men, and go with Madame and do whatever she bids you to do. Here is the order, what else do you want? henceforth, we do what you wish, and no questions asked, it is the easiest and I guess the only way to get along with you.

The Mother mourned her son's death but not [17] his disgrace. [brackets in pencil open] In after months this worthy officer by daring to take responsibility performed many acts which will gladden his dying hours. [brackets in pencil close] In this way one could be snatched from the suffering and death now and then, but oh the thousands that were beyond the reach of human aid and the numbers that no private individual power could help, only the great military power. This conviction first led to the thought of providing if possible some place where invalids could be sent north without the trouble of furloughs. The idea of Northern Military hospitals seemed practicable and so natural that we never once thought the authorities would oppose the movement. For nearly, a year this question was agitated, and urged with all the force, that logic, position, and influence [carat: 'could bring to bear' superscript]; but all in vain. Hope was well nigh dead within us. [spaces] God often chooses the most weak and insignificant instruments to [18] accomplish great good. [brackets in pencil open] And here I would like to say to my young friends— if in your future lives you should be placed in circumstances where action

is necessary, and you feel an impulse within you to act, never hesitate because others have failed. This impulse may be an inspiration from the Almighty—the voice of God speaking to you as much as was that audible voice that spoke years ago saying ‘Samuel! Samuel! and do you never fail to answer, ‘Here am I’ Fear not, you will be led by the hand of your heavenly father. In your childhood you did not falter nor dread to pass through the most dark, and fearful places, if led by the hand of your earthly Father. Can you not trust the Heavenly now, as the Earthly then. [brackets in pencil close] [spaces] This depression in the South because of the utter failure on the part of the Government to provide a [19] way by which her enfeebled soldiers might be restored to strength, at last suggested the thought of going directly to the Head, to the President by sending up from one authority to another, by this officer and that one we began to feel the message lost the flavor of truth and got cold before it reached the deciding power and because it was so luke-warm he speued it out of his mouth. It is always best if you wish to secure an object, if you have a certain purpose to accomplish to go at once to the highest power be your own petitioner in temporal, as in spiritual matters officiate at your own altar, be your own Priest. I am going to ~~tell~~ give you a ~~short story~~ of another chapter in my own ~~life~~ experience just as it was, if I can do so, without the least coloring. There is not a more difficulty task than to relate simple facts in such a manner as to convey [20] an entirely correct impression. The difficulty is increased when the relator is an interested party. I trust I shall not be accused of egotism if I give ~~to you~~ the exact conversations between Mr Lincoln, and myself, as taken down, at the time, for in no other way, can I so well ~~give a picture of~~ to you our much loved and martyred Pres. as he then appeared at the White House. As I said before, the necessity for establishing Military Hospitals at the North, had long been a subject of much thought, among our people but, it was steadily opposed by Military Authority. By the advice of friends and with an intense feeling that something must be done, I went to Washington. I entered the White House not with fear and trembling [21] but strong and self possessed fully conscious of the righteousness of my mission.

I was received after short delay. I had never seen Mr. Lincoln before. He was alone in a medium sized office-like room, no elegance, about him, no elegance in him. He was plainly clad in a suit of black, that illy fitted him. No fault of his tailor however, such a figure could not be



fitted. He was tall, and lean, and as he sat in a folded up sort of way in a deep arm chair, one would almost have thought him deformed.

At his side stood a high writing desk, and table combined, plain straw matting covered the floor, a few stuffed chairs and sofa covered with green worsted completed the furniture, of the presence chamber of the President of this great Republic. When, I first saw him, his head was bent forward, his chin resting on his breast & in his hand a letter, which I had just sent into him. He raised his eyes, saying, Mrs. Harvey? I hastened forward [22] and replied Yes, and I am glad to see you Mr. Lincoln, so much for Republican presentations and ceremony. The Pres't too my hand, hoped I was well, but there was no smile of welcome on his face. It was rather the stern look of the judge who had decided against me. His face was peculiar, bone, nerve, vein, and muscle were all so plainly seen, deep lines of thought and care, were around his mouth, and eyes. The word justice, came into my mind, as though I could read it upon his face. I mean that extended sense of the word that comprehended the practice of every virtue, which reason prescribes, and society should expect. The debt we owe to God, to man to ourselves, when paid is but a simple act of justice, a duty performed.

