MEN - LINCOLN AS A STORY TELLER.

In talking with Paul Reynolds on the artiele of Lincoln stories, the way he used them, he says that he thinks all men have some kind of a vicious outlet, that possibly this was Lincoln's vice. That the story was an outlet I agree, but so far as I have been able to discover, he did not use it as a vice. There are two or three evident reasons for his frequent use of stories when a President. One was as a protective devide. He could turn the conversation if it become tiresome or dangerous. He could relieve the effort and unnecessarily serious trend, break up the tension of a visitor, get him out of the room, with his stories. The mischievous, perhaps malicious use that the highly conventional self-important general, The New Englander. I think he liked to shock Chase and Stanton. It amused him. It seems a little malicious in some cases.
This story-telling by which he won such fame in Sangamon was not a new accomplishment. He had practiced it in his Indiana home, in Jone's Grocery Store, at "mussin's and raisin's and clearin's." Nor was it peculiar to him. It was a characteristic of the primitive society in which he was born. In crude society the world over men tell stories. The habit persists in one form or another as long as there remain those who must be amused and for there are a few ambitious to amuse them. Take a dinner-table of people unused to conversation there is always somebody who tells stories to hide the conversational poverty of the others. It is only when everybody in a company is intellectually alert and is rich enough in experience and culture to talk that the story-teller is suppressed. Men knew little conversation in the society where Lincoln was born but they knew much of story-telling. The boy heard his father and Dennis Hanks telling stories around their warm fire and he heard them in the groups of men who gathered on the fence to chat. He grew up to it and as he grew older he cultivated the habit; one can not but believe that he cultivated it intentionally as he did his habit of speech-making, because it won him the applause and the good will of his hearers. That he got pleasure himself from it there is no question. He loved a "point", a quick unexpected turn to a thing and his stories all had the flash of wit at the end yet the humor in the development of them was quite as remarkable as their wit. He saw all the amusing elements of a situation, the foibles, the inconstancy, the blundering, and he had such a broad human sympathy with men that he could amplify all these features without malice or bitterness.
He unquestionably used his stories more and more as he grew wiser to see what their effect on men would be. He studied men as he amused them, found out that he would win and mould by his stories and cultivated the habit for that purpose. He found out the longer he practised his art that there were few arguments like a well-told anecdote, even when he was beginning to make a reputation in Jone's Grocery Store his maximum auditors noted how often he used a story to convince them. One of his comrades in this period, Nat Grigsby says: "When he appeared in company, the boys would gather and cluster around him to hear him talk -- Mr. Lincoln was figurative in his speech, talks, and conversation. He argued much from analogy and explained things hard for us to understand by stories, maxims, tales and figures. He would almost always point his lesson or idea by some story that was plain and near us, that we might instantly see the force and bearing of what he said."

Throughout his legal career he continued this practice and when he became President of the United States and found himself among a set of men whom culture and the association of other men superior to him had made out of the story-telling period and who regarded it as a crude and childish habit, he continued to their exasperation, but frequently to the great benefit of the public cause. His stories were unanswerable arguments. His humorous sense of things showed him frequently that a course was ludicrous under the circumstance when the deadly seriousness of its advocate prevented their seeing anything incongruous in it. For instance no more powerful argument could have been advanced than the story by which he silenced the cotton speculators in the
war who wanted to bring out cotton from certain insurrectionary districts. The civil attention had consented, the military authorities were opposed. An agent was sent to find out from Mr. Lincoln what he thought of the result of the contest. He immediately remembered a story of a friend in Illinois. This gentleman, it seems, when he came to age had found among his father's papers a number of warrants and papers for land in east Missouri. Collecting his titles he had gone to investigate the situation and prove ownership. Arriving in the neighborhood as he supposed, he found a cabin in which a burly, taciturn frontiersman was making bullets. The claimant immediately dismounted, tied his horse, and accosted the man with: "I am looking up some lands that I think belong to my father" and drawing out his papers he demonstrated to his own satisfaction, at least, that the land which the pioneer occupied belonged to him. He ended his evidence with the remark: "Now, that is my title, what is yours?"

The frontiersman had kept silence throughout the harangue, but now looking up he pointed towards a rifle suspended on a couple of buck horns above the grate: "Young man, do you see that gun?" It was impossible not to see it. "Well," said the frontiersman, "that is my title, and if you don't get out of here pretty damned quick you will feel the force of it."

The young man renounced his claim on the spot and mounting his pony with undisguised haste he galloped down the road, the pioneer snapping the trigger of his "title" at him as he went.

