

An Intimate View of Abe Lincoln

Ralph Emerson, who was an extended member of the Rockwell family, owned the large white building across from the Colebrook Congregational Church around the turn of the twentieth century. He was an elderly man at the time, sporting a long flowing white beard. In 1909, during Lincoln's centennial year, he and his wife had a small pamphlet printed in which he recalled his personal recollections of Lincoln. One of these resides at the Colebrook Historical Society, and I think the readers will enjoy what Mr. Emerson had to say about our sixteenth president.

"About sixty years ago I was, for a time, intimate with Abraham Lincoln. People are apt to think of him largely as a joking, story-telling man. When he was alone with friends who did not expect a story or a joke, he was a quiet, earnest, almost sad-faced man. I remember one afternoon when we were strolling together after court, through the delightful 'Money Creek Timber,' I sought his advice with regard to my own future life. It was given so quietly and earnestly that I soon after embraced the first opportunity to enter a business life.

So impressed was I with his ability that when, four years later, we became involved in a very important litigation, we retained him to help. I paid him the largest retaining fee, he said, he had ever, up to that time, received. So important was the litigation that a host of lawyers were engaged on each side, including such men as Senator Douglas, Gov. Wm. H. Seward, and quite a number of other lawyer members of Congress.

When the case came on for hearing in Cincinnati, as Lincoln had not had sufficient time to prepare, he did not speak, but he was present through the whole hearing, which consumed several days. We were limited to two lawyers on a side. Edward M. Stanton, later the celebrated 'War Secretary,' was one of those who spoke for us, delivering a speech which he had spent a very long time in studying up and preparing. So intensely interested was Lincoln in his speech, that, forgetting the dignity of a United States Court, he stood rapt in attention, or else was even walking back and forth in the court room listening intently. It was the first time Lincoln and Stanton had met, and from what Lincoln said to me when he was President I am satisfied that it was that speech which made Lincoln choose Stanton as his Secretary of War.

Let me illustrate. There was talk, at one time, of a compromise with the other side. Stanton was a man, when excited, of a lion-like countenance. The moment he heard the subject of compromise broached in our office he was ablaze at once; and with gestures as though he held a sword in his hand, and to smite, and keep smiting!' And his countenance was a blaze of wrath as he spoke. What wonder that Lincoln, when disappointed in other men, sent for Stanton as his final Secretary of War!

When the hearing was through, Mr. Lincoln called me to him as we left the court room and wanted to walk and talk.

For block after block he walked rapidly forward, silent and deeply dejected.

At last, turning to me, he exclaimed: 'Emerson, I'm going home.' A pause. 'I am going home to study law.'

'Why,' I exclaimed, 'Mr. Lincoln you stand at the head of the bar in Illinois now. What are you talking about?'

'Yes, yes,' he said. I do occupy a good position there, and I think I can get along with the way things are going there now. But these college trained men who have devoted their whole

lives to study are coming west don't you see? They study on a single case perhaps for months, as we never do.'

'We are apt to catch up the thing as it goes before a jury and trust to the inspiration of the moment. They have got as far as Ohio now. They will soon be in Illinois.'

Another long pause. Then stopping and turning towards me, his countenance suddenly assumed that look of strong determination which we who knew him best sometimes saw on his face, and he exclaimed: 'I am going home to study law! I'm as good as any of them, and when they get out to Illinois I will be ready for them.'

He finished, and at once became very cheerful, as though he now saw a clear path before him.

We walked on down by the banks of the Ohio River. He suddenly turned and pointed across the river to Kentucky, and said: 'Here is this fine city of Cincinnati, and over there is the little town of Covington. Covington has just as good a location as Cincinnati, and a fine country back of it. It was settled before Cincinnati. Why is it not a bigger city? Just because of slavery, and nothing else. My people used to live over there, and I know. Why the other day I went to ship my family on a little railroad they have got down there from Covington back into the country. I went to the ticket office and found a lank fellow sprawling over the counter, who had to count up quite a while on his fingers how much two and one-half fares would come to. While over here in Cincinnati, when I shove my money through the window, the three tickets and the change would come flying back at me quick. And it is just the same way in all things through Kentucky. That is what slavery does for the white man.'

We walked on down the river and the conversation turned on a trip to Palestine and Jerusalem. His countenance at once lit up, and he exclaimed, 'Yes! To tread the ground the Savoir trod!' Never from other human lips have I heard the word 'Savoir' pronounced with such depth of earnestness. Apparently absorbed with the two thoughts of the evils of slavery, and of the 'Savoir,' we wandered on in silence, and so parted.

Time went on – he was President – and the war came with defeat after defeat to the Union armies. Such men as Horace Greeley were loudly calling for peace at any terms with our 'erring sisters, who should be allowed to depart in peace.' Everything looked dark. Being in Washington with my brother, Prof. Emerson of Beloit College, Judge Davis of the Supreme Court (one of Lincoln's best friends), suggested that we go and cheer 'Old Abe' up a bit. As we went, Judge Davis said: 'You must expect him to tell some kind of a story. If he could not relieve his mind in the darkest hours in this way, he would die.'

We found Lincoln sitting very sad and pensive, for news had just come in of one of the worst defeats of the war. We told him that we had come to tell him that no matter how dark the clouds, and what might be said in the east, the great west was with him, and had absolute confidence in him and in God, and that we would pull through. He looked up with a sad smile and then said: 'Yes, but I am sometimes reminded of Old Mother Partington. You know the old lady lived on the sea beach, and one time a big storm came up and the waves began to rise till the water began to come in under her cabin door. She got a broom and went to sweeping it out. But the water rose higher and higher; to her knees; to her waist; at last to her chin, but she kept on sweeping and exclaiming, 'I'll keep on sweeping as long as the broom lasts, and we will see whether the storm or the broom will last the longest!' And that is the way with me.' And his jaws came together with that firm grip we who knew him best were familiar with. Looking earnestly at the fireplace he resumed: 'Yes, Providence! As I read history I see we can not tell in advance what God's plans about any nation are. We can only find out by seeing what the

result finally is when it is all over. All we have to do is to do the best we can with what we have, and trust the result to God.' And his jaws again assumed that set expression, and we knew what was his iron determination. He thanked us heartily for coming to tell him what the people thought 'at home.' And so we parted.

This was the last time I saw him alive. When he was in his coffin, Mrs. Emerson and I sat for a long time gazing at his countenance. The deep lines produced by anxious thought were still there. But across each line was written very plainly: 'The peace of God has settled on his quiet spirit.'

It was a marked contrast to the time when I had last seen him. The dead countenance appeared to say that he had died with the consciousness of having done his best and that he was satisfied with the result."