This attribute seemed the source of Mr Lincoln's strength. He motioned me to a chair. I sat, and silently read his face while he was reading a paper written by one [23] of our senators, introducing me and my mission. When he had finished reading this he looked up, ran his fingers through his hair well silvered, (though the brown there predominated his beard was more whitened. [no close paren.] In a moment he looked at me with a good deal of sad severity and said Madam! this matter of Northern hospitals has been talked of a great deal, and I thought it was settled, but it seems not, what have you got to say about it? Only, this Mr President, that many soldiers in our western army, on the Mississippi river must have northern air or die. There are thousands of graves all along our Southern rivers, and in the swamps for which the Government is responsible, ignorantly undoubtedly but this ignorance must not continue. If you will permit these men to come North you will have ten men where you have now one Mr President could not see the force [~~illeg.~~, prob. miswritten 'or,' which is overwritten in superscript] or Logic in this last argument. He shrugged his shoulders and said, 'if your reasoning was correct it would be a good argument.' [underscoring and quotation marks in a

different ink] I saw that I had misspoken. [period in a different ink] I don't see how he continues sending one sick man North, is going to give us in a year ten well ones. a quizzical smile played over his face at my slight embarrassment. Mr Lincoln, you understand me I think—I intended to have said if you will let the sick come north, you will have ten well men in the army one year from today where you have well one now whereas if you do not let them come they will all be dead. Yes! yes, I understand you, but if they are sent north they will desert, where is the difference. 'Dead men cannot fight and they may not [25] desert.' [Quotation marks now appear in a different ink<sup>1</sup>] Mr. Lincoln's eye flashed as he replied—'a fine way—a fine way to decimate the army we should never get a man of them back not one, not one.'

'Indeed, but you must pardon me when I say—you are mistaken, you do not understand our people, You do not trust them sufficiently. They are as true and as loyal to the government as you say. The loyalty is among the Common Soldiers and they have ever been the chief sufferers.' 'This is your opinion,' he said, with a sort of sneer. 'Mrs. Harvey, how many men do you suppose the government was paying in the Army on the Potomac at the battle of Antietam, and how many men do you suppose could be got for active service at tha time. I wish you would give me a guess.' I know nothing of the [26] Army of the Potomac, only there were some noble sacrifices there, when I spoke of loyalty I referred to our western army. 'Well! now give a guess? How many?' 'I cannot Mr President.' He threw himself around in his chair, one leg over the arm and again spoke slowly. 'This war might have been finished at that time if every man had been in his place that was able to be there, but they were scattered hither and thither over the North some on furloughs or in one way and another gone! ['g' overwritten on a fainter 'g' in a different ink; emphasis in a different ink] So that, out of one hundred and seventy thousand men which the government was paying at that time only 83,000 could be got for action. The consequences you know proved nearly disastrous.' 'It was very sad, but the delinquents were certainly not in northern hospitals,

1. Harvey did not usually employ quotation marks to indicate conversation. J. G. Holland, however, in his reconnaissance of the Lincoln interviews section of the ms. inserted them freely, and these have been allowed to stand in the transcription. Only when Harvey herself appears to have used quotation marks is the fact noted parenthetically. See Section 4 (next issue) for a discussion of Holland's use of the Harvey ms. in his Lincoln biography.

