

## ARMIES OF THE POTOMAC

### TIME

1867, late in President Abraham Lincoln's second term, two years after John Wilkes Booth's failed assassination attempt.

**CHARACTERS** (highlighted characters in this 10-page excerpt)

ABRAHAM LINCOLN (age 58), 16th president of the United States of America

ROBERT LINCOLN (24), his elder surviving son

TAD LINCOLN (14), his younger surviving son

NOAH WADE (30s-40s), the president's chief of staff

LUCIUS REXROTH (30s-40s), a political pundit

GOVERNOR SHELBY "BULL-ROARER" BLAKE (40s-50s), governor of a Southern state

SEN. ZEBULON HARKNESS (40s-50s), a Lincoln ally and friend

DETECTIVE SERGEANT CLEMENT OTT (30s-40s), a state police officer

RANDALL TARR (30s-40s) a citizen and a veteran with a prosthetic leg

MARY TODD LINCOLN (49), the First Lady

ADA SAMS (late 20s), a "straw pollster" and political consultant

MRS. PERCY (40s-50s), a midwife

CAPTAIN LUTHER JOHNSTONE (20s), Pres. Lincoln's aide, Sallie's husband and father of her children

ISOM BOOKER (30s-40s, a former slave and servant to Governor Blake

REV. EZEKIEL BARNES (30s-40s), a Lincoln ally and minister

SALLIE JOHNSTONE (20s), a former slave, wife of Luther and mother of two

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Contact Me  
PhilipHeckmanWriter.com

**ARMIES OF THE POTOMAC**

ACT I, SCENE 3

*Lights up on the president's office antechamber. TAD LINCOLN is on a settee, struggling to master a wooden yo-yo. He looks up when CAPTAIN LUTHER JOHNSTON enters, in uniform.*

TAD

Oh!

LUTHER

Hello. I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Captain Johnstone.

TAD

*(Splitting his attention.)*

You're new.

LUTHER

Yessir, as always, it seems.

TAD

What do you mean?

LUTHER

I have been new so often, I think it must be my usual condition. Cotton picker, orphan, student, runaway, prisoner, fugitive, soldier--Almighty God has reborn me so many times I suspect that little of the original Luther Johnstone remains.

TAD

And what are you now?

LUTHER

One of your father's aides.

TAD

He needs a bodyguard more.

LUTHER

How do you know that's not one of my duties?

TAD

What else?

LUTHER

I can "walk the dog."

TAD

We used to have a dog. We don't any more.

LUTHER  
Let me show you.

*LUTHER takes the yo-yo from TAD  
and demonstrates the trick.*

TAD  
How did you do that?

LUTHER  
Did I mention yo-yo master among my accomplishments?

TAD  
Will you teach me?

LUTHER  
Don't see why not. Your father doesn't seem interested.

*GOV. SHELBY BLAKE enters  
abruptly. He is wearing a plain  
coat with a patterned vest and a  
Confederate slouch hat pressed  
firmly on his head. LUTHER hands  
the yo-yo to TAD and takes a  
protective stance before BLAKE.*

GOV. BLAKE  
Where's Lincoln?

LUTHER  
Please announce yourself, sir.

GOV. BLAKE  
As I told the Sunday soldiers outside: I'm Shelby Blake--  
Governor Shelby Blake--and I'm here to see Lincoln.

LUTHER  
Is the President expecting you, Governor?

GOV. BLAKE  
I don't need an appointment, damn it. You ever hear of states'  
rights?

LUTHER  
I'll see if President Lincoln has a moment for you.

*LUTHER pauses, then...*

LUTHER (CONT'D)  
You'll have to remove your hat.

GOV. BLAKE  
I don't take my hat off to no nigger.

LUTHER

In deference to the President.

GOV. BLAKE

I don't take my hat off for no nigger-lover neither.

*LUTHER composes himself, then exits. BLAKE begins to pace, when he notices TAD, who is preoccupied with trying to duplicate LUTHER's yo-yo feat. BLAKE stops abruptly.*

GOV. BLAKE

You must be the young Lincoln kid.

TAD

Yep. Thomas.

GOV. BLAKE

My son was your age not long ago.

TAD

Where is he?

GOV. BLAKE

You Yankees killed him...Ever hear of Second Bull Run?

TAD

Uh-huh. It was in the war.

GOV. BLAKE

Goddamn right. Yankees shot off his arm and half his chest and bled him to death. Practically just a boy.

TAD

I'm...sorry.

GOV. BLAKE

You oughta be.

TAD

I'm also happy for the Yankees your son didn't kill because we got him first.

*BLAKE is open-mouthed and about to answer when LUTHER reappears.*

LUTHER

The President will see you now, Governor.

*BLAKE wants to reply to TAD, who is staring insolently at him, but decides not to.*

Angrily he follows LUTHER into ABRAHAM LINCOLN's presence. Lights down on the antechamber as TAD exits, and up on Lincoln's office. ABRAHAM rises from his desk. He looks, as always, as if he had dressed in a high wind.

