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THE WIT AND HUMOR OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

If Abraham Lincoln had been a humorless man would he ever have been elected President of these United States? It is debatable. Certain it is that his ability to make men laugh and to laugh with them was the base of his popularity from the day he first appeared as a Jack-of-all-trades on the Sangamon River in Illinois.

Thrown in with a crew of raft-builders who spent their noon hour loafing on the logs they were cutting, his stories soon had them clamoring for more. Even funnier than his yarns was his way of telling them, his own enjoyment of them. Forty years later a survivor of the crew told me that while he could not recall a single one of the stories he still laughed when he remembered him and how as he came to the end he would "whoop and roll off the log he straddled." After he had gone his way the log, which was his favorite seat, was preserved. "Abe's Log," they called it. It was his first monument in Illinois - a monument to his comic spirit.

Wherever Lincoln attempted in the next few years to make a place for himself among men, whether it was as a day laborer, a student, a surveyor, a warrior, a politician or a lawyer, his fun-making gathered men to him - kept ^{him} around. That he was no mere clown they of course soon discovered. The longer they knew him the more they respected him for his consideration of others, his independence of spirit, his ambition to make something of himself and his willingness to work to do it, but the respect was all the stronger because of the humor with which he salted his sterner qualities.

On the Circuit which he travelled so many years as lawyer and politician no man was so depended upon for amusement. Few indeed were the sessions which were not enlivened by some practical joke of Lincoln's on bar or bench. The classic example of his practical jokes was his piloting the court travelling on horseback across Fox River. The river was in flood running wild across the prairies, the roads under water, all land marks obliterated. The travellers, thoroughly bewildered, asked one another how in the world they were to cross, for cross they supposed they must. There was only one way, Lincoln said. They must strip, tie their clothes in a bundle to the back of their saddles and swim for it. Whatever

objections may have been raised were over-ruled and they prepared and started on their swim, Lincoln at the head of the ridiculous nudist group. For an hour their horses waded through water which never reached the stirrups, and when they saw they were approaching a town ~~soon~~ they realized it was their town. To reach it it had not been necessary to cross Fox River, something known from the first to Lincoln. He had played a trick which set the whole circuit rocking with laughter.

This type of practical joking was and had been for many years the most popular diversion of the bar in the pioneer communities of the West and South. Altogether the most complete authentic and amusing picture of it is to be found in Baldwin's, "Flush Times in Alabama," first published in 1853. Lincoln owned the book - the very copy which he carried with him on the Circuit being now in the collection of Honorable Henry Horner, Governor of Illinois.

"The Flush Times" of which Baldwin wrote belonged in the 1830's, but the types which he caricatured still flourished but slightly modified. Lincoln doubtless could have named their counterparts in every county seat of Illinois where he practiced, something which made the extravaganza the more relished.

4

It was a motley crowd of humbugs and windbags which Baldwin presented. There was the "natural liar," Ovid Bolin, Esq., who "lied from the irresistible influence and a disinterested love of the art;" there was Caesar Kasin a free libeller who poured out "demijohns of vituperation" and "could look more sarcasm than anybody else could express;" there was Paul Beechim of Tennessee, "assiduous in the cultivation of manners," who finding himself at the St. Charles in New Orleans took pains to show his familiarity with elegant table etiquette by stirring his cut-up pineapple in the water of his finger bowl and eating it with his fork; there was J. Tallabola "who never had made a speech to a jury in his career without telling an anecdote." As time went on he gradually settled on a particular story which he told, whatever the case, until it "got to be a necessity of speech."

To hoist these ridiculous gentlemen on their own petards was the finest ^{spirit} of the humorous and unpretentious members of the Bar and "Flush Times" is rich in its tales of how it was done.

Lincoln's favorite in the collection was the "Earthquake Story" as told by Cave Burton, Sig., of Kentucky. "Blower Cave," his associates called him from his interminable tales of his own former grandeur, distinguished friends and associations and above all his remarkable exploits as an orator.

Cave was not only a tireless and bombastic talker but a monstrous glutton. "You might founder him but you could never subdue his appetite." It was inevitable that the day would come when Bench and Bar would combine to settle its score of boredom and disgust with Cave. It came one Christmas - a frolic at the town tavern.

