



FROM A PAINTING BY GEORGE P. A. HEALY

VINNIE REAM

THE PALIMPSEST

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From Plastic Clay

The Civil War was over. Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, was still the man of the hour. On his face were lines drawn by the pencil of sorrow, grief, and great sympathy.

It was Vinnie Ream — later Vinnie Ream Hoxie — who was to give perpetuity to the face and form of Abraham Lincoln as she saw him toward the close of the war. For a half hour every day for five months he sat in a room at the Executive Mansion while she fashioned the statue that stands in the rotunda of the national Capitol.

Vinnie Ream was born at Madison, Wisconsin, in September, 1847. Her father was a government surveyor and while he was engaged in surveying, Vinnie was learning primitive life in Wisconsin — sleeping in log cabins and playing with papooses. Later, Robert Ream was appointed to survey the western part of Missouri, and his daughter Vinnie,

then eleven years old, went to school in Columbia, Missouri. There at Christian College she was taught to be a "lady". To many people she lost all claim to that title when she busied herself with that most unfeminine art — sculpture.

After two years in Missouri, the Ream family moved to Washington, D. C., where Vinnie obtained a clerkship in the Post Office Department. It was a year later that she stopped one day in the office of Clark Mills, a sculptor, whose last work was the casting of Crawford's colossal statue of Liberty, which crowns the dome of the Capitol at Washington. The artist tossed his girl visitor a piece of clay with the half-jesting command: "Do a portrait of me!" Thus accidentally discovering that clay shaped itself almost naturally in her hands, she began earnestly to study the art of sculpture. It was a brave venture, for later, having developed this natural bent, the words of Carl Schurz, spoken of Vinnie Ream, "she is not only a woman, but something more", were, in social circles, words of condemnation, not praise.

Her academic education was of short duration. Whatever she knew, she learned from travel and from people with whom she came in contact through her work. According to the critic, George Brandes, whom she met in Italy, she was acquainted with only English and American writers. Shakespeare and Byron were her favorite poets.

In her own field, however, she worked with such

diligence and concentration that she plumbed the depths of her art. In a statement over the signatures of President Andrew Johnson, General U. S. Grant, and other national officials, including the Senators and Representatives of the United States, Miss Ream was appraised as "a most worthy and accomplished young lady" who possessed "rare genius in the beautiful art of sculpture."

She worked with ease and rapidity. "Her facility in modeling in clay is extraordinary", declared a critic in the *New York Evening Telegram* in February, 1877. "I have never seen a sculptor who could compare with her in the rapid formation of a likeness. When she began the bust of Judge Waite she had in front of her a standard, an iron wire with prongs and a tub of moist clay. Within a couple of hours she had built up in rough the whole fabric of the bust, modeled the shape of the head, and produced an accurate profile. On the following evening she rounded off and expressed one side of the face, and almost completed the coarse modeling of the other side."

It was in July, 1866, that Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior, then James Harlan, to contract with Miss Vinnie Ream for a life-size model and statue of the late President, Abraham Lincoln, to be executed by her at a price not exceeding \$10,000, one-half payable on completion of the model in plaster, and the remaining half on completion of the statue in marble.

This charge was duly executed. Lacking many of the qualities that make a portrait attractive and impressive, the artist's subject nevertheless had to be portrayed to meet not only the expectations and approval of national officials, but the criticism of the American people as well.

She was the first woman from whom a statue was ordered by the United States government. On the subject of women sculptors, an article in the *Iowa City State Press* voiced the feminine opinion so prevalent in contemporary tea table talk. Miss Ream, says the angry communication, "worked up the susceptibilities of Congressmen in order to get the appropriation of \$10,000." That was all the more surprising because "she is a young girl, about twenty, a Washingtonian, believed to have been in sympathy with secession throughout the war, has only been studying her art a few months, never made a statue, has some plaster busts on exhibition in the Capital [perhaps the spelling is indicative of the merit of the criticism], has a pretty face, with a turn up nose, bright black eyes, long dark curls and plenty of them, wears a jockey hat and a good deal of jewelry, sees all the members at their lodging or the reception room in the Capital, urges her claims fluently and confidently, sits in the galleries, in a conspicuous position, and in her most bewitching dress, while those claims are discussed on the floor, and nods and smiles as a member rises and delivers his opinion on the merits of the case, with the air of

a man sitting for his picture, and so she carries the day over Powers, Crawford, Homer, and who not? What are fame and success as an artist, talent, genius and all that sort of stuff, when compared to black eyes and long black curls? Her bust of Mr. Lincoln, now on exhibition at the Capital, is the worst representation of his head that I have ever seen. It is in the face so bad as to be a caricature, and one suspects that the object is to make a national caricature of our martyred President, as Miss Ream is a pupil of Clark Mills, who is so violent a secessionist that he took sick and kept his bed for several days when the New York riots were suppressed by the military, and he will probably make the statue contracted for with his pupil. How Senator Trumbull came to be entrapped into supporting the measure is one of the mysteries of the age. He evidently is a poor judge of works of art, and wishes to encourage American genius."

Five thousand dollars paid to her on the completion of the plaster model—"a faithful resemblance to the original"—and the many expressions of favorable criticism (in letter and in the press) constitute the testimony of Vinnie Ream's ability. "Rendered *con verita*", wrote Luigi Majoli from Rome on October 31, 1870.

Of the official inspection of the model, the editor of the Washington *Evening Star* wrote on January 7, 1871, "there was a sudden hush in the buzz of conversation" as workmen prepared to lift the veil.

