

Wit and Humor of Lincoln

BY HUBERT NORTHERN

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MR. LINCOLN'S career exemplifies the truth and aptness of the poetical trope that "man is a pendulum between a smile and a tear." He at one moment being given over to the abandon and license of unrestrained humor, and at the next to the gloom and impenetrable melancholy. What he felt and experienced during the romance of the latter condition will never be known or even intelligently conjectured. His somber mood was the voiceless tomb of expression and confidence, but he shared the best and exultation of his excursions to the shrine of Thalia, or the fane of Joe Miller with all mankind.

So far as dignity and the fitness of things are concerned, the outside world might consider that he mixed jokes and business too intimately. It certainly does not appear fitting that he should introduce the first reading of the emancipation proclamation to his cabinet with Artemus Ward's story of a "high handed outrage at Ulster," but we can't know to what extent the strain of formulating so mighty an event was neutralized by a brief sojourn in the realms of nonsense.

Equally doubtful, if true, was the propriety of allowing the response of Lord Lyons upon the diplomatic encounter to announce the incident of international import—the marriage of the Prince of Wales. To the formal speech of the ambassador announcing the august event the great president reported to have replied to the bachelor minister, Lord Lyons, go thou and do likewise. If such an incident happened, it is not garnered except by the left hand of history, but it is strictly Lincolnian and might well have happened anyway. Great and solemn occasions did not repress or deaden his propensity to joke. Thus at the Hampton Roads conference, as he and Seward entered at one end of the small cabin of the steamed River Queen, he saw the diminutive Stevens at the other end in the act of emerging from a huge overcoat.

He said he soiled his boots and Seward, "Did you ever see such a little rascal in such a big shuck?" So, too, during the progress of that famous conference, when Mr. K. T. Hunter urged the President to treat with the Confederates, citing the example of Charles I as a precedent, the president promptly replied, "As to that I don't pretend to be well versed in history, and therefore I refer you to Seward for details. He is the one who recollects of the precedent you cite is that Charles lost his head in the end." That was answering a fool according to his folly and is the best instance of apt repartee on record.

Now, the essence of the first of these River Queen jokes was pure fun and nothing else, while the essence of the last one was strictly utilitarian—was absolutely demanded by the situation. It put Hunter and his prompt answer out of the ring, "put him to sleep," to use modern slang. It ended the Confederate's function completely. But he sometimes went further in vanquishing an opposition than the bounds of good humor required. Thus, when a delegation of rich men from New York waited on the President in a dark hour of the nation's tribulation, begging for a gunboat to protect New York harbor, he manifested the utmost impatience and almost paralyzed them with this reply, "I am straining every nerve to meet the requirements of the army and navy at the front, and I have no gunboat to give you; but if I was half as rich as you half a dozen of you could furnish the gunboat myself instead of begging the government for what it ain't got to spare."

He very rarely made either himself or any else a butt for a joke, and certainly never in malice. His humor was usually impersonal. Once, however, at City Point a little discussion arose as to what religion He is an Episcopalian," said Lincoln, "because he swears just like Seward does, and Seward is an Episcopalian."

More in union with his methods was his story to illustrate why he did not fill certain vacancies, thus: A boy was making a church out of mud. Having got it substantially completed, he was asked why he did not make a minister for it. "Kase I hain't got no mud left," was the obvious answer. In a similar vein, when a dash of the enemy cost the government three brigades and a lot of army mules, he lamented the loss of the mules, explaining that he could replace the general by a dash of the pen, but that the mules would cost well on to a hundred dollars apiece.

But his sarcasm was so infrequent and withal so mild as to scarcely deserve the name of sarcasm. Once in Champlain county he had a jury out in a case, which he found would disagree, as there was no hope of acquittal, and while we were on the anxious seat of a noisy young orator whom Lincoln had known from childhood, being a staunch friend of his father, was making a long "whiskey" case, when Lincoln, bored beyond endurance, said, "I wish he would quit, for I'm afraid the jury will agree, so as to get here to hear that speech." But this bit of sarcasm was richly deserved.

In like manner during the war the persistent claims of some pretentious Union men for forage, etc., taken by

the army reminded him of Captain Jack Chase, who used to pilot a small boat through the rapids of the Illinois river. While in the very midst of the boiling current a small boy tugged at the pilot's coat and shouted, "Cap'n stop de boat, for I've lost my apple overboard!" Trivial matters amused him equally with those of greater significance. A long experience with wit and badinage had not made callous or blunted his sense of the ludicrous. Thus at the Bloomington convention he had occasion to introduce the courtly, polite, exuberant, drooping to the coarse, irrelevant Wentworth, "I've heard much of you," began the prize, "I'd much against me, I reckon!" blurted out the boor, Lincoln was wont to laugh over this very often.