ABRAHAM

*(Extending his hand.)*

Governor Blake, how good of you to come by.

GOV. BLAKE

*(A perfunctory handshake.)*

Lincoln, you've got to do something about the blacks in my state.

ABRAHAM

My goodness, Governor, what a handsome hat. Excuse me. The band, is that copperhead?

GOV. BLAKE

Uh...yes. Killed it myself.

ABRAHAM

May I see it?

*BLAKE complies with pride.*

GOV. BLAKE

Thing was damn near six foot long. Before I swung my axe, that is. Afterward, it was four and two.

ABRAHAM

What a magnificent specimen. Reminds me of my Kentucky days. We boys used to wake snakes in the spring, when they were sluggish. Oh, it was great fun to uncover a den of them. Dozens packed together like worms in dog shit. It was a test of grit to see if you could pull one out by the tail, and before the thing could double up and bite--swing it around your head...

*(Miming the action.)*

...then snap it like a bullwhip...CRAACK!...and break its neck like cheap twine!

*(Beat, admiring the hat.)*

Oh, yes, we were jackleg ruffians in those days.

*Suddenly, before BLAKE can do more than twitch, ABRAHAM hands the hat off to LUTHER, who takes it with a slight smile.*

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)

So, Governor Blake, what can I do for you?

*BLAKE hesitates, torn between making an issue of the hat and pressing his case.*

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)

Something to help you improve the lives of your negro nationals, perhaps?

GOV. BLAKE

Their lives already been improved to the point of uselessness. Walk any street in the South and you'll see nothing but idle and insolent negroes, drunker'n fruit wasps and twice as ornery. Tell one of 'em to call you Sir and he'll laugh in your face. Tell a pack of 'em to move along and you better be armed. Meantime, when we do get cotton planted, it rots in the field 'cause there's no one to pick it.

ABRAHAM

No one can compel a man to take a job he does not freely choose.

GOV. BLAKE

We're not talking about men...

*(Beat, glancing at LUTHER.)*

...we're talking about negroes.

ABRAHAM

To the law they are one in the same. I thought we settled that.

GOV. BLAKE

All we settled was that you Yankees had more cannon.

ABRAHAM

Which is still true, and which therefore lends a certain authority to the federal government's position about what constitutes a man, don't you agree?

GOV. BLAKE

I agree to the fact, but not the principle.

ABRAHAM

At present, the one is as good as the other.

*BLAKE is too furious to speak.*

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)

Forgive me, Governor. I've forgotten my manners. You look parched. Let me offer you a drink. Whiskey?

*BLAKE nods.*

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)

Capt. Johnstone, would you be so kind?

*LUTHER sets BLAKE's hat down on a table near the door, and exits. BLAKE eyes his hat helplessly. ABRAHAM sits behind his desk and motions BLAKE to a chair opposite.*

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)

Please, Governor, sit...I understand that your son fell in battle. I offer my sympathy.

GOV. BLAKE

Manassas Junction in '62. He was...just seventeen.

ABRAHAM

I'm sorry. I know how hard it is to mourn a child. It is the worst part of war.

GOV. BLAKE

The worst part of your war.

ABRAHAM

Ours--we both embraced it with equal fervor.

GOV. BLAKE

And yet who suffered it more? Who housed it? While you Yankees slept unmolested in your beds, we used ours for barricades. I think it must be far easier to keep your fervor up under clean sheets.

ABRAHAM

I can imagine what you lost.

GOV. BLAKE

Imagining loss is not the same as living it. At the point of a bayonet, my wife tore up her skirts to bandage Yankee wounds. My granny watched 'em burn the house of her birth to the ground. A man whose boot is on another man's throat may imagine what the other man feels, but make-believe humiliation and rage are nothing like the real thing, I can assure you.

ABRAHAM

I would like to step off. I am a highly reluctant occupier.

GOV. BLAKE

Well, your troops are unaware of your reluctance. They show no hesitation to interfere in our affairs without provocation. Just last week I heard that one of your officers arrested a store owner for exercising his God-given right to decide who he will and will not serve, and struck the poor man repeatedly.

ABRAHAM

Governor, if you have evidence that any Union soldier has abused a civilian, I will have him court-martialed. Meanwhile I expect the Freedmen's Bureau to promote just and orderly relations among citizens and for the military to keep the peace.

GOV. BLAKE

If you want peace, then do something about those damn blacks!

*LUTHER returns with a glass of whiskey on a tray and offers it to BLAKE, who glares at him before taking the glass. LUTHER stands at ease near the table with the hat. ABRAHAM takes out a sheet of paper and writes on it intermittently during the following...*

ABRAHAM

Governor, I know that you and your people have suffered immensely. The tragic examples of your own family have been repeated hundreds of thousands of times across the South. The loss of land and the destruction of property has robbed your state of wealth and the means to rebuild it. Your administration is hampered by inflation and reduced revenue.

