

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

CHAPTER XXV

- its first quarter and set at 9:43, that is, before the murder was committed.
- 5) *Diff Armstrong the son of Earl and ...*

(Miss Marshall: This picture will not be ready until Thursday.)

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

CHAPTER XXV

Why Men Loved Lincoln

A nomination to the Presidency of the United States depends on several things beside the fitness and ability of the candidate. One indispensable factor is a little group - highly trained politicians preferred! - which, in the scrimmage at the end of the convention, will seize the man and rush him in as a team seizes a football and carries it over the line. There have been cases when the group rushing the man had as little personal feeling for him as the team has for the ball. The Illinois group which put over Abraham Lincoln at the Chicago convention of 1860 ^{was} were in quite different case. Here was something more than a cause and a party; there was an extraordinary devotion to the man - a devotion built up by years of closest association. Indeed it is a question whether Abraham Lincoln could ever have been made President of the United States if in the traveling he had done for nearly 20 years before his nomination, week in and week out, over a tract of country, one hundred by one hundred and fifty miles in extent, with many excursions to towns and cities outside the block, he had not won both the respect and the love of all sorts of people, and particularly of the legal class, which, as everywhere in the United States, was the leading political class.

When it began to dawn upon these men in 1859 and '60 that Lincoln had ^{earned} a chance for the presidency ^{by} the character of his fight against the extension of slavery, their personal devotion put a fire into their ^{for him} efforts, which, in the final analysis, was perhaps the deciding element. What was there about man that aroused such devotion?

The only answer is that he was ^{naturally} an extraordinarily lovable human being - one of the rare special kind that on the instant inspires affection and confidence, and that life never spoiled him. Such was the feeling for him in the 50's that his arrival in a circuit town was an event for many an admirer. "Lincoln's come," was welcome news not only in the court but at the hotel and in many a household. Something of this welcome was certainly due to his quick falling in with whatever was going on - grave or gay - and this included sports of the young as well as the old. There was nothing that boys did in which he did not gladly take a hand, often ending up by treating a whole crowd with whom he had run a race or helped carry out a practical joke. He was excellent at games, playing them purely for fun and exercise, particularly the "game of fives" - a variety of hand ball, popular in those days. It was excellent sport. A high dead wall was chosen, and horizontally across it two lines were drawn - one perhaps 2 feet, the other 20 feet from the ground. In front of this two ranks of five men each placed themselves, at agreed upon distances. A man in the front rank threw

Traverse
 the ball at any point he chose between the black lines. As the ball rebounded, it was the business of the rear rank to knock it back against the wall. This operation was kept up until the ball fell to the ground or failed to strike the field. This was called a hand-out, and ten hand-outs on either side decided the game. Mr. Lincoln never missed a game of fives if he could help it; and I have heard men who saw him playing when he was fifty or more years old, declare that there was no better player on the Circuit, than he.

His instinctive landing a hand where there was something to be done, endeared him everywhere. A perfect illustration of this - and there are many of them - is found in the "Personal Recollections of Jane Martin Johns, published by the Decatur (Ill.) Chapter of the D.A.R. Mrs. Johns came to Decatur, the county seat of Macon County in 1849, and first lived at the Macon House, which, ~~as~~ she says, the court of the Eighth Judicial District looked upon as an oasis in their itinerary, since there you found clean beds, good bread and a genial landlady. Mrs. Johns, in coming into Illinois, had evidently stipulated that certain things, rare in pioneer settlements, should follow her. One of these was a piano. After a long journey it arrived by wagon. *but how were they to get it into* ~~"The wagon was backed up to the steps at the front door of the Macon House," Mrs. Johns says, "and the question of how to unload it and get it into the house was a puzzling one."~~

Now, it happened that this was court week in Decatur, and as the discussion of what to do with the piano was going on, the court adjourned and judge and lawyers began to join the crowd that

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had gathered around the wagon. There was a piano in the box, they were told. "We want it unloaded. Who will lend a hand?"

"A tall gentleman stepped forward, "Mrs. Johns ^{writes} ~~goes~~ on, "and throwing off a big gray Scotch shawl, exclaimed, 'Come on, Swett, you are the next biggest man.'