The agitent went back to the cotton speculator and told the story, the policy of the administration was evident and there was no more need of discussing the matter.
It is well to note that in all Mr. Lincoln's use of the story it is not for the sake of the story that he tells it. There is no frivolity in his practice. The criticism was often made in the war by his enemies that he was simply a clown, a buffoon who lightened his difficult position by indulging a childish habit. These stories were arguments, illustrations, proofs in the White House as they had been in Gentryville.

We have every reason to believe too that even as early as the days of "Abe's Log" he indulged in the habit as a relief from his melancholy. Certainly as the years went on and experience, sorrow and responsibility intensified it, even though it taught control to his sadness, he systematically and deliberately told stories to escape from himself, "I should die if it were not for this occasional vent," he said once to a congressman who, irritated by the president's joking said, "Mr. President I did not come here this morning to hear stories, it is too serious a time." "I should die if it were not for this occasional vent," was the piteous reply.

Certainly in any study of Mr. Lincoln his stories must be continually kept in view. They were one of his most effective means for winning popularity - one of his strongest methods of argument. One of his chief resources for personal amusement and relief.
"THAT REMINDS ME."

President Lincoln related many a story, but never a one nearer the point, or more applicable, than the following:--

It was in the summer of 1861, a short time after the Bull Run defeat, that complaint was made to Gov. R--- concerning the conduct of Col. ----, of the --- Regiment Wisconsin Volunteers.

The Colonel was a prominent man, a Democrat, and the Governor was disposed, in a military affair, to act impartially; but how to have the Colonel transferred, or "let down easy," so that no disturbance, political or otherwise, should arise at home to vex him, was the question. Finally, it was resolved that the matter should be dealt with President Lincoln. So Judge O---- was requested by the Governor to go to Washington and have "matters fixed." Accordingly the Judge and Senator D---- called at the White House and
stated the case to Mr. Lincoln, and recommended that the Colonel be put upon some General's staff, where he could be more useful than in the position he then occupied, and so "let him down easy." Mr. Lincoln inquired if the Colonel knew anything of the plan, and upon being answered in the negative said,—

"That reminds me of a little story. It was in the Mexican War, —at the battle of Monterey, I believe, — that a little Irish captain from Sangamon County was ordered by his Colonel to a position, so and so, with his company. After hearing the order, the little captain straightened up full height, and said, 'Colonel, will yez be so kind as to tell that to my min yoursel'? for, by jibers, Colonel, I'm not on spakin' terms with my company!"

It is perhaps needless to add that the gallant Colonel was, shortly after this interview, with the good-natured President, placed in a more exalted sphere of usefulness.
Generally as a parable to illustrate and enforce his meaning. But at other times they were told for the purpose of drawing out the character of others with whom he was conversing. As in a country tavern he would convulse the crowd with one of his stories, his eye would run sharply round the circle; gauging its effect on each one. For each one of his hearers might be a future antagonist, client, attorney, or juryman, and he was taking the gauge of each one, and how they would be influenced by one form or another of presentation of thought.

There is another thing which should be said with regard to Mr Lincoln's stories. They were very often of questionable character, that if repeated now would exclude a man largely from respectable society, and give the impression of a very low moral character. But it must be remembered that he was raised on the border, and the fault was not his, but entirely the surroundings in which he was placed from early childhood forward. It was, so to speak, the very atmosphere of conversation in the shop and by the road side of the community of his boyhood and early manhood. But the effect was only superficial. The community notwithstanding its accustomed vulgarity of expression was as pure, if not purer than any of those communities where now the telling of such stories would be regarded as the sure mark of a depraved nature.
To me Mr. Lincoln was one of the saddest and most earnest of men when talking on serious subjects. The joking and the story telling would pass away. Deep and earnest thought and expression would take their place.

Speaking at one time of wishing to travel in the east, particularly in the Holy Land, he spoke of Palestine as the "land of the Saviour." The tones in which he rendered the word Saviour, and his expressions in regard to Christ's teachings showed that whatever might be his theological opinions, he was by nature one of the most religious of men. There are those natures whose religion runs so deep that to stop to discuss the details of creeds is but a waste of nervous energy and time.

As we would be together his mind was often reverting to his past life.

In speaking of Daniel Webster for example; he had nothing but charity for what some considered the defects of that Statesman's character. He loved to dwell on the grandeur of Webster's personal appearance. "Those two eyes which appeared under his forehead as though they were looking out from caves under a hill."