[27] neither were they deserters therefrom, for there are none. This is therefore no argument against them.' 'Well! well! Mrs. Harvey you go and see the Sec'y of War and talk with him and hear what he has to say.' This he said thoughtfully and took up the letter I had given him, after writing something on the back of it, gave it to me. 'May I return to you Mr Lincoln?' I asked, 'Certainly' he replied and his voice was gentler than it had been before. I left him for the War Dep<sup>t</sup> I found written on the back of the letter these words. Admit Mrs Harvey at once, listen, to what she says she is a lady of intelligence and talks sense. A Lincoln. Not of course displeased with the introduction, I [28] went on my way to Mr Stanton, our Sec of War, about whose severity I had heard so much, that I must confess I dreaded the interview, but I was kindly received, listened to respectfully, and answered politely. And let me say here as a passing tribute to this great and good man that, I never knew a clearer brain, a truer heart, a nobler spirit, than Edwin M. Stanton. I have watched him by the hour listening to, and deciding questions of minor moment, as well as those of greater importance those upon which the fate of the nation depended, and yet he never wavered. Quick to see the right, he never hesitated to act. His foresight and his strength, seemed at times, more than human [29] His place as a statesman will not be filled in this century. [spaces] But to return to my first interview with him, after understanding the object for which I came he told me [he] had sent the surgeon Gen<sup>l</sup> to New Orleans with directions to come up the river and examine all hospitals. In short I understood he had started a tour of inspection which meant nothing at all so far as the suffering was concerned. I told Mr Stanton our western hospitals had never received any benefit, from these inspections, and we had very little confidence that any good would result from them. Any person of discernment with a medium allowance of common sense, and humanity who is loyal and has been through our southern river-hospital knows and feels the necessity for what I ask, and yet you say you never have received a report to this effect. The truth is, [in a different ink, comma overwriting a dash] the medical authorities know the heads of departments, do not wish hospitals established so far from army lines, & report accordingly: [in a different ink, colon overwriting a dash or comma] [30] I wish this could be overruled. Can nothing be done? 'Nothing until the Surgeon Gen<sup>l</sup> returns.' Mr Stanton replied. 'Good morning,' I said and left him not at all disappointed. [spaces] Returning to Mr Lincoln I found

it was past the usual hour for receiving. No one was in the waiting room, the messenger said I had better go directly into the President's room. It would be more comfortable waiting there, and there is only one gentleman with him and he will soon be through. I found my way to the back part of the room, and seated myself on a sofa, in such a position that the desk was between me and Mr Lincoln. I do not think he knew that I was there. The gentleman with him had given him a paper. The Pres<sup>t</sup> looked at it carefully and said 'yes, there is sufficient endorsement for any body. What do you want?' I could not hear distinctly the reply, but the promotion of somebody in the army either a son or brother was strongly urged. I heard the words, I see there are no vacancies among brigadiers, from the fact that so many Col's are commanding Brigades

[31] At this the President threw himself forward in his chair in such a manner as to show me the most curious, comical face in the world. He was looking the man straight in the eye— with the left hand raised in a horizontal position and his right hand patting it coaxingly— he said 'my friend, let me tell you some thing about that you are a farmer, I believe, if not you will understand me. [spaces] Suppose you had a large cattle yard full of all sorts of cattle, cows, oxen, and bulls and you kept selling your cows and oxen taking good care of your bulls, bye and bye you would find you had nothing but a yard full of old bulls good for nothing under heaven, and it will be just so with my army if I don't stop ~~making~~ making [overwritten superscript] Brigadier Genl<sup>s</sup>.

The man was answered, he could scarcely laugh though he tried to do so, but you should have seen Mr Lincoln laugh, he laughed all over, and fully enjoyed the point if no one else did. The story, if not elegant is certainly appropos [*sic*]. As I commenced to tell you Every thing I remember of this singular man This must fill its place. The gentleman [32] soon departed fully satisfied I doubt not, for it was a saying at Washington when one met a petitioner, Has Mr Lincoln told you a story? If he has it is all day with you he never says yes after a story. [a bracket closes here; opened?] I stepped forward as soon as the door closed. The President motioned to a chair near him. 'Well, what did the Sec of War say?' [here ms. shifts to every other line for duration of the narrative] I gave a full account of the interview and then said I have no where else to go but to you. He replied earnestly, 'Mr Stanton knows very well there is an acting surgeon general here, and that