"That was my first meeting with Abraham Lincoln."

Mr. Lincoln took charge at once; bench and bar fell to, and amid great hilarity, the instrument was unloaded, unpacked and finally set up. That night after supper the whole bar, Judge Davis included, asked Mrs. Johns for a concert. She gives in her captivating "Recollections" the program - a charming echo from the past!

"For show pieces, I played the 'Battle of Prague,' and the 'Carnival of Venice,' then followed with 'Washington's March,' 'Come Haste to the Wedding,' and 'Woodup Quick Step' to convince the audience that I 'did know a tune' or two. For tragedy I sang Henry Russell's 'Maniac,' and 'The Ship on Fire,' and then made 'their blood run cold' with the wild wail of the 'Irish Mother's Lament.' For comic, we sang 'The Widdy McGee,' and 'I won't Be a Nun,' topping off with 'Old Dan Tucker,' 'Lucy Long' and 'Jim Crow,' the crowd joining in the chorus. These were followed by more serious music. Mr. Brown and Mr. Swett joined me in the duet 'Moonlight Music, Love and Flowers,' 'Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep,' 'Pilgrim Fathers,' 'Bonaparte's Grave,' and 'Kathleen Mavourneen.' Each and all met with applause.

"As a finale, I sang 'He Doeth All Things Well' after which Mr. Lincoln, in a very grave manner, thanked me for the evening's entertainment, and said: 'Don't let us spoil that song by any other music tonight.' Many times afterwards I sang that song for Mr. Lincoln and for Governor Oglesby, with whom it was also a favorite."

There is another paragraph in Mrs. Johns' "Recollections" which should be quoted in this connection. It is a point which needs frequent emphasizing to counteract that caricaturing of Mr. Lincoln's personal appearance which has been going on ever since he became a candidate for the presidency - a caricaturing which the multitude of photographs, from 1848 on, contradict.

"When I first knew Lincoln," Mrs. Johns says, "the ungainliness of the pioneer, if he ever had it, had worn off and his manner was that of a gentleman of the old school, unaffected, unostentatious, who 'arose at once when a lady entered the room, and whose courtly manners would put to shame the easy going indifference to etiquette which marks the Twentieth century gentleman.'

"His dress, like his manner, was suited to the occasion, but was evidently a subject to which he gave little thought. It was certainly unmarked by any notable peculiarity. It was the fashion of the day for men to wear large shawls and Mr. Lincoln's shawl, very large, very soft, and very fine, is the only article of his dress that has left the faintest impression on my memory."

There is scarcely a town which Mr. Lincoln visited either regularly or occasionally in the Eighth Judicial Circuit that has not some such distinctive reminiscence of him; one particularly characteristic has within recent years come out of Albion. Early in the 40's, Lincoln went to the town to speak at a joint political meeting of Whigs and Democrats. The Democratic speaker was a former resident of Albion, a somewhat flowery and sentimental individual apparently, and Lincoln, knowing him fairly well, anticipated that he would start off by affecting references to the home and friends of his youth so dear to his heart and whom he was so glad to be able to see again, which was exactly what he did. But Lincoln was ready. In the day he had borrowed a copy of Byron's poems, and he began his reply by declaiming

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But Lincoln was ready. *(which was exactly what he did)* In the end he lived

~~had anticipated, he declaimed the following, "grandiloquently,"~~
according to the historian of the episode:

"He, the unhoped but forgotten Lord,
The long self-exiled chieftain is restored;
There be bright faces in the hall,
Bowls on the board and banners on the wall.
He comes at last in sudden loneliness,
And whence they know not, why they need not guess,
They more might marvel when the greetings o'er,
Not that he came, but came not long before."

This Albion story comes from a man who was a school boy there at the time and who had been so stirred by a little talk Lincoln had given to the school children in the morning before the meeting that he ran away in the afternoon to hear him again. Many of the fresh reminiscences that come to us in these days have a similar source; that is, they are from men who were boys when they first saw Lincoln. Often this was in the court room, and not unfrequently at a murder trial. The boys of Illinois seem to have had the same kind of curiosity about murder trials that young Abraham Lincoln did when he lived in Indiana, and like him they would walk any distance, even run the risk of a thrashing, in order to get into court, to "see how a murderer looked," as one of them once told me. And if Mr. Lincoln was in the case, they invariably remembered something of his defense. I say defense for the impression seems to be, though I do not know that it can be sustained by documents, that he was always the defender and never the prosecutor of a murderer. A boy who had once heard him speak rarely forgot him, and was very apt later to watch for a chance to

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edge his way into any group where he knew Mr. Lincoln was talking or telling stories.