Many of his stories were commentaries on the situation in hand with something that happened down in—somewhere. "That's like the man down in Indiana" was the frequent introduction. Thus, when after a long interval of silence he produced news not altogether favorable from Burnside, beleaguered at Knoxville, he neither lamented at the untoward aspect of the news nor enthused at getting news at all, but simply said, "That's like Sally Ward, who had thirteen children, that were accustomed to stray out into the woods, from the depths of which would occasionally float on infantile cry of disaster, when Sally would exclaim, 'Thank heaven, they're one of my children, what ain't dead yet!'"

In order to illustrate the moral uncleanliness of certain unscrupulous politicians he was reminded of a "feller" who applied to a physician for advice in and about a cutaneous disease. He needed a very simple remedy, so a prescription was given him somewhat thus: "R. Sapon, castile oz. 8. Aquapure gal. 16. Mice. Apply to all parts of the skin with a sponge and wash dry with a towel." "That simply means washing me!" exclaimed the dirty sufferer. "It certainly is open to that objection," replied the physician.

In a similar vein he took the starch of a vainglorious applicant for a minor office who, in order to magnify his importance, gave in quite unnecessarily the suggestion that he sprang from one of the leading families of Vermont. "Never mind," said the justice President, "that won't be very much against you."

So, in order to illustrate the well known aphorism that the remedy proposed is often worse than the disease, he was reminded of the situation was worse than the disease it was supposed to cure, he was reminded of the man down in Danville who had occasion to head up a hog's head, but did not clearly discern how to keep the head in position while he lightened the straps by driving his young son in the hog's head, where his height just served to keep the recalcitrant head in place, when he adjusted the straps, and the experiment seemed to be a success till the imprudent boy yelled, "Let me out of here!"

Once he came in official contact with Judge Baldwin, the author of the humorous book so highly prized by Lincoln. "Flush Times in Alabama," had known who his distinguished visitor was his reception would have been different, for the President cherished a real humorist above all men. The judge was born and bred in the Shenandoah valley and migrated first to Alabama, where he wrote this book; thence to California, where he became a humorist, and thence to the states, and in 1861 to revisit his childhood home to Washington and applied first to Justice Field, then to Halleck, both of whom he well knew, to gain the needed permission; but, being circuitously rebuffed, he applied to Justice Field, sought the aid of the President, who asked if he had seen Stanton. Yes, he had and had been contemptuously turned down. "Then," said Lincoln, "I can't help you for I've very little influence with this administration."

He was accustomed to narrate this experience while he was in Congress. Upon an occasion of telling being ordered on an important matter a puddy, bibulous member started in a zigzag, bacchanalian gait from the rear of the house down the center aisle, making strenuous efforts to keep his head in line, "as if he had a drop of sweat on his nose and his nose was afraid it would drop off," to use Lincoln's own words. The sight was so ludicrous that the general leavies of Bacchus, and no member attempted to follow, but when he reached the tellers he suspected something to be wrong, carefully turned his head and realizing the comic situation, he said, "Oh, h—!" and with drunken gravity staggered back to his seat, the house roaring with glee.

It was stated at the time that Hon. Wade, chairman of the committee on the conduct of the war, called to complain of something when Lincoln started to say, "That is like the story," when Wade roared out: "Yes, it's all right, story, story, and with you going to h—!" It ain't a mile from h—!" to this minute." "Just the distance to the capitol," said the amused President as the brawling speaker rushed out, trying to put his hat on the floor and his cane on his head.

As to the form of humor, Mark Twain in his essay on "How to Tell a Story" says it depends entirely on the manner of telling, and that the wit depends on the essence of the matter. And this distinction is quite as applicable to Lincoln, for even his stories need the

inspiration of his action to achieve their crowning merit, and, as to the essence of humor, Carlyle aptly says that "the essence of humor is sensibility—warm, tender fellow feeling, with all forms of existence. * * * Unless sensibility * * * will readily corrupt into disease, falsehood or * * * sentimentality."

And Mr. Lincoln's penchant for humor was not an insane diversion, but was the fringe and passementerie of a great crisis in government.

How Lincoln Paid a Board Bill.

While Mr. Lincoln was studying law at Petersburg, Ill., he and a friend named Hanks, also a law student, boarded at Alfred Gordon's house. He was an old friend of the Lincoln family, and as he did not charge the young men anything for board they undertook to make rails enough for his two farms.

LINCOLN and DOUGLAS

Incidents of the Famous Political Campaign Debate of 1858.

BY CHARLES F. BUTTS.