Three barrels of oysters, a demijohn of Irish whiskey and a box of lemons had come up the River from Mobile and the Judge and all the lawyers in town had gathered for a supper. In the company was Cave, from whose habit of making way with five times his share of supper they all had suffered. It was the Judge, himself, who declared that the time had come to teach him a lesson and suggested how it could be done.

Cave had one story which he delighted in telling above all others, since it gave the grandest opportunity to magnify his power as an orator. It was known as the, "Earthquake Story," and it was this story which the Judge begged while they were waiting for the oysters to be opened and cooked.

Cave's love of an audience made him careless and he was soon launched on a rambling account of the case - a suit for breach of promise - of the parties to it - of the famous legal lights with whom he was associated and of the Judge,

along with various detours which had nothing to do with anybody or anything. Finally he reached the point where he always lost count of time and circumstance - his own powerful final plea.

So eager was the town to hear him, declared Cave, that the Court Room was packed and the Judge was obliged to order doors and windows locked against the excited crowd milling without.

Above the court room a tired jury was shut up. Angered at the thought that they were missing his masterpiece of eloquence they attempted to break jail. All they succeeded in doing was knocking down the yards of heavy stove-pipe which ran the length of the room. It fell in sections with an awful clatter at a dramatic point in Cave's flight. "I had prepared the audience for a catastrophe," said Cave, "and this coming as it did had an awful effect." But worse was to come. The commotion above had loosened the ceiling plaster of the Court Room and it began to drop in big sections. It brought down the chandelier, knocked the Judge out of his box, terrorized the audience. Cries of, "Earthquake, Earthquake," arose and bedlam followed in the imprisoned mass.

The pipe gone, smoke was now pouring from the upper windows. The fire department was called and soon was

throwing streams of water on the screeching, squirming mass locked in the Court Room.

In preparing the way for his earthquake, Cave had stopped at intervals to ask about the oysters only to be told they were not ready, but as he came to the peak of his tale he lost himself entirely, made no inquiry, failed to notice that at regular intervals a couple of his audience left the room, were gone for a considerable time, returned and two more slipped out. It was not until ^{one} of these returning smacked his lips and said in a voice louder than that of the story teller that he had never tasted better oysters in his life that Cave came to,

"Oysters," he cried, "are the oysters ready?" and began shouting for dozens of raws, of roasts, of stews to be brought him, only to be told by the waiter,

"Why, Mars Cave, dey's all gone dis hour past, de gem'man eat ebery one."

The pages of Lincoln's copy of "Flush Times" show how often he must have read the Earthquake story to his friends, or passed it on that they might read it for themselves.

They liked it particularly no doubt because it was so good an example of the way they themselves disciplined

8

these of their numbers who made nuisances of themselves.

Another form of disciplin^{ing} those whose manners were obnoxious, as well as those social and political rivals who were regarded as humbugs, was the anonymous communication to the newspapers ridiculing the objectionable person. Lincoln at one time published a series of such letters, signed Aunt Rebecca, aimed at a political opponent whose views he disliked. A couple of saucy young women, one of them his future wife, Mary Todd, took up the series under his nom de plume when he laid it down, ridiculing the philandering propensities of the gentleman.

As there were no libel laws to protect the victim of such attacks there was nothing for him to do but thrash his tormentor or challenge him. Lincoln's victim choose the latter and the duel was all but fought to the great injury of his growing political prestige, dueling being one of the practices Illinois was at the moment trying to wipe out by statute. It was his first severe lesson that the fun-making which had done so much for him, both politically and professionally, could be carried too far. It was the beginning of a restraint in his handling of the comic which in the following years became increasingly marked.

By the time he was ready for the Great Debates with Stephen Douglas, the debates which introduced him politically to the country, the practical joke, the story for the sake of the story, the long satirical communications to the newspaper, the doggeral had disappeared from his technique. He had learned the value of economy of words, words and of acts in wit as in reasoning.

By the time he had reached the White House his humor was a finished product, used instinctively as a weapon in handling men and situations. This shows particularly in his use of the story. His repertoire of stories and the facility of which he adapted and colored them were probably as full as any man in the country. Certainly no man ever carried such a collection to the White House.

Where did he get them people wondered. He had drawn on the rural supply of every pioneer community in which he had lived from boyhood up and apparently never forgot one or where it came from. Knowing his love of stories men brought them to him. "I mustn't forget to tell that to Lincoln", was every man's mental and spoken note, and Lincoln, himself, never forgot to ask a friend he hadn't seen for a time, - "Any new stories?"