In many of the towns which Lincoln frequented there was a favorite rendezvous, like Diller's drug store in Springfield, chosen because the proprietor had that combination of human qualities which particularly delighted Lincoln - humor, shrewdness, frankness, unspoiled naturalness; And here he was almost sure to be found in his leisure hours. There was such a ^{drug} store in Knoxville, kept by a Dr. Duncan, who had been a friend of Lincoln's in New Salem times - one of the men who had predicted that he would one day be President, - and here Lincoln always made his way when he was in the county for court or a political speech. Among the boys in that town was one Henry H. Miller, who, true to his genius, ran away from school one day in the middle 50's and wormed his way into a crowded court room where a murder trial was going on. "And it was here," he wrote me a few years ago, "that I first saw Lincoln, the tallest man in that court room." Such was the impression that Mr. Lincoln made on Mr. Miller that he never missed a chance after that to get a look at him, to listen to him. He discovered his habit of dropping into Dr. Duncan's drug store and was always on hand to listen to the talk that was sure to go on when he was there. "Here," said Mr. Miller, "I heard a story-telling match between Lincoln and one we called 'Uncle Bill' Sanburn. It was a very even match. Dr. Duncan would not render a decision."

One could go on almost interminably with these recollections.

One of the finest groups concerns itself with his friendliness and helpfulness to young men, particularly to youngsters starting in the law. He would go out of his way to help the shy, the confused, the ignorant. I doubt if there is a county seat on his circuit that has not made its contribution to this Lincoln trait. Senator Joe Blackburn of Kentucky used to tell a story, less familiar than many of this group. He was very young and for the first time was appearing in the U. S. Circuit Court in Chicago. The opposing counsel was Isaac H. Arnold, one of the most distinguished men of the Chicago bar and a friend of Mr. Lincoln's. When the case was reached *Blackburn* he was so nervous that he became bewildered and made only a very feeble effort. "I was about to sit down," *his story goes* ~~Mr. Blackburn~~ used to say,

"and let the case go by default, as it were, when a tall, homely, loose-jointed man sitting in the bar, whom I had noticed as giving close attention to the case, arose and addressed the court in behalf of the position I had assumed in my feeble argument, making the points so clear that when he closed the court at once sustained my demurrer. I didn't know who my volunteer friend was, but Mr. Arnold got up and attempted to rebuke him for interfering in the matter, when I for the first time heard that he was Abraham Lincoln, of Springfield. Mr. Lincoln, in his good-natured reply to Mr. Arnold's strictures on his interference, said that he claimed the privilege of giving a young lawyer a boost when struggling with his first case, especially if he was pitted against an experienced practitioner. Of course I thanked him and departed from the court as proud as a young field marshal. I never saw Mr. Lincoln again, and he died without ever knowing who the young, struggling lawyer was he had so kindly assisted and rescued from defeat in his maiden effort before a United States tribunal."

Mr. Lincoln's ingratiating personal qualities had much more local recognition than has been popularly supposed. Men

were pleased to honor him when they had a chance. Here is a little case in point, - a town named after him as far back as 1853, the county seat of Logan county. It came about in this way. In 1839 he had been chairman of the state committee on counties that had cut Sangamon county into four parts, to one of these parts he gave the name Logan, in honor of one of his friends in the Assembly, the father of Gen. John Logan. As years went on, Mr. Lincoln built up a considerable practice among the leading settlers of the new county. *Logan* Early in the 50's three of the most energetic of these settlers, finding that a railroad had been routed across their county, quietly used their inside information to get control of a considerable tract of land which they believed could be made the future county seat. They secured title to the tract and proceeded to incorporate the town, Mr. Lincoln being asked to draw up the necessary documents. When it came to a point in the negotiations where the new town had to be named, the leader of the group in the speculation suggested that it be called Lincoln. "You better not do that," Mr. Lincoln said, "for I never knew anything named Lincoln that amounted to much." But Lincoln it was. And Lincoln it is today.