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The rival senatorial candidates, Lincoln and Douglas, did not travel in company, but occasionally met on the way bound for the same destination. Once, each with a large following (myself among them in the Douglas crowd), they steamed down the Mississippi on a little stern wheeler belonging to White river.

As we went down stream Mr. Lincoln took his stand in the bow of the boat, seeming to look intently ahead, though from the speculation in his eye I saw he was thinking deeply. He did not rouse until some one called out, "Say, Mr. Lincoln, doesn't this remind you of old times?" He smiled pleasantly and nodded, saying, with a sly look at Judge Douglas: "Yes, it was on this river I learned how to keep from striking snags." We understood that he meant the argumentative pitfalls Douglas had so often set for him.

The debate was wearing, all alleviations of chance and change and personal encounters to the contrary notwithstanding. The debaters themselves felt it more, I think, than any of their immediate followers. On one notable occasion, when I felt Douglas's lot to close, I saw Mr. Lincoln during the last speech slip almost unnoticed from the platform. I met him at the steps. Douglas had just said something which caught the crowd and set it yelling its loudest. "This seems to be something of a Douglas crowd," Mr. Lincoln said as he saw me. "I'm going to steal off for a little rest, as I am far from feeling well."

"Let me go with you," I answered. So together we tramped at least four blocks, and though the town seemed to be deserted it struck me as somewhat strange that in all that distance not a human being appeared to recognize my champion, although he was so marked a figure and the foremost man of his party. He reached the hotel utterly exhausted. In an hour, at the outside, the meeting would be over and his crowd trooping to see him. At my suggestion he asked for another room than the one engaged for him. There was none vacant, but the clerk upon finding out who wanted it obligingly put his room at Mr. Lincoln's disposal. I helped him to it. Then he got his boots off, bound a wet towel around his head and stretched himself on the bed with a sigh of relief. After thinking me warmly, he said: "Tell them not to disturb me. I will be down stairs as soon as I am rested." I knew, however, that that would be futile and acted on my own judgment. Going outside, I looked over the transom, found the key back over the transom. Until he himself chose to reappear, refreshed and ready, only the clerk and one of his whereabouts, although, as may be guessed, a pretty potter set up when people found his regular rooms wide open and himself conspicuously absent.

At Alton, Oct. 18, the great debate came to a full ending. I can make no approximation even to the number of people who saw it. They were there in myriads, in clouds it seemed. St. Louis, but a little way off, sent tens of thousands. Every city, every considerable town even, of Illinois furnished delegations of both parties to swell the swarm. There were more like those from the Missouri towns, and from Indiana and Kentucky.

Both Lincoln and Douglas were like schoolboys who have finished to their own complete satisfaction some extra wearing task. They met when the last speech was made at the home of a mutual friend, the Hon. Robert Smith.

Lincoln's Hard Road To Success



BY H. C. WHITNEY

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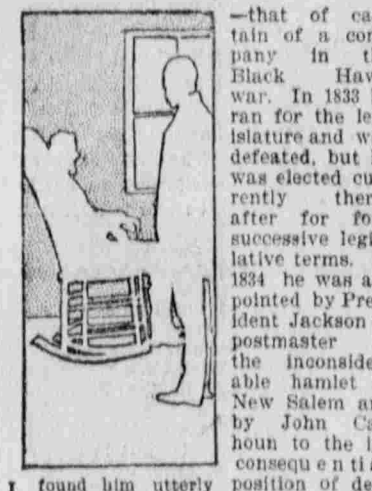
The usual and ordinary belief is that the career of the ultimately successful man is an uninterrupted and unbroken series of current successes from zero to affluence or renown. In practice, however, it appears that the progress of the successful and unsuccessful alike is strewn with current misfortunes, humiliations, checks and disasters, and that the adventurer who shall have attained the goal of ultimate defeat may nevertheless have been highly favored of fortune in life's journey, while the laureled victor may have trodden the wine press of humiliation and defeat all of his days but the last.

Mr. Lincoln's career as a business man may be thus summarized: After practicing law and living in the most frugal and economical manner for a quarter of a century, being meantime his own hostler and errand boy and attending to his own woodpile, coward and pipsen himself, he had accumulated \$10,000 worth of property when he was elected as President of the United States, and having consumed his capital for current uses in living during the months preceding the inauguration he was compelled to borrow every cent of money which he had in his pocket when he started to Washington, and which he repaid out of the earliest receipts from the presidential salary.

On Jan. 5, 1859, the day of Douglas' last election to the United States Senate by the Illinois legislature, I was alone with Mr. Lincoln from 2 o'clock till late bedtime, and I can testify to say that no man in the state was so gloomy, dejected and dispirited, and no man so surely and heartily deemed his life to have been an abject and lamentable failure as he then considered his to have been. I never saw any man so radically depressed, so completely steeped in the bitter waters of hopeless despair. The soundings, even, were eloquent of flat, prosaic failure. I found him utterly alone and sitting in an old rocking chair doing absolutely nothing but brooding over his griefs and political discomfiture. He was in his office, one of the most neglected and ungarnished offices in the state.

