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HUMOR IN THE WHITE HOUSE

What are the qualities in a President of the United States most likely to insure us ^a administration of wise affairs?

We would probably differ as much about them as we do about the ten greatest books in English Literature. However, whatever else goes on Humor should stand near the top of the roll. It is the surest of touchstones, but if we seek it in the thirty-two Presidents chosen since the first in 1789 we plow a barren field. Consider the first half dozen - Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, John Quincy Adams - little enough of the genuinely humorous do we get from reading either men's recollections of them or their own Letters and Journals.

And in these last days it is hardly better. The vigorous Theodore Roosevelt with a gay and inexhaustible relish for life and all its exhibits was hardly humorous. As a President he seemed to have gotten his fun chiefly from nonsense verse. He was forever learning and repeating them. Carolyn Wells, our chief authority on the limerick came to be a kind of mentor in limericks to Mr. Roosevelt. Her mentorship

began in a pleasant way. She and her mother were in Washington and wanting to call upon the Roosevelts sent a rhymed request ending:-

"If Miss Wells may be granted this boon,
May an answer be sent her right soon;

Including her mither,

Who also is with her,

For they're leaving on Friday, at noon."

Of course they were received at once and Miss Wells has written how on that happy day they went out on the great veranda where Roosevelt insisted that she teach him the latest nonsense verse.

"I can see him now," she will tell you, "walking up and down the long porch, hands behind him, repeating the absurd lines. Over and over again he would say them, until he knew them for keeps, and then would demand a fresh one.

"One he told me, which pleased our whimsical if a little distorted taste, was this, written after the famous Fall River murder trial:-

Lizzie Borden with an ax

Hit her father forty whacks;

When she saw what she had done

She hit her mother forty-one!"

The gentle and dignified Mrs. Roosevelt took part in all of this, her interest at that moment being in tracking down the youth who tried "to spell Tommy without a T."

Mr. Coolidge had wit, slightly sardonic. It told him when the time had come for him to quit, that so far as he was concerned he could do nothing more in stemming the inevitable.

As for our thirty-second President, now in office, he has a well-disciplined gaiety of nature which keeps him smiling, gives him a sense of values. This smiling good humor has been helpful in persuading the country to the program of the New Deal and he will have plenty of opportunity to develop it into seasoned humor before he has finished his re-building of our broken down industrial system.

We have had but one president whose love of laughter and devotion to the mechanics which incite it mellowed into a humor, unknown to him as a boy or young man - Lincoln. He was the son of a pioneer and laughter is a primary need of the pioneer. It limbers his body stiffened by labor, drives away the melancholy which hangs like a fog over his life, relieves emotions clamped down by the necessity of creating conventions under which all may live in some form

of order and decency, shows up the pretender, the braggard, the cheat, creates a congenial and livable atmosphere for the society which he is seeking to create from rough material and under staggering odds.

Lincoln from boyhood fell in with everything used in his world to induce laughter. He took part in all the tricks, horse play, buffoonery, however coarse. Even when a lawyer travelling the circuit he played tricks on his fellows which became legends in Illinois. Such was his solution of crossing Fox River. The Court, a Judge and group of lawyers, were traveling by horseback to their next meeting place when they came to Fox River, running wild over the prairies. How were they to cross for they supposed their town to be on the opposite bank? Lincoln insisted there was but one way, to strip, tie their garments in bundles behind their saddles and swim their horses. They prepared themselves and for an hour the ridiculous nudist group waded through water which never rose above their stirrups until they came to their town. It was on the bank they had been traveling. Only Lincoln had known that it was not necessary to cross Fox River.

As the years went on and Lincoln became absorbed in the fight against the extension of slavery his buffoonery was practically abandoned. He gave up, too, almost entirely the lampooning in which he had freely, and often rather cruelly, indulged. He had a gift for satire, early shown, and with it a certain facility for verse making and combined the two into lampooning of those whom he would punish. He found as a boy that it went farther than his fist, powerful as that was.

Like his horse play, he kept the habit up through all his young manhood even fighting a law suit in a Springfield newspaper in the '30's in a series of letters ridiculing an opponent who had made unfair charges against him.

He almost ruined his political career in the '40's by lampooning a political rival. The thing went so far that he was finally challenged to a duel. Lincoln and his opponent were actually on the field, their weapons in their hands, their seconds pacing off the ground, when friends arrived and stopped the sorry business.

You find after this episode extreme caution in his use of ridicule. There was little of it in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. For one reason it was the burnt child dreading the fire. But another reason was that he had by this time developed a tremendous seriousness. His satirical thrusts at Douglas,

if keen, are few and more good natured. He had learned to put into a sentence what he once spread over columns.