Judge Lawrence B. Stringer in his admirable and interesting history of Logan County says that when the day came for the sale of lots in the new town, Mr. Lincoln was present, and going to a temporary street stand where eatables were being sold, bought two water melons, and, one under each arm, presented himself to the

incorporators. "Now," he said, "we will Christen the new town."

One of the few pieces of property that Mr. Lincoln ever owned was located in this town of Lincoln. He did not get it in the original deal, as I have heard it cynically intimated, but several years later. The owner of the lots had borrowed money from Mr. ^{him} Lincoln, giving them as security. As he never was able to pay the debt, Mr. Lincoln finally found himself with the property on his hands. His only relation to it seems to have been paying the taxes.

If Lincoln had been a mediocre, indolent, half-hearted lawyer, his personal loveliness would never have carried him far in the thoroughly able group of judges and lawyers on the Illinois circuit which he traveled. They were of the type that give confidence and loyalty only when they respect the intellect and character of a man. There is a big bulk of testimony from the best of them, correcting the early impression that Mr. Lincoln, after all, didn't amount to much as a lawyer. Such studies as Frederick Trevor Hill's "Lincoln, the Lawyer," Charles W. Moores' "Abraham Lincoln, Lawyer", and Jesse Weik's "The Real Lincoln" all challenge this earlier notion. Lincoln was an able if unconventional lawyer and as the years went on he steadily grew in his profession by conscientiously following the two rules he had laid down for law students - rules born of experience: - "Work, work, work" and "Your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing."

There are several of his cases and not a few incidents in connection with different cases which are rapidly becoming fixed traditions, and it is of course desirable that these traditions should be as nearly accurate as possible, even if they may not be very important. For example, it is sometimes quoted against Mr. Lincoln that he took a pass on the railroad. It is not so many years ago that the best of us did - if we could get one. We had not yet seen the inevitable abuse of the practice. In Lincoln's day there never was any question of the propriety, at least of the counsel of the road having a pass. There has long been a letter in circulation, asking for a renewal, which, ~~as usually quoted~~, according to Mr. Richard P. Morgan, the man to whom it was written, ^{usually} is incorrect.

quoted: -

"Springfield, Feb. 13, 1858.

"R.P.Morgan, Supt. C. & A. R.R.

"Dear Sir: Says Sam to John, 'here's you old rotten wheelbarrow. I've broke it usin' on it. I wish you would take it and mend it case I shall want to borrow it this afternoon.' Acting on this as a precedent, here's your old 'chalked hat.' I wish you would take it and send me a new one, case I shall want to use it the first of March.

"Yours truly, A. Lincoln."

Several years ago I had this letter submitted to Mr. Morgan, then living in Dwight, Ill., and I have before me his answer. The letter, which he believed to have been destroyed in the Chicago fire, "was written," he says, "in the spirit of a friend enclosing an expiring annual pass for renewal, which Mr. Lincoln was entitled to as counsel for the company.

"I remember the letter quite distinctly and for such

use as you may desire to make of it, give it as I believe it to have been worded and dated.

"Springfield, Dec.

1855

"Richard P. Morgan, Jr.
Supt. Chicago and N Rd.

"Dear Sir: Here's your darned old wheelbarrow broke; father wants you to mend it so he can borrow it again this afternoon.

"Yours truly, A. Lincoln."

"I think I am safe in saying that the terseness of Mr. Lincoln's style will be better recognized by his personal friends in my recollection of the letter than in the publication you sent me.

"I am certain of three things:

"1st - That the letter was written and that it was received by me.

"2nd - That my wording of the letter as stated is substantially correct.

