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Galley: He Knew Lincoln

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More than one clue must be unravelled to reach an understanding of Abraham Lincoln. Among them there surely must be reckoned his capacity for companionship. None more catholic in his selections ever lived. All men were his fellows. He went unerringly and unconsciously for the most part, to the meeting place that awaited him in each man's nature. There might be a wall, often there was; but he knew, no one better, that there is always a secret door in human walls. Sooner or later he discovered it, put his finger on its spring, passed through and settled into the place behind that was his.

His life was rich in companionships with unlikely people, often people who began by contempt or semi-contempt of him. There was the town bully of his youth, whom he soundly thrashed for trying a foul in a wrestling match, and who rose from the dust to proclaim Lincoln the best man who ever broke into camp; thirty years later there was his own Secretary of State, with his self-complacent assumption of the President's unfitness for leadership and of his own call to direct the nation, put gently but firmly in his place and soon frankly and nobly declaring, "He's the best of us all."

He had many pass-keys—wrath, magnanimity, shrewdness, patience, clarity of judgment, humor, resolve; and in the end, one or the other or all together opened every closed door, and he sat down at home with men of the most divergent view and experience: the bully, the scholarly, the cunning, the pious, the ambitious, the selfish, the great, the weak, the boy, the man.
- the boy, the man.

Particularly was Lincoln at home with men like the Billy Brown of these pages, men whose native grain had not been obscured by polish and oil. There were many of them in his time in Illinois, plying their trades or professions more or less busily, but never allowing industry to interfere with opportunities for companionship. They were men of shrewdness, humor, usually modest, not over-weighted with ambition. Their appetite for talk, for politics, for reports on human exhibits of all sorts, never dulled. Their love of companionship outstripped even their naturally intolerant partisanship.

These men, unconsciously for the most part, resisted the social veneering that, beginning in Illinois in Lincoln's day, rapidly overlaid the state. In his first contact with Springfield in the '30's he remarked the "flourishing about in carriages," the separation of people into groups according to money, antecedents, social etiquette. He never allowed convention, address, ceremony, however foreign to him, to interfere with his human relations—he went over or around them. But, natural man that he was, he found a special freedom with those in whom the essence of human nature remained unmixed and uncowed.

The original of Billy Brown was such
The original of Billy Brown was such a man. He was still keeping his drug store in Springfield in the '90s when the writer made studies there for a "Life of Lincoln." She passed many an hour in Lincoln's chair, while Billy, tipped back in something less precious, talked. There were Billy Browns in other towns— Bloomington, Princeton, Quincy, Chicago. Their memory of Mr. Lincoln was among the most precious and satisfying things in their lives. When business was dull or the day rainy and consequently there were few or no interruptions, the talk you started by questions soon became a soliloquy. Head against the wall, feet on desk, eyes far away, voice softened, they re-lived the old friendship. Their memories were tender, reverent but singularly devoid of the thing that we call hero-worship. Mr. Lincoln remained too real to them, too interesting and companionable.

The sense of intimacy with him which they treasured, their conviction that he recognized them as his friends, had little or no trace of familiarity. He was always "Mr. Lincoln" to them, never "Abe," nor would they tolerate the use of that word. I never saw my Springfield Billy Brown so angrily indignant as in talking of a townsman who affected the name. True,