Hammond will not be back these two months. I will see the Sec of War myself to night and you come in the morning. [33] I arose to take leave, when he bade me not to hasten, spoke kindly of my work, said he fully appreciated the spirit in which I came. He smiled pleasantly and bade me good evening. As I left the White House I met Owen Lovejoy who greeted me cordially and asked how long are you going to stay here? Until I get what I came after I replied. That's right that's right go on I believe in the final perseverance of the saints. I have never forgotten these words, perhaps, it is because [34] they were the last I ever heard him utter. I returned in the morning full of hope thinking of the pleasant face I had left the evening before, but no smile greeted me. The Pres merely raised his eyes, and said good morning, and pointed to a chair for me. He was evidently annoyed by something, and waited for me to speak, which I did not do. I afterward learned his annoyance was caused by a woman pleading for the life of a son who was sentenced to be shot for desertion under very aggravating circumstances. After a moment he said 'Well!' with a peculiar contortion of face [35] I never saw in any body else. I replied Well, he looked at me a little astonished, ~~I fancied~~. I fancied, and said, 'Have you nothing to say?' 'Nothing, Mr President, until I hear your decision. You bade me come this morning. Have you decided.' 'No! but I believe this idea of Northern hospitals is a great humbug, and I am tired of hearing about it. [no close quote] He spoke impatiently. I replied, 'I regret to add a feather's weight to your already overwhelming care and responsibility, I would rather have stayed at home.' With a kind of half smile he said, 'I wish you had.' I answered him as though he had [36] not smiled. 'Nothing would have given me greater pleasure, but a keen sense of duty to this government, justice and mercy to its most loyal supporters, and regard for your honor, and position made me come. The people cannot understand why their friends are left to die, when with proper care, they might live, and do good service for their country. Mr Lincoln, I believe you will be grateful for my coming. He looked at me intently. I could not tell if he were annoyed or not, as he did not speak I continued. I do not come to plead for the lives of criminals, for the lives of deserters, not for the lives of those who have [37] been in the least disloyal. I come to plead for the lives of those who were the first to hasten to the support of this government, who helped to place you where you are, because, they trusted you. Men who have

done all they could, and now when flesh, and nerve, and muscle are gone, still pray for your life, and the life of this Republic; they scarcely ask for that for which I plead. They expect to sacrifice their lives for their country. Many on their cots faint, sick and dying, say, we would gladly do more, but I supposed this is all right. I know that a majority of them would live and be strong me again if they could be sent North. I say, I know because [38] I Was sick among them last spring surrounded by every comfort; with the best of care, and determined to get well, I grew weaker day by day until not being under military law my friends brought me North. I recovered entirely simply by breathing northern air.' While I was speaking the expression of Mr Lincoln's face had changed many times. He had never taken his eye from me, now every muscle in his face seemed to contract, and then suddenly expand, as he opened his mouth, you could almost hear them snap, when he said 'You assume to know more than I do' and closed his mouth [39] as though he never expected to open it again sort of slammed it too. I could scarcely reply. I was hurt and thought the tears would come but, I rallied in a moment and said, 'You must pardon me Mr Pres I intend no disrespect, but it is because of this knowledge—because I do know what you do not know that I came to you. If you knew what I do and had not ordered what I ask for, I should know that our appeal to you would be in vain; but I believe the people have not trusted you for nought. The question only is whether you [39 40] believe me or not. If you believe me you will give me hospitals. If not—[dash inserted in pencil] well.' [original quotation marks] With the same snapping of muscle, he again said, 'You seem to know more than surgeons do.' 'Oh no! Mr. Lincoln I could not perform an amputation nearly as well as some of them do. indeed, I do not think I could do it at all. But this is true, I do not come here for your favor I am not an aspirant for military honor. While it would be the pride of my life, to be able to win your respect, and confidence. Still this I can waive for the time being. Now the medical authorities know as well as I do that [41] you are opposed to establishing Northern military hospitals, and they report to please you. They desire your favor. I come to you from no casual tour of inspection, having passed rapidly through the general hospitals, in the principal cities on the river with a cigar in my mouth and a ratan<sup>2</sup> in my hand talking to the Surgeon in charge of the price

2. i.e. *rattan*, in this case a walking stick (or possibly a riding crop) made out of rattan.