Not only was he a tireless collector, he was an inveterate reader of what was called in his time, "Funny Books." Back in Indiana he and his friends had read in the woods on Sunday afternoons one of the earliest joke books to find its way into this country from England, "Quinn's Jests, or the Facetious Man's Companion." Nothing very shocking or very funny in Quinn's Jests to one who reads it today, though Tom Lincoln would probably have thrashed his son, Abraham, if he had caught him with it and burned the book.

Later it was "Flush Times," "Phoenixiana" by one John Phoenix, Squibo, "Artemus Ward," "The Naseby Papers," "Hood's Poems" - any collection he could get his hands on. Lincoln's interest in funny books, carried over into the Presidency, was very like Roosevelt's and Wilson's interest in new limericks, Herbert Hoover's in new detective stories. In all of these cases they were releases from strain - invitations to laughter.

It is interesting to note that those who laughed with him over these books often remarked, as did the raft-builders with whom he worked on the Sangamon, that he and his enjoyment of what he was telling or reading was funnier than the thing itself.

John Hay pictures him coming long after midnight one night into the office where he and Nicolay were still at work, with a volume of Hood in his hand to show them the little caricature, "An Unfortunate Bee-ing"; "seemingly utterly unconscious," says Hay, "that he with his short shirt hanging about his long legs, and setting out behind like the tail feathers of an enormous ostrich, was infinitely funnier than anything in the book he was laughing at."

As Lincoln's love of stories became generally known clever publishers both here and in England took to crediting items in their collections to him - naming books after him. There are several titles bearing his name or crediting something of their contents to him. There was, "Old Abe's Jokes," which announced on its title page that it was, "Fresh from Abraham's Bosom, containing all issues excepting the greenbacks to call in some of which this book is issued."

Two editions of Kempt's, "American Joe Miller," were published in London in '65, containing many stories attributed to Lincoln. The first volume appeared in January, the other came after his assassination and the editor has this touching tribute in his Preface to Lincoln.

"Since the first appearance of this little work, an event little dreamt of, because of its very baseness and gigantic atrocity, has convulsed America with grief and indignation, and shocked the whole civilized world. The Compiler trusts that it may not be regarded as out of place, even in the pages of a jest-book, to allude to the peculiarly painful occurrence which has deprived the United States of one, who after George Washington, was their best friend and their greatest President. But the name of Abraham Lincoln so frequently occurs in the following pages, and the Compiler has reason to know that the success which they have met with is in no small measure due to the Lincolniana scattered throughout the volume, that it might be deemed a strange omission were no mention made here of the sad circumstances of the late President's death. Consulting his own individual sympathies, the Compiler must confess that, since the demand for a new edition of this collection affords him an opportunity to include himself among the myriad admirers of President Lincoln, he has all the more pleasure in complying with that demand."

It would be idle to suppose that all the stories attributed to Lincoln in these jest books or those which were retailed and have found their way into our biographies ever passed his mouth. Such a story teller as he was becomes a legend. The tale gains by attaching his name. "Lincoln's latest," was often no doubt something Lincoln had never heard. Even certain stories told of him which one would like to believe were his because of their peculiar aptness are doubtful. There is that perfect answer that he is said to have made to the anxious citizens who came to him to tell him that Grant drank.

"Could you tell me the brand of the liquor he uses? I would like to send a barrel to some of my other Generals?"

Major Eckert, who organized the military telegraph and used often to see Lincoln in its offices in Washington once asked him if the story was true.

It would have been very good if he had said it, replied Lincoln, but he did not. He supposed it was charged to him to give it currency.

"The original of the story, he went on, "was in King George's time; bitter complaints were made to the King against General Wolfe. It was charged that he was mad."

"Well," said the King, "I wish he would bite some of my other Generals then."

Not only are many stories mistakingly attributed to him, but undoubtedly many of these which did originate with him are told by different writers in such different forms that one may almost doubt that they are Lincoln's, but rather that as in the case of the Grant story were credited to him to give them currency.

For instance that very good beet blacking story, Carl Schurz tells in his Reminiscences. According to him an Englishman traveling in this country called on Mr. Lincoln and spoke of the difference of social habits in the two countries.

"I have heard with astonishment," he said, "that gentlemen in America black their own boots."

"That is true," said Mr. Lincoln, "but do not gentlemen in your country do that?"

"No, certainly not," the Englishman replied.

