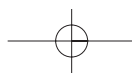
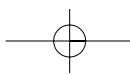
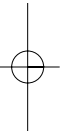
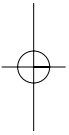
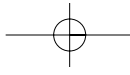


PART I

The Profiteers





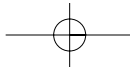
CHAPTER 1

The Riddle of the *Colburn's* Volume

One of the most popular haunts of Philadelphian bibliophiles in the 1950s was Leary's Book Store. Standing on Ninth Street opposite the post office, its shelves and counters crammed with as many as 300,000 volumes, Leary's advertised itself as America's largest retail outlet for rare books. It had a soft-sell policy and would no more have employed a high-pressure salesman than hired a known shoplifter. Customers were invited to browse all they wanted to, and any who were reluctant to leave empty-handed could at least have carried off a complimentary lithograph entitled *The Bookworm*, ready for framing.

This is where our quest began, on the second floor of Leary's Book Store one afternoon in April of 1957. Not that either of us, at the time, had Lincoln's murder in mind. The occasion was a routine forage among the Civil War collections, and the item we bought was selected because it contained an account, by an officer of the British Royal Engineers, of a visit to General George Meade's Union Army of the Rappahannock. For fifty cents the book was ours.

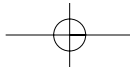
Colburn's United Service Magazine and Military Journal was required reading at Sandhurst, West Point, and other academies where young men were schooled for command. Bound sets filled the shelves of retired generals and army chiefs of staff. A forum equally for theorists and sentimentalists, *Colburn's* mingled reviews of the latest advances in military science with anecdotes of service life in peace and war, travel articles, and memoirs reliving the dash and glory of old campaigns. The bound set bought in Leary's Book Store



was Part Two of 1864, embracing the months May through August. Its pages, except for the article on Meade, were no more than cursorily glanced at until the following summer, when a number of them were seen to contain figures and letters penciled along the inner margins, close to the binding. Ray Neff was then conducting research at the office of the medical examiner for the City of Philadelphia. He showed the book's pages to a chief investigator, Patrick Kmat. To Kmat, who had served in army intelligence during World War II, the writing appeared to be a cipher. Kmat knew an expert in cryptography, who was then shown the *Colburn's* volume and who confirmed Kmat's suspicions. He gave instructions for translating it.

The system used was of a "sliding" variety, in which the key pattern is shifted at intervals to make solution all the tougher. Translation taxed patience and perseverance but was duly accomplished. And the first part of this cipher, found on page 181 and dated "2-5-68," struck a distinct note of alarm. "I am constantly being followed. They are professionals. *I cannot fool them.*"

There was yet more: tiny dots under certain letters in essays on an invasion of Denmark and a voyage to Tenerife. The letters formed these words: "It was on the tenth of April sixty-five when I first knew that the plan was in action." What followed was a detailed charge that Abraham Lincoln's secretary of war had fostered a plot hatched among influential persons in the North to have the president kidnapped and, if necessary, killed. On page 107 the decoded words included "Ecert had made all the contacts, the deed to be done on the fourteenth." Correctly spelled, the name was that of Thomas T. Eckert, Secretary Stanton's close aide and chief of the military telegraph. Pages 119, 120, 127, and 245 yielded this startling allegation: "I know the truth and it frightens me. I fear that somehow I may become the sacrificial goat. There were at least eleven members of Congress involved in the plot, no less than twelve army officers, three naval officers and at least 24 civilians, of which one was a governor of a loyal state. Five were bankers of great repute, three were nationally known newspapermen and eleven were industrialists of great wealth. The names of these known conspirators is [sic] presented without comment . . . in Vol. one of this series. Eighty-five thousand dollars was contributed by the named persons



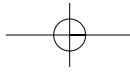
to pay for the deed. Only eight persons knew the details of the plot and the identity of the others.”

The final words, secreted within an account of artillery experiments along the east coast of England, formed another distress signal: “*I fear for my life, LCB.*”

At this point, every page in the book had come under close scrutiny. Several marginal portions seemed oddly discolored. Subjected to ultraviolet radiation, one of the spots glowed purple. At first, exposure under the lamp produced nothing. Several days of additional experimenting were required before an application of tannic acid brought forth a name: L. C. Baker. The writing had been done with an “invisible ink” not unknown to secret agents in the Civil War. Its ferricyanide base would ordinarily have become visible after an hour’s exposure to bright sunlight. But it had lost this property with the passage of many years, which explained why it had not responded to the ultraviolet lamp.