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believe me or not. If you believe me you will  
 give me hospitals, if not well.' With the  
 same snapping of muscle, he again said. You  
 assume to know more than surgeons do. Oh.

Figure 2. 'If you believe me you will give me hospitals, if not-well. . . .'

of cotton, and abusing the Generals in our army for not knowing, and performing their duty better, and finally coming into the open air, with a long drawn breath as though they had just [42] escaped suffocation, and complacently saying, a very fine hospital you have here sir. The boys seem to be doing very well a little more attention to ventilation is desirable perhaps. It is not thus I have visited hospitals, but from early morning, until late at night: sometimes, I have visited the regimental and general hospitals on the Mississippi River from Quincy to Vicksburg, and I come to you from the cots of men who have died, who might have lived had you permitted. This is hard to say but it is none the less true.' During the time I had been speaking [43] Mr Lincoln's brow had become very much contracted and a severe scowl had settled over his whole face. He sharply asked how many men Wis[consin] had in the field? that is how many did she send I mean I replied about 50,000 I think I do not know exactly. 'That means she has about 20,000 now' He looked at me and said 'you need not look so sober. they are not all dead!' I did not reply. I had noticed the veins in his face filling full within a few moments and one vein across his forehead was as large as my little finger it gave him [44] a frightful look. Soon with a quick impatient movement of his whole frame he said. 'I have a good mind to dismiss every man of them from the Service and have no more trouble with them!' I was surprised at his lack of self control I knew ~~that~~ he did not mean one word that he had said— but, what would come ne[~~ill let~~ 'x' overwritten]t as I looked at him I was troubled



fearing that I had said something wrong. He was very pale, the silence was painful, I said, as quietly as I could 'They have been faithful to the Government, [45] , [sic] they have been faithful to you they will still be loyal to the government, do what you will, with them— but if you will grant my petition, you will be glad as long as you live. They prayer of grateful hearts will give you strength in the hour of trial, and strong and willing arms, will return to fight your battles!' The President bowed his head and with a look of sadness I never can forget ['he' inserted] said [, inserted] 'I shall never be glad any more.' [',' extra '.' inserted] All severity had passed from his face. He seemed looking backward, and [46] heartward, and for a moment to forget he was not alone, a more than mortal anguish rested on his face. the spell must be broken. I said ['to him' inserted] do not speak so Mr Pres. Who will have so much reason to rejoice as yourself when the government is restored as it will be.' [',' extra '.' inserted] 'I know, I know, he said, placing a hand on each side and bowing forward, but the springs of life, are wearing away.' I asked, if he slept well—he said, 'he never was a good sleeper, and, of course, slept less now than ever before. [47] He said the people did not yet appreciate the magnitude of the rebellion and that it would be a long time before the end. [line ends with spaces] I began to feel I was occupying time valuable to him and belonging to others, as, I arose to take leave. I said have you decided upon your answer to the object of my visit.' He replied 'No. Come to-morrow morning. No, it is Cabinet meeting to-morrow— Yes, come at twelve o'clock there is not much for the cabinet, to do, tomorrow [' subscript in ms.; ' inserted] He arose, and bade me a cordial good morning. The next morning I arose, with a terribly depressed feeling, that perhaps I was to fail [48] in the object for which I came. I found myself constantly looking at my watch and wondering if twelve o'clock would never come. At last, I ascended the steps of the White House as all visitors were being dismissed, because the President would receive no one that day. I asked the messenger if that meant me. He said No. The Pres desired you to wait, [, inserted] for the cabinet would soon adjourn. I waited, and waited, and waited three long hours and more, in which time the President sent out twice saying they would soon adjourn, that I was to wait. I was fully prepared for [49] defeat, every word of my reply was chosen, and carefully placed. I walked the room, and studied an immense Map that covered one side of the reception room. I