"3rd - That the date of the letter was in 1855 or 1856, most probably in 1855." *

There is no one of Mr. Lincoln's law cases which seems to me to show more clearly the kind of man he was or to illustrate better his life-long habit of recognizing superiority when he met it and trying to pull himself up to it, than that in which he was employed as counsel by Manny & Co., a firm of Rockford, Ill., manufacturers of reaping machines, which had been sued early in the 50's by Cyrus H. McCormick, for an infringement of patents. The best of counsel was employed by the Mannys. The greatest patent lawyer of his day, P. H. Watson of Philadelphia had charge

of the case, and ^{he} had as assistant on the mechanical side, a young lawyer, afterwards widely known, George Harding. Edward M. Stanton was the leading forensic counsel.

Mr. Lincoln's coming into the case was due to the admiration and confidence of a young partner in Manny & Co., Mr. Ralph Emerson of Rockford, who as a law student had been thrown into Lincoln's company. He wanted him because he believed in him. Mr. Lincoln seems to have been pleased and proud that he was retained; but it is doubtful if he ever had had in his professional life as humiliating an experience. Two letters recently published in Gilbert Tracy's collection show that although he had met Mr. Watson in Illinois and discussed the case with him, Watson had considered him so negligible a quantity that he had not taken the trouble to send him copies of documents in the case as he had promised, and he evidently went to the trial, held in Cincinnati in September of 1855, without having heard from his principal. Nevertheless he had prepared his brief and expected to have a chance to argue the case. The story that he was not allowed to make his argument because of Mr. Stanton's contempt for his appearance is certainly, I think, exaggerated, if not entirely mistaken. It was for Mr. Watson not Mr. Stanton to decide who should make what was called the "forensic argument"; and when it was decided that there was to be but one speech of that nature, he chose Mr. Stanton in preference to Mr. Lincoln. The circumstances

of this decision were such that Lincoln felt he had not been fairly treated. Moreover, there is no question that he was ^{socially} snubbed from first to last by his fellow counsel. Many years ago I discussed the case fully with Mr. Harding, the only one of the counsel on either side then living, and published an account written by him. But there was a side light in his talk not in his published story. It has something of a confession.

"Twice in my life," he told me, "I have turned my back on men because of their appearance, and both of these men later became presidents of the United States. The first was in Cincinnati in 1855 when I deliberately turned my back on Abraham Lincoln because he looked queer and provincial and held his umbrella in a way of which I did not approve. The second was at a little town in Western New York State where the hotel accommodations were crowded and I was asked to share my room with a strange lawyer and refused because he was dusty and hot from travel. His name, I learned, was Grover Cleveland. I think I have finally learned that you cannot always judge a man by his haberdashery and tailoring."

The big thing about Lincoln in this trial was that, disappointed bitterly as he was and ^{neglected} ~~snubbed~~ and possibly insulted as he felt himself, when the trial was thoroughly launched, ^{and} he realized that it was a contest between men of the highest technical knowledge, as well as the finest legal training and experience, he became utterly absorbed in the exhibit. His intellectual delight in the quality of the thing, wiped out all personal feeling. It became a great professional experience. Emerson reports him as saying, as they walked the street after the close of the case, "Emerson, I am going home to

study law. These big fellows are coming West soon and I am going to be ready for them." Hewas ready a few years later to meet the biggest of them all, and to have him acknowledge him as his rightful master, though it was not exactly in a field where he had expected to meet Edward M. Stanton.

Without a doubt the law case which today has the strongest hold on most Lincoln readers and pilgrims is that in which Mr. Lincoln defended Duff Armstrong, the son of his old Salem friends, Jack and Hannah Armstrong, from the charge of killing a companion in a drunken brawl. In the first place, it has the fascination of being a murder case, something in which youth and natural human beings never lose interest; then the very incongruity of the setting - a camp meeting - catches the imagination. And yet, how typical it was! Orthodox Christians of Illinois had not learned in those days as in later to protect their respectability from the contact of the wicked. The wicked formed a disreputable fringe around every camp meeting - drinking and quarreling and carousing. It was in such a fringe that the crime with which Duff Armstrong was charged had ^{was} been committed.

The case had the further appeal of sentiment. Here was one of Illinois greatest lawyers and its second greatest man, who soon was to contest the senatorship with her first greatest man, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, dropping important legal and political duties to come, at his own expense, to defend the wayward son of two simple, unimportant people who had been his friends when he was poor and

unknown. It was a great man fighting to save a mother's tears.