The imperiled encipherer? Lafayette Charles Baker was an intimidating figure, docketed by historians, when noticed at all, as a federal lackey doing Stanton’s undercover work, with the official designation War Department special agent or provost marshal, chief of its detective bureau. Baker had launched countless campaigns against alleged enemies of the Union, arresting military bounty brokers, uncovering sexual immorality in the Treasury Department, and raiding liquor and gambling saloons. He had also directed the pursuit of John Wilkes Booth. After the war, he had infuriated Andrew Johnson by posting gumshoes on White House grounds to spy upon the president’s female visitors. This impertinence hastened his departure from government service, and Baker retired to Philadelphia, where he died in July 1868.

The question remained. Did the handwriting that had given the *Colburn's* volume a dimension of mystery belong to Secretary Stanton’s chief detective? We found Lafayette Baker’s will at Philadelphia City Hall and a codicil to it in the same file. Upon the advice of a member of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, Chief Investigator Kmat contacted Robert F. Fowler, editor of a national magazine specializing in Civil War subjects. Fowler obtained the services of Stanley S. Smith, former officer of the Pennsylvania State Police and an



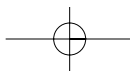
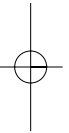
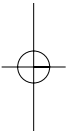
examiner of questioned documents, who finally reported that the signature “Lafayette C. Baker” in the left margin of page 574 of the *Colburn’s* volume and those on Baker’s will and codicil were of the same hand. Not found, although eagerly sought, was the early 1864 *Colburn’s* containing, according to Baker, the names of conspirators in the plot against Lincoln.

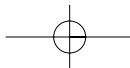
That codicil indicated likelihood of a court hearing. We talked with Charles Hughes, Philadelphia archivist (the city’s first), already noted for his rescue of important historical documents lost for years and in danger of destruction. Hughes had, for instance, found the original deeds that secured for the City of Philadelphia clear ownership rights to Independence Square and the site of Independence Hall. Promptly interested, Charles Hughes referred us to Ernest DeAngelo, register of wills, for authority to go into the City Hall basement, accompanied by appropriate staffers.

After a week of exhaustive rummaging amid piles of faded documents and moldering ledgers, we found the shorthand record of a hearing “In the matter of a paper propounded as a codicil to the Last Will and Testament of Lafayette C. Baker, deceased.” The hearing was conducted before W. Marshall Taylor, register of wills, on October 14, 1872. Further search revealed the handwritten transcripts of the hearing’s shorthand text, and this in turn led to the discovery of additional transcripts typed in 1936 under the federal Work Projects Administration. Charles Hughes saw to it that the entire material was brought above ground and microfilmed.

It was this record of a court hearing, dealing with an unprobated codicil to Baker’s will, that most quickened pulses. Viewed alongside what had been found in the *Colburn’s* book, the document portrays in arresting detail a former public official who knew too much, who had determined to mask his dangerous knowledge in cipher and secret ink, and while so engaged had raced an agonizing death at the hands of someone beneath his own roof.

Further tests on the *Colburn’s* volume were conducted at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) by questioned documents specialists from the United States Post Office, the Department of Defense, and the FBI. All reached the same conclu-



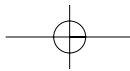


sion: The signatures, dots under letters, and numbers in margins were the work of Lafayette Charles Baker.

The release of a portion of these discoveries in the fall of 1961 touched off a mild furor. Edwin Stanton and Lafayette Baker became, briefly, front-page news. The *New York Times* published a letter from one of Stanton's descendants, angrily defending the secretary's good name. A professor of history was apparently so eager to veto the findings that he confused them with the enduring controversy over the death of Napoleon Bonaparte, for he sailed into print attacking "veterans of the 'Lincoln was murdered' hypothesis." Hypothesis? But such hapless irrelevancies aside, the general response among Lincoln scholars and professional historians reflected keen, if guarded, interest in what was unearthed to date and an almost unanimous recommendation that the digging continue.

It did, with caution. A British writer on Lincoln's assassination called the new revelations "the most extraordinary discovery in this field." David Kahn, in a definitive work on cryptography, contemplated as a possible result of it "a reappraisal of one of the cruelest moments in the whole of American history." Wrote Victor Searcher, author of *Lincoln's Journey to Greatness*, "The new data on the Lincoln murder . . . underscores the fact that all has NOT been told." And the reaction of Ralph T. G. Newman, Lincoln authority, manuscript dealer, and founder of the Civil War Round Table, was an admission of belief that Stanton took advantage of Lincoln's murder to "further his own ends . . . that he did, to some extent, 'cover up' details of the crime. One thing is definite now—the case is not closed."