listened, and at last heard many footsteps;— [dash in original; semi-colon overwritten] the cabinet had adjourned. Mr Lincoln did not wait, to send for me but came directly into the room, where I was. It was the first time I had noticed him standing. He was very tall and moved with a shuffling awkward motion. He came forward, rubbing his hands saying, 'My dear Madam I am sorry [50] to have kept you waiting. We have but this moment adjourned.' I replied, my waiting is no matter, but you must be very tired, and, we will not talk to-night.' He said 'no sit down,' and placed himself in a chair beside me, and said 'Mrs Harvey I only wish to tell you that an order equivalent to granting a hospital in your state, has been issued nearly twenty-four hours.' 'I could not speak I was so entirely unprepared for it. I wept for joy I could not help it. When I could speak I said, 'God bless you. I thank you in the name of thousands who will bless [51] you for the act.' Then remembering how many orders had been issued, and countermanded I said, 'Do you mean really and truly that we are going to have a hospital now' With a look full of humanity and benevolence, he said, [comma inserted] 'I do most certainly hope so.' [' inserted] He spoke very emphatically no reference was made to any previous opposition. He said he wished me to come and see him in the morning and he would give me a copy of the order. I was so much excited I could [52] not talk with him. He noticed it and commenced talking upon other subjects He asked me to look at the Map before referred to, which he said gave a very correct idea of the locality of the principal battle-grounds of Europe. It is a fine map he said pointing out Waterloo and the different battle-fields of the Crimea then smiling said, 'I am afraid you will not like it as well when I tell you, whose work it is.' I replied, 'it is well done whoever it may be. Who did it Mr Lincoln?' McClellan and he certainly did do this well. He did it while he was at West Point [53] There was nothing more said for awhile. Perhaps, he was [ill. superscript, cancelled and partially erased] ballancing [superfluous 'I struck out in a different ink] [carat, superscript: 'in his own mind' written over an earlier and partially erased and now illegible superscript] the two ~~great~~ words which then were agitating the heart of the American people, words which have ever ~~spoken~~ [carat, superscript: 'throbbed'] the great heart of nations, [, inserted] words whose power every individual has recognized, Success and failure. I shortly [carat, superscript: 'after'; in author's hand] left with the

promise to call next morning as he desired me to do at nine o'clock. I suppose the excitement caused the intense suffering of that night. I was very ill, and it was ten o'clock [carat, superscript in author's hand: 'next morning'] before I was able to send [54] for a carriage to keep my appointment, with the President. It was past the hour more than fifty persons were in the waiting room. I did not expect an audience but sent in my name, and said I would call again. The messenger said 'do not go I think the Pres will see you now.' I had been but a moment among anxious expectant waiting faces, when the door opened and a voice said 'Mrs Harvey the President will see you now.' I arose not a little embarrassed to be gazed at so curiously by so many with a look, that said as plainly as words [55] could 'Who are you?' As I passed the crowd [underscoring in a different ink], one person said, she has been here every day, and what is more she is going to win. I entered the presence of Mr Lincoln, for the last time. He smiled very graciously, and drew a chair near him, and said, come here and sit down. He had a paper in his [check mark inserted] hand which he said was for me to keep. It was a copy of the order ~~just issued~~. I thanked him not only for the order just issued but for the manner and spirit in which it had been given—then said I must apologize for not having been there at nine o'clock as he desired me to be [56] but that I had been sick all night. He looked up with, 'did joy make you sick. I said I don't know, very likely it was the relaxation of nerve after intense excitement, still looking at me he said, I suppose you would have been mad if I had said No.' I replied 'No Mr Lincoln, I should neither have been angry nor sick.' 'What would you have done?' he asked curiously. 'I should have been here at nine o'clock Mr President.' 'Well' he laughingly said 'I think I have acted wisely, then and suddenly looking up, don't you ever get angry he asked. I know a little woman not very [57] unlike you who gets mad sometimes. I replied, I never get angry when I have an object to gain of the importance of the one under consideration, to get angry you know would only weaken my cause, and destroy my influence. That is true, that is true, he said decidedly this hospital I shall name for you.' I said 'no, but if you would not consider the subject indelicate I would like to have it named for Mr Harvey.' 'Yes, just as well, it shall be so understood, if you prefer it, I honored your husband, and felt his loss and now let us have this matter settled [58] at once.' He took a card, and wrote a few words upon it, requesting the Sec of War to name

