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THE BOY LINCOLN *

How devoid of understanding is he that pities Abraham Lincoln's ~~youth~~ boyhood. It was so hard, we say, so meagre, and ugly - no comforts, no hair mattress, no electric light, no free library, no ready-made clothes. We rehearse what we know he did not have, but fail to see what he did have.

The real boy Lincoln was not he who slept in the loft of a log cabin through whose chinks the snow may sometimes have sifted; it was the boy who came home after a long day's work with glowing eyes, hugging to his heart a book - a borrowed book - who did his "chores" almost unconsciously, his mind on the joy that awaited him. What mattered it to him that he must gather chips and shavings to keep the logs flaming, if he would have a light to read by? He had a book to read, and he read it until sleep overtook the household, and then carried it up to bed that at the break of day it might be within his reach.

The real boy was not he who struggled with plow or ax or flat boat rudder; it was he who while working rehearsed over and over the passages that he had read the night before, making them his own. It was the boy who as he traveled the furrow visualized George Washington, Valley Forge, the Crossing of the Delaware - who learned to declaim the "Great Declaration" - being born so close to his own time that no disappointing sequences had yet chilled its noble phrases. To him there was

* published in Collier's Weekly Feb 1923.

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a quality of truth, of possible realization in the famous document which thrilled and enobled him. The real boy Lincoln was the one who, in those days we call so hard, carried with him a faith in the possibility of freedom and opportunity for all men, a faith which grew as he toiled.

He is not the one to be pitied. Pity the boy who, surrounded by all the thousands of volumes which rehearse the making and interpret the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, have never yet caught its vision or felt the fire of its inspiration.

He must walk far for the book - beg it from neighbors who knew him, build acquaintance with strangers into confidence sufficient to borrow. Pity him for <u>that</u>? He had learned a great thing - that the book is worth the price - any price. What did he grudge that brought him Robby Burns or Aesop or Plutarch or the Constitution of the United States, or a collection of the strange and changing laws of men - that brought him anything that dealt with the workings of men's hearts and minds?

His desire carried him across fields and over rough trails to Boonville, twenty miles away, to Rockport, as far, and to many a distant home of educated English settlers, of Southern men, or of those who had followed the long trail of his own family from the Atlantic Coast, through Virginia,

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Kentucky, into South-western Indiana. Wherever he knew of man or woman who had or might have a book, he wormed his way. He scented a book, trailed it, worried it out of its hole. His hunter's nose and tirelessness became known far and wide. It won him friends among men of parts. They knew a living mind when they met it, understood its hunger, strove to feed it, grew to respect him, to go out of their way to put the book in his way.

Pity this book hunter! What if the chase was long - the path hard, the footwear worn, the coat of homespun - what was all that to him? It was the quarry not the way of which he thought. A book in hand he walked homeward with the man he had found - Jefferson, Shakespeare, Bunyon, Defoe - and for days, whatever came, cold, short rations, hard labor, Jefferson, Shakespeare, Bunyon, Defoe was by his side.

No, this boy is not to be pitied; but rather he who has never longed for a book, never walked a mile to borrow one - he who when a book is by his side can keep his hands from it, who can live among books daily, incurious, unacquainted.

The boy Lincoln did not read for forgetfulness. The book was not a sedative, a soporific for him. It did not take him out of Spencer County, Indiana, but rather helped him to understand Spencer County. It interpreted to him the thing of which he and Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks Lincoln and all of these neighbors and friends of theirs, were a part.

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The pioneer life had its excitements and allurements - discovery, danger, hope lifted it out of the commonplace. Young Lincoln shared all this; and the book told him, as those about him could not, the meaning, the reasons behind it all. It traced the path a long line of forebears had traveled westward - their sacrifices, their hopes! Through the book he saw south-western Indiana and its people as a scene in a great and noble drama - saw its relation to the opening of the new continent, the upbuilding of a new kind of government, the founding of something which would admit more and more men to the opportunities of the earth.

The book did something else for him - it helped him to understand human beings. His curiosity about them was insatiate - their ways, their thoughts, their passions, their meannesses, their nobilities. The boy Lincoln saw wide ranges of human material - a few men of education; many men of patient, steady, daily labor - reverent, believing men; he saw those of riotous life, and not a few men of petty living - dirty habits, physical and mental. He shirked no man. He was curiously impersonal in his contacts with them. He sought to know them - and the book helped him. Aesop, Bunyon, Burns, Shakespeare - all of them helped him understand the men of Spencer County, Indiana. He loved and sought the book because of the light and understanding it gave to life.

Do not pity him because he had no steadier glow to read by than that of blazing logs - rather rejoice that he read!

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