This was all very well. Enough was known of Baker's duplicity for us not to place much credence in his cipher-shrouded accusations. Baker was capable of playing an elaborate and malevolent joke on his boss or anybody else against whom he had a grievance. Some suggested that Baker's charges were the product of a senile brain. He was only in his forty-second year when he framed them, but his physical health *was* certainly questionable. He was taking belladonna and bromides to guard against the epileptic fits that had plagued him in youth, and the discoveries in Philadelphia's City Hall

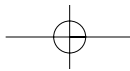


make clear that Lafayette Baker had been so dosed with arsenic that the medicinal leeches his doctor pressed behind his ears fell away lifeless.

The man Lafayette Baker accused of engineering Lincoln's removal as part of a plot to seize power was himself something of an enigma. Like the future president's, Edwin M. Stanton's career had begun in legal practice. He had an early courtroom encounter with Lincoln and at that time spoke of him with contempt. When he joined Lincoln's cabinet in the second year of the Civil War, some who knew both men expected that it would be only a matter of time before Stanton gained the upper hand. Yet their wartime relationship would be recalled by others as, at least outwardly, marked by cooperation and mutual esteem. It was well known, however, that Stanton cultivated a close liaison with Lincoln's most active political foes and, according to one of Stanton's own aides, was in "continual argument" with the president over his disposition to let the South off lightly once the war had ended. On at least two occasions, Stanton overruled the chief executive. Indeed, the two men had a working agreement that the secretary could ignore White House directives whenever he saw fit, and he is said to have torn up such notes in front of visitors.

Unlike the torrid anti-rebel outbursts of his radical cronies in the Republican Party, self-revealing rhetoric seldom escaped Edwin Stanton's lips. But his public attitude toward the insurrectionist South was as retribution incarnate. Some lauded him as an indefatigable war bureaucrat, devoted to the Union. He was feared by others as a would-be despot. Friends ascribed his sour personality to asthma. The deaths of his daughter and his first wife, and a brother's suicide, may have warped his character. A former law partner is said to have argued that if it should prove necessary to replace the Constitution with a military dictatorship, Stanton would be just the man. According to General Ulysses S. Grant, the secretary held little regard for the Constitution during those years of extreme national crisis.

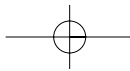
A deciphered entry in Lafayette Baker's *Colburn's* volume reads: "Address Earl Potter, Ladoga, Indiana." A decade-long hunt revealed that Earl Potter managed Baker's National Detective Police. The



Virginia-born Potter had been a tracer of missing goods for a Norfolk shipping firm until the outbreak of war. His antisecessionist views compelled him to leave the state for his safety's sake, and he joined Baker's then modest little detective corps after its transfer from the Department of State to the War Department.

The ostensible function of the NDP was to track down spies, contrabandists, traitors, and defrauders of the government. Its command post at 217 Pennsylvania Avenue conveniently faced Willard's Hotel, a setting for much wartime intrigue, and among its other Washington installations was a four-floor building on Tenth Street in the southeast quarter of the capital. Here, Earl Potter's younger half-brother Andrew ran the Secret Services division, which assembled photographs and dossiers on hundreds of Americans, well known and obscure alike. That Tenth Street address was the nerve center of a clandestine corps that compensated in industry for what it lacked in manpower. At peak strength the NDP's undercover section numbered no more than 400 agents, couriers, paid informers, and a small but effective band of female spies, all operating in territory both north and south of Civil War battle lines. What Americans knew of the NDP was learned mainly from its roving agents, who showed little regard for constitutional rights and due process when following a "case." This attitude had started at the top with Baker, who, in his capacity as NDP chief, was answerable only to Secretary Stanton. Too often for his own good, he flouted even this limited allegiance, acting as if he were a law unto himself.

Specialized branches of this early federal bureau of investigation included a cipher room and a telegraph service, a photography division, and a gun shop. In 1863 a mounted police unit was added, armed, and equipped for local raids on nests of crime, vice, and subversion. It was organized as the First District of Columbia Cavalry; was commanded by Lafayette Baker, who had a colonel's rank; and was snubbed by the regular army. When the Civil War ended, the NDP's controversial activities diminished, but many of its agents remained in federal employ until Edwin Stanton's death in 1869. Afterward, as Richard Wilmer Rowan says in *The Story of Secret Service*, "Most of Baker's operatives scattered over the land as a new and insinuating plague of private detectives."