the Hospital Harvey Hospital in memory of my husband, and to gratify me He gave me the card saying, now do you take that directly to the Sec of War and have it understood. I thanked him, but did not take it to Mr Stanton The hospital was already named. I expressed a wish that he might never regret his present action ['and' inserted in pencil] said, I was sorry to have taken so much of his time. Oh no. you need not be he said kindly. You will not [59] wish to see me again.' [period inserted] I didn't say that, and shall not. I said you have been very kind to me and I am grateful for it. He looke[d] at me from under his eyebrows, and said, you almost think I am handsome, don't you? His face then beamed with such kind benevolence and was lighted by such a pleasant smile. I looked at him and with my usual impulse said, clasping my hands together, you are perfectly lovely to me now, Mr Lincoln. He colored a little and laughed most heartily [60] I arose to go, he reached out his hand, that hand if which there was so much power, and so little beauty, and as he held mine clasped, and covered in his own, I bowed my head, and pressed my lips most reverently upon [ill. overwrite] the sacred shield, even as I would upon my country's shrine. A silent prayer went up from my heart. God bless you Abraham Lincoln. I heard him say goodbye and I was gone. Thus ended the most interesting interview of my life, with one of the most remarkable men of the age. [61] My impressions of him had been so varied, his character had assumed, so many different phases, his very looks had changed so frequently, and so entirely, that it almost seemed to me, I had been conversing with half a dozen different men. He blended in his character the most yielding flexibility, with the most unflinching firmness, childlike simplicity, and weakness with statesman like wisdom, and masterly strength, but over all and around all was thrown the mantle of an unquestioned integrity.

### Section Two: The Credibility of Cordelia Harvey's Narrative

This is a manifold question that cannot fully or finally be answered, given the scarcity of context or corroboration. Perhaps credibility rests on what one *feels* while reading and the degree to which Harvey's portrait of Lincoln comports with those of other important, even intimate eyewitnesses. She insists at the beginning of the portion of her story concerning Lincoln (about two-thirds of the whole ms.) that she will give us 'the exact conversations between Mr Lincoln, and myself, as

taken down, at the time (20).’ What does she mean by ‘exact conversations’ and ‘at the time’? Surely not making notes in long- or short-hand while the interviews were taking place! Rather, she must have written her recollections soon after the fact of their meetings; otherwise she ran the risk of outright fabrication—not of events but of conversation, of which there is a good deal in the ms. I find it easy to believe that she kept a comprehensive record of the five meetings with the president, occasions that were in a very real sense highlights of her life to that point, and *a fortiori* after Lincoln was killed. This would entail, one guesses, a good deal of time writing in a notebook (not known to exist) while resting at her hotel, then likely further entries and revisions during her train travel back westward—for Harvey had more than a year’s nursing and supervision still ahead of her—and perhaps revisions made at home in Madison as she oversaw the operations of the Harvey Hospital. Then at some point in the weeks (or months) after the assassination on April 15, 1865, we may guess that she put the events of that week in September 1863 into a narrative—the one she intended to give (and perhaps did in fact give) as a public lecture. Reading the ms. today, I believe Harvey sincerely wants us to trust her account, and here is where the *feelings* come in. The story reads true, and largely because she constructed it *as a story*. One that ‘came out all right in the end’—as the author, Cordelia Harvey, knew from the start, though the character, ‘Mrs. Harvey,’ didn’t.