His humor was developing and came to be a very finished thing by the time he reached the White House. This shows particularly in his use of the story. His repertoire of stories and the facility of ^{with} which he adapted and colored them were probably as full as any man in the country. Certainly no man ever carried such a repertoire ^{collection} to the White House.

Where did he get his inexhaustible supply? ^{just by word of mouth} Stories travel like news in a pioneer community; they were passed from one to another, stored in the memory. ^{But} Even in Lincoln's boyhood there was a comic literature afloat, "Funny Books," they were called. And one of ~~a~~ kind, at least, found its way to Southwestern Indiana and into Lincoln's hands. We have this bit of information from his most intimate boyhood friend, Nathaniel Grigsby, who sixty years after young Lincoln left Indiana told that distinguished Major-Domo of Indiana, Mr. William Fortune, how Lincoln would read from this book to the boys out in the woods on Sunday. "We got a lot of fun out of it," he commented.

"Do you remember the name of the book, 'Uncle Nat,'" asked Mr. Fortune.

"Yes, it was the King's Jester." At least King's Jester was the name that Mr. Fortune, years later, found in

his long neglected notes of his investigation made in 1881, but never used.

He decided to look up the book, talked to one and another learned book dealer. One and another undertook to find it, but always failed. The search went to London. Finally it was decided that there was no such title as, "King's Jester." There was a book called, "Quinn's Jest," or the "Facetious Man's Constant Companion," published in 1776. What was more natural for Uncle Nat than to have made, "Quinn's Jest" into "King's Jester."

Mr. Fortune accepted the solution, ordered a copy, secured it and sat up all night to read it and found, as might be expected, that while there were robust jokes in it which probably the mothers and fathers of the south Indiana boys would not have allowed them to read if they had known anything about their possession, there was nothing in it that could be called indecent. vicious.

The love of funny books grew on Lincoln. He read all he could get his hands on. On the circuit in the '50's he carried Phoenixiana," by one John Phoenix,"Squibo." One story Lincoln particularly enjoyed was a joke on the author, himself, a Lieutenant in the Army. When Jefferson Davis

was Secretary of War in the '50's he called for suggestions for modifying the uniform of the American soldier and Squibo made his contribution - a design of an iron plate with a ring in it to ^{be tied to} fit at the seat of the military trousers. And he went on to develop with great seriousness the usefulness of this arrangement in the various situations which a soldier might find himself. Davis was furious and wanted Phoenix court marshalled.

"Court marshal him if you will," said Lewis Cass, then Secretary of State, "but you will have the whole country laughing at you."

Baldwin's, "Flush Times of Alabama," was another favorite book of Lincoln's in his circuit days. The ^{he} copy/owned and carried is now in the possession of the Governor of Illinois, the Honorable Henry Horner. Lincoln's favorite sketch in this book was famous in its time - "The Earthquake Story." The worn pages of his copy show how often he must have read it or passed it along to his fellows on the circuit.

Lincoln's interest in funny books was carried over into the Presidency. It was very like ^{T.} Roosevelt's and ^(W.) 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.

Lincoln's fondness for the Naseby Papers is well known. He read from the letters in all sorts of ticklish situations, often to the despair and disgust of the Cabinet.

"Artemus Ward," was another of his pet books. He got much fun out of Hood's Poems. 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."

He loved joke books and became before the end of the War the chief source from which both English and American publishers made up their funny books. 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."

Digitized Image, 2011. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

Two editions of Kempt's, "American Joe Miller," were published in London in '65, containing many ~~pages~~ *pages* 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." *see 13*

It is frequently said that stories which he so freely used and which were circulated so widely over the English speaking world were not original. Certainly to a degree this is true. He took things right and left as he found them and adapted them to the purpose, as do all men in their work - you build on what has gone before.

Forty years ago talking with Lyman Trumbull, who was especially bitter about Lincoln at that moment, he said,

"You call him original, he was not. He stole his stories and sayings. Take his remark about his reelection in '64, that the country had simply concluded that it was better not to change horses in the middle of the stream. That was not his. I had heard it all my life."

That is true no doubt. The wit of it lay in its perfect adaptation to the situation. This is true of some of Lincoln's best and most widely spread sayings. He took what he found, fitted it to the occasion, his need, making of an old idea, an old saying, something fresh, newly awakening. It was the "better mouse trap" replacing the lesser one. This is true of his definition of Democratic Government - "government of the people, by the people, for the people." Lincoln was by no means the first to express the idea in a similar phrase., His genius was in seeing that the dedication of the field at Gettysburg offered the time and the place when the thought would carry further than at any moment in our history. To use the opportunity to the full, he sought and found the perfect form we know, the most adequate, of all definitions of Democratic rule.