“It must have been an anxious moment to the courageous little sculptor, and to her personal friends present. Could it be that the fragile, youthful figure standing there, pale and anxious, and rendered more child-like in appearance by her petite form and wealth of Dora-like curls, had made a success where so many older sculptors — Brown notably and recently — had failed? Was it possible that at her age, and with her slight experience, she had made a statue of Abraham Lincoln fit to be placed in the Capitol of the nation? And then there was the formidable array of Illinoisians present, familiar with the living Lincoln, and prompt to detect a defective literal representation, however good the work might be artistically. The veil was raised slowly, disclosing first the base, bearing the simple words ABRAHAM LINCOLN; then the well-remembered form; and finally and essentially, the head of the Patriot Martyr. There was a momentary hush, and then an involuntary, warm, and universal demonstration of applause gave the verdict of the distinguished and critical gathering, and assured the artist that her work was to be set down a success. There was another pause, while a more deliberate view was taken; and then another, and another round of applause confirmed and rendered final the involuntary decision from the first impression. And then everybody turned to where the little sculptor-girl stood, a little in the rear with glad tears in her eyes, and congratulations were poured

in upon her from all quarters, official and unofficial; the Illinoisians present being foremost in expressing their satisfaction with her representation of the man they revered. The expressed opinion of Senator Trumbull and others from that State was that the statue gives that thoughtful, benignant expression familiar to those who knew Mr. Lincoln best, and which was best worth perpetuating in marble."

According to another newspaper correspondent, the "head and features are forcibly, yet truthfully modelled; the hair boldly managed in flowing masses as by the skill of experience; and the expression of sadness mingled with benevolence is touchingly portrayed, well conceived and appropriate to the expression and meaning of the statue." Moreover, the "figure is well poised, standing firmly and naturally". The masses in the cloak, "happily arranged to give breadth, as well as dignity to a very tall and meagre figure" are managed so artistically as to lend manliness to the subject. "Indeed there seems a unity of idea and design expressed throughout the work, and an absence of those conventionalities which are so often visible in the productions of those who have derived their ideas of Art principally from the schools in which they study."

The "tragic era" followed the death of Abraham Lincoln. Even the little improvised studio of Vinnie Ream in the basement of the national Capitol had a part in the intense drama that culminated in the impeachment of President Johnson. Vinnie

herself flitted across the stage. Senator E. G. Ross had a room in the home of Vinnie Ream, and politicians, big and hard, were pressing her to reveal the vote of Ross in the pending trial. Miss Ream was not strong. She did not enjoy politics, and though later she was often visited in her studio, never in the manner in which she was thus hounded. In Italy suitors were to give her little rest, but in Washington politicians were driving her into hysterics.

Not long after the impeachment fiasco, Vinnie Ream left for Europe for further study with particular reference to the completion of her statue of Lincoln. It had yet to be finished in marble — snow-white marble from the famous quarries of Carrara.

As a train was about to start from Florence to Rome, one day in the fall of 1870, a girl in her twenties, with brown eyes and brown curly hair, guitar case in her hand (she accompanied her own singing), entered the carriage. She spoke in English to a fellow traveller of visits in London, Berlin, Munich, Florence, of acquaintance with Gustave Doré, the French artist, Franz Liszt, and Cardinal Antonelli. It was Vinnie Ream on her way from Carrara where she had been superintending the shipment of one of her works. Before Carrara she had been in Paris, studying under Bonnat, and then in Rome, under Majoli.

Her chance acquaintance on the train with George

Brandes, Danish author and critic, grew into friendship in the short time she stayed in Rome. Though Vinnie was "the first specimen of a young woman from the United States" that the critic had seen, he was greatly impressed with her as a type of the American girl. Her talent he thought more pictorial than plastic, but spoke of her nevertheless as a true artist, possessing an uncommon will and capacity for hard work. "There was the very devil of a rush and Forward! March! about her, always in a hurry". Her day in Rome was typically occupied with visits from as many as twenty-five people, opening mail, sittings with the American painter, George P. Healy, and work on Antonelli's bust, besides attending to household affairs.

If she was vain, she was at the same time ingenuous. When she was teased by a friend about all the time that he had wasted in her company, she retorted, "People do not waste time with their friends."

"What do I get from you?" he asked.

"Inspiration," was the laughing reply.

In 1878 Miss Ream married Richard Leveridge Hoxie of Iowa City, then a first lieutenant in the Engineer Corps of the United States Army. He had been well-drilled to obedience. When he proposed marriage to Vinnie Ream, he was commanded to "wait until my statue is finished". By the intercession of Mrs. Farragut, however, the marriage was consummated sooner than Art had dictated.

Subsequently the Hoxies lived in Washington, while Iowa City saw them in the summer months. The home in Iowa was called "Vinita", the name first given a town in Oklahoma by Boudinot, a Cherokee Indian, in honor of Vinnie Ream.

Following the ceremony of unveiling her Lincoln statue in the national Capitol on January 25, 1871, she was commissioned to make a statue of Admiral David Farragut. It was cast from bronze of the propeller of the *Hartford*, the Admiral's flagship.

Her list of works is long and impressive, including statues of men of national repute, among them two Iowans — life-size figures of Samuel J. Kirkwood and James Harlan. Since 1914, the year of her death, there stands over her burial place in Arlington Cemetery "The Muse of Poetry", a statue of her own making.

As one looks upon the features of the likeness of Abraham Lincoln in the rotunda of the national Capitol, recalling all that he stood for, we remember also this, that he by his own unaided efforts had risen from obscurity to the highest position in the nation. And therefore, Senator Trumbull has said, it is fit that his features should be transmitted to posterity by one, who, like him, had nothing but her hands and her head to urge her forward — Vinnie Ream.

MARIE HAEFNER