"Well," said Mr. Lincoln, "whose boots do they black?"

The more common version places the dialogue in the White House where Charles Sumner coming in on Lincoln polishing his boots exclaimed, "Why, Mr. Lincoln, do you black your own boots?"

"Yes, whose boots should I black?"

The public delighted in the story because it proved his homely ways, so like their own, showed him not spoiled by new associations. Whether it was authentic or not mattered not a whit to them. It was like him.

They accepted the Grant story because it so perfectly illustrated what they had come to see was his way with men. He selected them for what he believed they could do and no bad habit, weakness, irritating quality, shook his support so long as they were making their contributions and when he found that they were in danger of neutralizing their usefulness by some "way" the public disliked he had his fable ready.

There was Stanton, aggressive, violent, hated by officers and men, one of the most abusive of Lincoln's early critics - and a Democrat. Why did he keep him Secretary of War? There was Greeley with his destructive, passionate outbreaks. Why did not Lincoln resent them? Both men were too essential to the cause to be dispensed with, both had large followings that it would be folly to risk antagonizing.

He had a story to explain his patience - a story laid out West of course. A meek and hen-pecked husband was one day public-ly whipped out of the house by his wife. A friend protested.

"Why did you permit her to act in this disgraceful fashion? You should have horse-whipped her."

"No, no," said the man, "it didn't hurt me any and you have no idea what power and good it did her."

Lincoln could use scripture to fix a value, explain an act, expose humbuggery, with the ease and sureness of his stories. When the decision to issue Greenback had been made the Cabinet debated solemnly whether or not the motto on its hard money, "In God we trust" should be put on the new currency. They seemed to feel that it was perhaps too much to ask God to back paper money.

Lincoln listened and finally said quizzedly, "Why not say, 'Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I ~~unto~~ thee.'"

Quite as quick-witted was an appeal to Bible history when called upon to explain the appointment of a man to an important post who had been concerned early in the War in a radical organization bordering on sedition. Why should such a man be recognized?

"He did behave ugly, didn't he?" Mr. Lincoln said when protests were brought him. "But I have scriptural authority for appointing him. When Moses was on Sinai getting a commission for Aaron, Aaron was at the foot of the mountain setting up a false God, but Aaron got his commission just the same."

Some of his most effective wit, most successful adaptation of stories was born of his unwillingness to be fooled or let others be fooled. What was the thing good for, that was vital in carrying on projects? General Barnard tells this story of the fortifying of Washington by McClellan, undertaken in 1862, when there was great uneasiness about its capture.

When the work was complete General McClellan asked Mr. Lincoln to inspect the work. General Barnard went along.

"Why," asked Mr. Lincoln, "are the fortifications to the North so extensive?" McClelland replied, that if by any chance the enemy got behind Washington there would be this Fort to defend it.

"That reminds me," said Mr. Lincoln, "of a discussion we once had in the Moot Court in Springfield, 'Why do men have breasts?' After many evenings debate the Judge decided, that if under any circumstances, however fortuitous, or by any chance or freak, no matter of what nature or by what cause, a man should have a baby there would be the breasts to nurse it."

The breasts of a man always amused Mr. Lincoln. In one of his best sallies at Stanton he used them as a figure. This was when the Merrimac first began its career along the coast and there was terror in Washington lest she come up the Potomac and destroy Washington. The Secretary of the Navy, Mr. Wells, felt sure she could never cross the river shoals, but Secretary Stanton was so alarmed that he got the consent of Lincoln to sink sixty or seventy canal boats loaded with stone across the channel. The Monitor had settled the case of the Merrimac, however, before it made any attempt to reach Washington. A few weeks later when the President was on his way down the river with a party including Stanton the long line of canal boats attracted his attention.

"That is Stanton's Navy," said Mr. Lincoln.

"It is as useless as the paps of a man to a sucking child. They may be some show to amuse a child, but they are good for nothing for service."

It was a characteristic of his unwillingness to be fooled that he would even poke fun at political necessities which he, himself, regarded, such as appointing to the Cabinet not the best man in the country for the job but the best in a locality demanding to be recognized.

"My Cabinet has shrunk up North," he told a friend in 1864 after the resignation of Attorney General Blair. "I must find a Southern man. I suppose if the twelve Apostles were to be chosen now-a-days the shriek of locality would have to be heeded."