The accusation that Lincoln's jokes and stories, were frequently indecent, must I think be taken with many grains of salt. Search the joke books he knew, the freest of them, and

while you find much that is distasteful today, a good deal that is rowdy and vulgar, there is little that can be called foul, less I should say than in those rather limited circles of our times where in the name of frankness obscenity of language is cultivated.

Lincoln's stories were sometimes ^{un}publishable, I have no doubt. They were of the type told by men in primitive society, natural men who use rude words and are keenly conscious of the grotesqueness of the functioning of the human animal. I suspect, too, that occasionally those who insist on the grossness of his stories simply are finding what they look for and enjoy, that it is rather their obscenity than his that is behind their reading of the story.

So far as I can make out it is largely a matter of the use of words. Take more than one of his parables, for his stories were usually that, centering about ~~that~~ troublesome insect which even the dough boys did not call by its real name, but found substitute in cooty, or that beautiful little black and white animal with which close acquaintance is so unpleasant that it was called by the early French settlers, "Enfan du Diable," the Devil's Child, ~~the~~ cultivated of Lincoln's time, as of ours, frown at the use of these common names. Lincoln did not, but could and did say, "louse," "skunk,"

squarely. And if he realized that a shiver of distaste ran through his hearers was not ashamed, but rather amused, took perhaps a kind of malicious pleasure in not sparing their ears.

h k 10 It would be idle to suppose that all the stories attributed to Lincoln in ^{*my*}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 some of the sayings and stories long attributed to him and which one would like to believe 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 mistakenly attributed to him, but undoubtedly many of those which did originate with him are told by different writers in so many 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 him currency.

For instance ^{there is} that very good boot blacking story ^{As} Carl Schurz tells ^{it} 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?"

Again The public 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. *mm*

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, a story laid out West of course. A meek and hen-pecked husband was one day public-ly

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?"

Reply
The public deluded in the story because it should be in Sumner's office not in Lincoln's. Sumner would not have been in Lincoln's office. He would have been in his own office. It was not Lincoln's boots that Sumner polished. It was his own boots. He was not in Lincoln's office. He was in his own office. He was not in Lincoln's office. He was in his own office.

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of course. A real and well-secured nucleus was one day publicly

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 ^{of} and good it did her."

He more than once selected men for what they could give in spite of episodes in their past. In one case it was a man 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."

This was not unlike what he wrote to Hooker when he appointed him in 1862 to succeed Burnside.

"I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those Generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you

is military success and I will risk the dictatorship."

His ways with men were food for the cartoonist. He never resented them. He would examine a cartoon ridiculing him calmly, see the point, laugh at it.

Soon after Burnside's retreat from Fredricksburg he picked up a cartoon showing him as a butcher cutting off Burnside's head. At that moment General Burnside came into the office and handing him the paper Lincoln said, "Here's your head."

It is doubtful if we ever had a President less excited by criticism and abuse than Lincoln. He showed the solidity of his spirit most perfectly in 1864 in the struggle for renomination and afterwards for election. Mr. Greeley was particularly violent and muddled early in the year over his renomination. One editorial in particular angered Lincoln's friends who ran to him with it.

"Mr. Greeley sometimes makes me feel a little like a traveller out West, a profane and irreligious man who was lost in a terrible thunder storm. He horse exhausted, he finally in terror threw himself on his knees and prayed, 'Oh, Lord, if it is all the same to you, a little more light and a little less noise.'"

He was nominated, but it did not silence his Job's comforters. They brought him many prophesies of defeat.

"Very well," said Mr. Lincoln who believed that the terms on which the opposition ^{sought} ~~by~~ election would endanger the Union cause. "Very well, if they turn their backs to the fire they must sit on the blisters."

This nervous discouragement of his friends about his re-election changed to confidence as things grew better in the fall of '64. "The only thing that can prevent your re-nomination now," one of them said one day, "is Grant's capture of Richmond and his nomination as an opposing candidate."

"Well," said Mr. Lincoln, "I feel very much about that as the man felt who said he didn't want to die particularly, but if he had to die that was precisely the disease he would like to die of."

From the beginning of his Administration in '61 the public was on his back, morning, noon and night. As the years have gone on certain break waters have been built around the White House which make it more difficult to inundate the President. In Lincoln's time there were no such break waters and there was little attempt on his part to protect himself. He was not one to say as Mary Queen of Scots did to John Knox when he attacked the right of women to rule.