GOV. BLAKE

That is a damned good point, sir.

*He drinks.*

ABRAHAM

Yes, you need prosperity and you need it quickly, along with your state's return to the Union.

GOV. BLAKE

And how are we to become prosperous when my planters are helpless to bring in a crop without their accustomed supply of labor? You're the one who stole that labor force. Make the negroes work.

ABRAHAM

I can't force a man to sign a labor contract. That is the antithesis of free labor.

GOV. BLAKE

Your notion of free labor will ruin the South forever.

ABRAHAM

Nonsense. You must simply reach new accommodations with your citizenry, starting with the chance for every man to own land.



GOV. BLAKE

The land is already owned. There is no more to be had.

ABRAHAM

Now, Governor, we both know that to be untrue. Military surveys show an ample supply of abandoned acreage--in your state and throughout the South.

GOV. BLAKE

You make it sound as though Southern landowners just walked off to a life of debauchery instead of to the grave.

ABRAHAM

We must deal with the situation we have, Governor. Among other things, that means finding ways to make every citizen productive.

GOV. BLAKE

Well, you won't do that by giving blacks their own property and permission to be idle on it. God made the negroes shiftless and put us here to rule over 'em. If we can't use the lash, we must use the law. My legislature does whatever I want. We'll require blacks to contract for work and jail 'em if they don't fulfill the terms.

ABRAHAM

Freedmen's Bureau courts have stricken down such Black Codes everywhere else. They'll do the same to yours.

GOV. BLAKE

See here, Lincoln, you have no right!

ABRAHAM

Oh, but I do. It's called the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which says that I can forbid you to impose a disguised form of black servitude and gives me the power to make it stick.

GOV. BLAKE

Do that, Lincoln, and you'll have another fight on your hands.

ABRAHAM

Blake, I knew a farmer once who was the victim of a bear that preyed upon his livestock. At first the farmer tried to accommodate the marauder. He set out guard dogs, but the bear killed 'em. He built a barn, but the bear broke in. That bear's intransigence finally convinced the farmer that he must drop all other activities to hunt down and destroy his nemesis. It was difficult, but once he killed that beast, he quickly made up his losses. You don't worry me, Blake. In '65, I killed a bear. Do you think I'll hesitate to swat a fly that's come to crap on my knee?

GOV. BLAKE

I'll not be treated this way--

ABRAHAM

--You'll be treated according to the law.

GOV. BLAKE

Here's what I think of your law.

*BLAKE spits into the drink he's been given. Glaring at ABRAHAM he forcefully sets the glass down on the president's desk. ABRAHAM finishes what he's writing with a flourish.*

ABRAHAM

Captain Johnstone.

*LUTHER approaches the desk.*

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)

Governor, I have just signed an executive order commanding Captain Johnstone to garrison a company in your state capital to ensure that you follow the law. As long as you satisfy him that you intend to fulfill your duty to protect all your citizens, as Congress has decreed, you will remain in office to the completion of your term. If, however, you do not, Captain Johnstone will declare martial law and detain you as an insurrectionist. So you must be nice to Captain Johnstone.

*ABRAHAM hands LUTHER the order. BLAKE moves as if to protest, but ABRAHAM cuts him off.*

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)

Captain, please show the governor to the exit. Once outside, under God's blue sky, if the governor asks you politely, you may return his hat. But if our hot-headed friend is rude to you, you may exercise the authority I have given you to pitch your tents on his state capitol grounds.

*ABRAHAM steps out from behind his desk to offer his hand.*

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)

Good day, Governor. I hope to have you back in the Union soon.

*BLAKE hesitates, then, ignoring the proffered handshake, follows LUTHER, who has picked up BLAKE's hat.*

*BLAKE reaches for it, but LUTHER uses the hat like a cape, and with the sweeping motion of a matador's veronica, directs the angry BLAKE like a bull over the threshold, then follows him out, closing the door. ABRAHAM watches them go. ABRAHAM turns back to his desk. After a moment, NOAH opens the door and sticks his head in.*

NOAH

Do you have a moment, Mr. President? There's someone I'd like you to meet.

ABRAHAM

Please, Noah. Come in.

*ABRAHAM sits to receive NOAH and the demurely dressed ADA SAMS.*

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)

Who's this you've brought me?

NOAH

Miss Ada Sams, Mr. President.

ADA

Oh, Mr. President, I'm so honored to meet you, ever since I heard your Cooper Institute speech. I was just a girl--my father took me. You were magnificent! So powerful. So august!

ABRAHAM

How kind of you to say. I'm more November now. I hope you're not disappointed.

ADA

I am so honored...

NOAH

I've hired her to advise us.

ABRAHAM

Splendid. A politician without advice is a sorry figure, like a yo-yo without a string. Tell me, Miss Sams, what kind of counsel do you retail?

ADA

I measure people's attitudes by means of informal votes.

NOAH

What the papers call "straw votes." I thought they would be useful to you as a gauge of public opinion.