My feelings were in union with his, and our conversation was as cheerless and dismal as the somber and melancholy surroundings, and yet in twenty-two months from that doleful and gloomy day this recipient of fortune's frowns had sounded the highest note in the gamut of ostensible and apparent success, for 1,857,510 citizens, embracing the elite of the nation, had elected him to be the ruler of 40,000,000 people.

And his early career as a politician may be thus exhibited: On April 21, 1832, he was elected to his first office



His own hostler and errand boy.

—that of captain of a company in the Black Hawk war. In 1835 he ran for the legislature and was defeated, but he was elected currently thereafter for four successive legislative terms. In 1834 he was appointed by President Jackson as postmaster of the inconsiderable hamlet of New Salem and by John Calhoun to the consequential position of deputy surveyor of Sangamon county. He was an unsuccessful competitor for a nomination yet Congress in 1844—if not also before—and in the year 1846 he was both nominated for and elected to a seat in Congress.

On May 29, 1856, Mr. Lincoln made his renowned speech before the Bloomington convention, known to a high fame as the "lost speech," which was the highest oratorical triumph that had been exhibited in the political arena in Illinois up to that date. It placed him on the highest pinnacle of fame as an impassioned and effective orator. Three days thereafter he and Herndon, his law partner, deemed it proper to ratify the proceedings of the convention at which such a marvel of political oratory had been achieved, and accordingly at Springfield, Lincoln's own home, Herndon got out huge posters and at quite an expense engaged a band of music, rang the bells and employed all means which enthusiasm and enterprise could suggest in order to attract a large audience, including the then primitive practice of blowing a horn. The hall of the House of Representatives was lit up to its full capacity, and no effort was omitted to insure success in that enterprise. But the evening advanced, and up to a late hour but one man came except Lincoln and his partner, the ever faithful Herndon. Lincoln, somewhat amused and quite chagrined, made a brief speech, thus: "Gentlemen, this meeting is larger than I knew it would be. I knew that Herndon and myself would come, but I did not know that anyone else would be here, and yet another has come, you, John Pain. These are sad times and seem out of joint. All seems dead—dead—dead! But the age is not dead. It lives as sure as our Maker lives. Under all this seeming want of life and motion the world does move, nevertheless. Be hopeful, and now let us adjourn to the people."

And thus, as has oftentimes been demonstrated in history, the aphorism that "a prophet is not without honor but in his own country and among his own kin and in his own house" was again verified in this case, for this man, whom in June, 1858, his own neighbors rejected, four years later the sovereign people of the nation made the headstone of the corner.

This subject may be further illustrated by an incident which occurred during the year while the political canvass was at a white heat. A zealous Republican in Monticello, in Platt county, wrote Lincoln several earnest invitations to come there and speak, assuring him of a good turnout. Lincoln, after addressing a very large meeting at Bloomington, went to Monticello to fulfill the ardent hopes of his corre-

spondent. Reaching town, he sought out the residence of his enthusiastic correspondent, where he found him working with his drawknife, while his wife was industriously getting dinner for their distinguished guest. After dinner Lincoln and his improvised host started for the grove which was to be the scene of the meeting, their way leading through the village. The man was almost staggering under the weight of the flag and its staff, and Lincoln did not realize the ludicrousness of the situation until he heard some of the town people commenting upon the "long procession." It being Lincoln and his solitary friend, each of them being over six feet tall. But there was no meeting. The town being composed chiefly of Kentuckians, rejected his political ideals and by preconcert systematic ally and unitedly kept away.

I will now afford a glimpse at the obverse face of the medal. Within a few days after the inauguration of March 4, 1860, I sat with the great of the fireplace, in which was a hearthstone. I had called to ask that his mutual young friend the secretary, ship to sign land patents. Strange to days and yet he appeared quite as miserable and gloomy as on the 29th of January, 1859, heretofore narrated. He had the press and political affairs for the improper bestowment of some allied appointments, and his sensitive nature was stirred to its profoundest depths. It was singular that so virile and courageous a nature as his should have been so supersensitive about comparative trifles. At concluding our interview in these bleakest words, "It is an awful thing to say, but I wish I was back home in peace and some one else was here in my place."

Lincoln's Appearance.

Lincoln was as unusual in personal appearance as in character. He was muscular in frame, 6 feet 4 inches tall, and weighed about 180 pounds. His hair was black and luxuriant, eyes brown, nose long and mouth large.

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