"Who are you to interfere with the affairs of Scotland?"

"Madam, a subject born within the same."

Every man or woman born in the country had a

right to interfere, express his opinion, have a hearing if there was a time for it or it was worth his time. He was quick to appraise his man.

*decide the cryptic & clear as the
nearly*

It is a mistake to suppose that Lincoln was unskilled in human beings. Few people have known them better, appraised them more accurately. There were all the types then that beset presidents today. There were those 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. A fleet had been fitted out; its destination was properly 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."

A type that caused much trouble, then as now, was the legalistic, those who having what they believed to be a sound case before the law for doing the thing that they want are not willing to yield to the necessities of the situation. There were the gentlemen who wanted to bring out cotton from insurrecting districts. An agent who had found his way to Mr. Lincoln said, "We have the law on our side, the civil authorities consent to our moving the cotton, doesn't that settle it?"

"You remind me," said Mr. Lincoln, "of a friend

of mine in Illinois who found among his father's papers a number of warrants for land in East Missouri. Collecting them he visited the neighborhood, found a cabin on what he believed to be his land. He told the frontier occupant why he was there, showed him his papers, 'Now,' "said he," 'that is my title, what is yours?'

"The frontiersman merely pointed to a rifle hanging above the grate. 'Do you see that gun, young man?' "Certainly." 'Well, that is my title and if you don't get out of here pretty quick you'll feel the force of it.'"

It was the military that they must deal with in an insurrecting district, not the law authorities.

While taken as a whole, there was admirable co-operation with the Government in the Civil War by financial and business men; there were always groups more interested in saving themselves than in saving the Union.

Lincoln 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."

As for the office seekers, myriads of whom swarmed about him, the stories he told them were often more final than refusals. There is that he told a man who had come to him with an endorsement, "sufficient for anybody," Lincoln said when he looked it over. The gentleman begged a Brigadier-Generalship for a friend.

"See here," Lincoln said ~~looking~~, "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."

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."

This answer had something of the same character of the remark Lincoln made to a country editor who had come to him to say impressively that it was he who had first nominated him, the natural consequence being of course that whatever he asked ought to be granted. Lincoln listened patiently and finally excusing himself on the ground of an important engagement, said, as he shook hands,

"Good bye, ~~he said as he shook hands.~~ "I hope you will be perfectly easy about having nominated me. Don't be troubled about it, I forgive you."

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 the uneasiness about its capture was very strong in the Administration.

When the work was complete General McClellan asked Mr. Lincoln to inspect the fortifications. General Barnard went along. "Why," asked Mr. Lincoln, "are the fortifications to the North so extensive?" McClellan 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."

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 explanations.

"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."

Lincoln was a particularly realistic politician. However often he outraged his party, even the most self-righteous members by selecting democrats for important posts when he believed they were the men who could do the thing he wanted done better than any available Republican, he shrank from violating settled traditions such as considering localities, ~~habitudes~~ in making Cabinet appointments.

"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.

Helpful in keeping his mind clear, relaxed, was his unending interest in the queer happenings that every crowded day brought. Nothing that was incongruous, freakish, whimsical in men and things escaped him. He found time to note it, comment, laugh, and out of the simplest happenings could make a laughable story. His odd visitors with their odd presents, of whom every president has many, always amused him. Among the things given him which he showed with glee was a chair with a frame made from Elk's horns, gathered by a Western hunter and trapper famous in his time and place, Seth Kinman. Kinman took his chair to Washington for presentation and with it a violin and a bow which he had made from the skull and the rib of a mule which had been in its time his cherished companion on the plains. According to his friends Kinman was "next to Ole Bull on a violin" and as a part of the ceremony of the chair presentation he played, "Root Hog or Die," and "Way Down in Dixie," on his queer instrument while Mr. Lincoln "laughed until his stove pipe hat fell off."

Anything unusual in the appearance or dress of men and women instantly diverted him. The height of men rarely passed unremarked. Alexander Stephens was "the biggest nubbin in the littlest shuck that he'd ever laid eyes on." The beloved Colonel Ellsworth was "the biggest little man he ever knew." He would ask a towering soldier, "Say, Friend, does your head know when your feet are cold?"

"What a long tail our cat has to-night," he laughed at Mrs. Lincoln when she appeared in an unusually sweeping gown.

"I'll be whipped if I don't pardon your brother," he said to a young and poorly dressed German girl pleading in broken English for her brother's life.

"Yes, I'll pardon him because - because you don't wear hoops."

No man ever used seasoned humor more potently for the public good. 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 inanities!