It amused him to see his party taking on the doctrines of its opponent. Under the hammer of events Jefferson and Adams had changed places. It was like a fight he once saw between two drunken men, he said. They had begun with their coats on, but when exhausted they stopped, each had fought himself into the coat of the other.

Good humored as Mr. Lincoln's stories and sayings usually are they could, often did, show the bitterness he felt over the pretensions of men, their excuses for failure.

The night after the first Battle of Bull Run when the road to Washington was filled with a demoralized crowd of retreating soldiers and civilians he lay on his office couch listening to explanation.

"Ah, yes," he said finally, "I see, we beat the enemy and then ran away from him."

Looking down on the encamped Army of the Potomac, after the retreat from the Battle of Antietam, he said to a friend,

"What is that?" "Why, Mr. Lincoln," the man replied, "it is the Army of the Potomac." "No," he said ironically, "you are wrong it is General McClellan's body guard."

In dealing with the public which swarmed over him night and day seeking offices, fighting for private selfish interests, prying into the conduct of the War which so often it was what he kept secret, he fitted his humor to the need with remarkable readiness and finality.

Carl Schurz gives a lively picture of the influx of would-be officers, particularly of foreigners, many of whom naturally sought Schurz' influence. They came with impressive letters of introduction, with claims - sometimes genuine, sometimes not - of military training and experience,

and they came depending upon recommendations which, while they might count in the old world they were not slow in learning were not worth the paper on which they were written in the new. One such that Schurz tells of was a general who was depending upon a row of ancestors several hundred years long. Finally he had an audience with the President and immediately he presented his family tree. Mr. Lincoln listened to him gravely.

"That need not trouble you," he said, "they will not be in your way if you behave yourself as a soldier."

"The poor young count looked puzzled," says Mr. Schurz, "and when the audience was over he asked me what the President could have meant by so strange a remark."

"See here," said Lincoln to a gentleman who begged a Brigadier-Generalship for a friend. "See here, you're a farmer, suppose you had a large cattle yard full of all sorts of cattle, cows, oxen and bulls, and you kept killing and selling and disposing of the cows and oxen, taking good care of your bulls; by and by you would find you had nothing but a yard full of old bulls, good for nothing under heaven. Now it will be just so with the Army if I don't stop making Brigadier-Generals."

With the purely curious, and there were numbers of them who wanted to know first hand why a thing was done and who would never rest until by hook or crook they were in his presence and putting more or less baldly their question, he could give an answer as effective as a slamming of a door. A fleet had been fitted out; its destination was promptly enough kept secret. Consumed by curiosity a visitor after beating about the bush, hinting for information, bluntly asked, "Where has it gone?"

"I will tell you," whispered Mr. Lincoln, "it has gone to sea."

The selfish rarely deceived him. Taken as a whole, there was admirable co-operation with the Government in the Civil War by financial and business men; but there were always groups more interested in saving themselves than in saving the Union.

He had reason enough to believe that a good many bankers of the country considered themselves first. One day a party was introduced by the Secretary of the Treasury who said, "I can vouch for their patriotism and loyalty for as the Good Book says, 'Where the treasure is, there will the heart be also'".

"There is another text," Mr. Lincoln replied.

"Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together."

When a group of New York City's richest men gathered in his office begging that he send a gun boat to protect their millions from the raids of Southern gun boats, he said pitylessly.

"If I were as rich as you say you are and as scared as I see you are I'd build a gun boat."

Taking it all in all no man ever used seasoned humor more potently for the public good than Abraham Lincoln. He used it for that, first of all duties of the one in power, keeping himself sane, responsive, discerning.

He knew, nobody better, how laughter makes a new man of one. He knew he needed it himself, knew that the men about him needed it; needed it for their stomachs sake as well as for the sake of clear thinking and healthy emotion.

It is quite probable he got a certain amusement from administering his tonic as he did regularly and faithfully to men some of whom resented it as much as if he had insisted on their taking a dose of castor oil.

His humor was part of him, like his vast common sense, his unending sympathy. It came to the fore unconsciously, instinctively, whatever the situation, clearing up puzzles, putting men in their place, silencing the curious, deflating the vain-glorious, spiking the intrigues of jealous factions, of jealous rivals.

"What an ornament and safeguard is humor," exclaims Emerson. "Far better than wit for a poet and writer." Far better for a statesman he might have added, "It is genius itself and so defends from the insanities" - and inanitiest