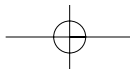


Documentation that would have secured for these original G-men a safe niche in the appropriate annals had also become scattered, buried, or destroyed, leaving few clues to the role they played in the drama of Lincoln's murder. But two men made sure that all was not lost. Shortly after the war, Earl and Andrew Potter—the service was rife with Potters—spirited a large quantity of sensitive NDP files, reports, and correspondence out of Washington and into rural Indiana. By the early 1870s, in the course of an extensive probe into a number of “strange deaths” in the wake of Lincoln's murder, the two agents added fresh quantities of documents to what already constituted a rich hoard of research material. There it all remained, stored near the small town of Ladoga, in gently rolling farm country some thirty miles west of Indianapolis, infrequently disturbed and engaging the attention of one person alone, Andrew Potter.

The remnants of what had been Secretary of War Stanton's secret police force held periodic reunions after the turn of the nineteenth century. Potter, one of the last survivors, continued his detective role, it seems, until his death at age ninety-two. Although he knew close state secrets of the Civil War era, lingering questions haunted him for the often unhappy balance of his long life. Combining what he continued to ferret out of equally aging contemporaries with the solid mass of NDP records in his grasp, he strove to form and fit together a tale of Lincoln's murder that he knew to be utterly at variance with conventional accounts.

Forty years after his death, we purchased the remains of the Potter collection. More than a decade following disclosure of the material that Lafayette Baker had secreted in the *Colburn's* volume, we had acquired other relevant material from Baker sources and elsewhere, photographic as well as documental, the written harvest supplemented by almost 1,500 tintypes, ambrotypes, daguerreotypes, cartes de visite, and glass plates. And on the face of it, here indeed was abundant indication of a series of events disturbing enough in their nature, doubly so inasmuch as the evidence had never been permitted to see the light of day.

The story now shaped up this way: To head off national bankruptcy and to finance the Union war effort by restoring American cotton to the international market, Lincoln had sanctioned, at great

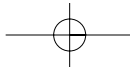


political risk, semiclandestine trade deals between Northern investors and owners of Southern cotton. When the Richmond government held out for direly needed meat instead of greenbacks as payment, representatives of both sides met secretly in neutral Canada to negotiate a mammoth exchange of pork for cotton. At the time, the negotiations had Lincoln's quiet endorsement. But in early 1865 Lincoln began to vacillate in regard to trading with the enemy, which, along with the imminent end of the hostilities, threatened the huge profits at stake. Simultaneously, the radical Republicans, the extremists of Lincoln's own political party, became enraged by his forgiving attitude toward the South. Determined to save the Union from the post-war course this attitude foreshadowed, they plotted to remove him from office.

Hourly more desperate as the Civil War neared its end, these elements merged into an unholy alliance. Simultaneously, holdouts from the crumbling Confederacy hoped to seize victory from the jaws of defeat by kidnapping the North's commander in chief. Once Lincoln was carried off by these rebel hotheads, a congressional junta in Washington would take control of the government, and the cotton deals would go through. The Northern interests bent on Lincoln's departure promised his abductors discreet aid, which ranged from a selective parole of rebel secret service agents in Union captivity to moored brigs on standby in quiet backwater coves. As a conspiracy, it was slipshod and improvised. But with powerfully motivated men involved and political survival and windfall profits at stake, it was altogether expedient and even foreseeable.

Unfortunately for these interests, a go-between or factotum with connections on every side was the unstable actor John Wilkes Booth. He was at Ford's Theatre, as was Lincoln, on the night set for seizing the president and spiriting him from Washington. But the actor's mind was obsessed by more than just abduction. And the derringer bullet he exploded into the president's brain incriminated politicians, bankers, Wall Street speculators, and even some of Lincoln's personal friends, not to mention his successor in the White House.

Booth was pursued across southern Maryland and into Virginia. But he was not cornered and shot to death in a burning barn, as promulgated by Secretary Stanton's War Department and fobbed off



on posterity. The interests with so much to hide had permitted Booth to escape. A luckless substitute was slain and buried in his name, a stunning transposition of identities only whispered of at the time and destined for generations of concealment.

Although it utterly contradicted standard history, Andrew Potter's scenario was too persuasive, too logically detailed, for instinctive dismissal. So here had loomed a formidable challenge. There was no escaping it, no easy path of compromise. If the story as presented by the War Department secret police papers and our follow-up research was not true on every salient point, the usual accounts of Lincoln's murder must and should prevail. If it *was* true, then a trick without parallel has been played on history. Getting at the truth would surely be a task of unpredictable length and labor. No short cuts were permissible. The detective documents and other newfound material that appeared to support them would have to be checked against independent evidence—and particularly that which anybody could readily look up in international and regional archives. The effort must be exhaustive, the search conducted just as diligently to refute as to corroborate. Double-checking became the order of the day.