This was enough to make it unforgettable. And on top of this came the charge that Mr. Lincoln saved Duff Armstrong, from hanging by a trick. For years the case has been tossed back and forth between those who believe this true and those who deny it. There have been those who justified the trick since it was successful; there have been those who, believing or half believing, have justified the trick because it saved a man's life; and there have been those, friendly and unfriendly to Mr. Lincoln, who decried it because it was a trick and proved him not always the honest man he was called.

The alleged deception came at a point in the trial when the charge against Duff Armstrong depended upon the truthfulness of the prosecution's chief witness, who had sworn he saw Duff strike the fatal blow.

"It was night, how could you see?"

And his answer had been that it was as light as day, the moon being full and about where the sun is at ten o'clock in the morning.

Mr. Lincoln, cross-examining the witness with gentleness, brought out repeatedly this point of the hour and the full light, until it was impressed upon the jury as the real crux of the case. And then at the proper moment, he introduced an almanac - an almanac that showed that the moon at the hour of the murder, close to eleven o'clock, was in a position where, so he declared, it

would not have given a light by which the witness could have seen the blow struck. The evidence of the almanac upset the testimony and in the end Duff was discharged.

Then came the accusation that to prove his point, Mr. Lincoln, discovering that the almanac of 1857 did not give him what he wanted, had caused the almanac of 1853, which did, to be falsified, the 3 changed to a 7 throughout. So far as I knew the treated almanac was never put in evidence until thirty years after the trial. In 1888 an individual who claimed to have been at the trial said that he had discovered the very book, showing, under the glass, the obvious change of the figure. The story went the rounds, and the almanac finally found its way into the famous Lincoln collection of Gunther, the Chicago candy man. The cover and August calendar of the falsified almanac are printed with this article. According to it, it is obvious that there was no moon shine at the time that the murder was committed that would enable any witness to see a blow.

But how about the true almanac of 1857? Would that be sufficient for Mr. Lincoln's purpose? Would it discredit the witness' contention that the moon was about where the sun was at ten o'clock in the morning? With this article there is printed a page from the true "Christian Family Almanac for 1857" the original of which is on file in the New York Public Library. This shows that on

*Two days passed
part of the night*

the August 29, 1857, the date of the murder, the moon was in its first quarter and set at 4 minutes past 12, midnight. That is, the moon at the hour of the murder was about an hour above the horizon, which is a good ways from where the sun is at ten o'clock a. m.

Then the question becomes, How much light would the moon, an hour above the horizon, give in the particular grove where Duff was said to have killed his comrade? One can hardly believe that it would have been enough to have seen distinctly the fatal act. I have always had a desire to settle this question by visiting where the murder took place the grove, if it still exists; or, if not, one nearby, about eleven o'clock on a night when the moon is to set at four minutes after midnight or thereabouts; but I have never had the opportunity, and I leave it to the Boy Scouts who, for a number of years now, have been making pilgrimages to the Armstrong home at Oakford, Ill. - to carry out this particular piece of investigation. I am inclined to think that in a grove at that hour and in that locality and under these moon conditions, they could see but little. The point of which is that it was not necessary for Mr. Lincoln to forge an almanac in order to free his old friends' son, even if he had been the kind of man given to trickery. It was not "like him" to do it. Moreover, he was certainly clever enough to understand that such a trick would be sooner or later detected and bring upon him the charge,

which he of all others disliked, that he had done an unfair thing.

One could go on, far beyond the limits of this series of articles, with these stories of Lincoln's relations to his fellows - of his wit, his ability, his unadulterated human nature - the kind of thing which stamped him as different from the ordinary man - more naturally kind, more naturally shrewd, less pretentious, less technical. It was the demonstration of the kind of man he was, going on year in and year out that finally made him the most generally loved and trusted man in Illinois. And there is no question that the place that he held in the esteem and affection of men of superior as well as of humble parts, was a powerful factor in finally carrying him into the presidency. Still, that could never have happened if it had not been for what he did on the great question of the day, from 1854 on.

Now, what did he do? What did he do after the campaign of 1856 where we left him in the last article? That will be the ^{next} ~~next~~ subject for us to take up.