In other words, ‘Personal Interviews with President Lincoln’ is a reminiscence composed *as a story* to be told, an act agelessly natural to humankind while at the same time literary, with an audience in mind. The plot follows something like this arc:

- First meeting (Sunday, Sept. 6, 1863): she and Lincoln together privately in his office at the White House; he is polite but cool; she announces her northern hospitals agenda; he’s heard all this before and tries to fob her off by sending her to Secretary of War Stanton, who gives her no genuine encouragement, though Harvey is not *discouraged*.
- Second meeting (same day): returns to Lincoln, who hardly says ‘yes’ but offers her some mild hope by saying he’ll talk to Stanton himself about the matter.
- Third meeting (Monday, Sept. 7): the grand agon begins. This is by far the most detailed and longest of Harvey’s accounts. She and Lincoln go at each other like two seasoned debaters, with Lincoln becoming strangely emotional: the one urging her case for northern hospitals for sick and wounded western soldiers,

the other trying to hold off his opponent's arguments, mostly on the grounds of knowing more and better on the subject than she does and by being just plain ornery about the matter. As the contest of wills continues, Lincoln becomes angry, then falters, seemingly overcome with melancholy feelings, and begins, with reluctance, to slump into defeat.

- Fourth meeting (Tuesday, Sept. 8): After waiting more than three hours for the president to emerge from a cabinet meeting, Harvey is immediately told by Lincoln that her request has been granted! She is overwhelmed with thankful emotion, and he appears to be on the verge of collapse from worry and fatigue. Afternoon has shaded into evening. They share some unspecified length of time alone in the White House, no longer at odds and no longer discussing hospitals, before she takes her leave.
- Fifth meeting (Wednesday, Sept. 9): Harvey appears at the White House around 10 a.m., makes her way through the crowd of people hoping to see the president and is announced to him immediately. There is a spark of genuine friendship, if not romantic chemistry, between them as they conclude their business tenderly and part forever.

Five meetings in four days, all private. This was quite a feat for Cordelia Harvey to have achieved, given the incessant demands on Lincoln's time. How far does the historical record support the claims of her narrative? There is but one piece of corroboration. A document in AL's hand reads, 'To Edwin M. Stanton/ September 9, 1863/ Mrs. Harvey wishes the Hospital to be named for her late husband. . .' (*Collected Works*, 6: 437). Reference to an 1863 calendar shows that Sept. 9 was a Wednesday, corresponding to the date of her final meeting with Lincoln. Evidently, at this meeting Harvey received *two* documents from the president. Upon her arrival, '[h]e had a paper in his hand which he said was for me to keep. It was a copy of the order [authorizing the hospital] just issued. And, after some conversation regarding the naming of the hospital after her late husband, 'He took a card, and wrote a few words upon it, requesting the Sec of War to name the Hospital Harvey Hospital in memory of my husband, and to gratify me He gave me the card saying, now do you take that directly to the Sec of War and have it understood.' Yet the following sentence in the narrative indicates that Harvey *did not return* to Stanton's office, and, therefore, the 'card' could not be the document published in the *Collected Works*: 'I thanked him, but did not take it to Mr Stanton The

hospital was already named.’ This, despite the wording of the *Collected Works* document that very clearly parallels that of the ‘card’ Lincoln wrote and gave to her. This is a puzzling inconsistency, perhaps owing to an (unlikely) mistaken recollection on Mrs. Harvey’s part.

On balance, then, there is sufficient reason to believe the narrative credible in two key aspects: Harvey did meet Abraham Lincoln at the White House, more than once; and her mission, to secure a hospital for Wisconsin sick and wounded soldiers, was successful, thus strongly implying persuasive argument on her part. The corroborated fact of her meeting with Lincoln on Wednesday, September 9, logically entails at least one previous meeting, since Harvey had to have presented her credentials and talked through her mission. So even had Lincoln immediately acceded to her request for a hospital, bureaucratic formalization of the requisite presidential order would have taken some time. And if two meetings, why not five? But everything else in the narrative, and in particular its recreated dialogue, is a matter of story. In the analysis of her narrative that follows, I hope to discover the extent to which Harvey’s story comports with what we know, independently, of Lincoln’s personality and character.

*The second, final part of this analysis will appear in the Fall 2022 issue.*