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ABRAHAM LINCOLN



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ABRAHAM LINCOLN



LONDON:

THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY

65 St. Paul's Churchyard and

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MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN.

Printed by Wm. Clowes and Sons, Ltd., London and Beccles.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

EARLY YEARS

THE career of Abraham Lincoln affords a most striking illustration of the possibilities of life in the United States. Sprung from the humblest grade of society, by a wise and right use of the privileges and opportunities he shared with all his fellow-citizens, he attained the highest station in his country at the great crisis of her history. Playing as prominent a part in a vaster and more tragic struggle, he has received with Washington the patriot's undying fame.

Lincoln came of a good stock, although rank, wealth and learning were unrepresented among his immediate ancestors. It is not certain, but highly probable, that he was a descendant of the Samuel Lincoln who, about 1638, left Norwich in England for Hingham in what is now

the State of Massachusetts. Thence the family moved to Virginia, and, in 1780, Abraham Lincoln, his grandfather, left Virginia for Kentucky, which was then being opened up by the famous pioneer, Daniel Boone.

The youngest son of this Abraham Lincoln, Thomas by name, married in 1806 and moved a year later to a small farm in Hardin County, Kentucky, and as Lincoln's biographers tell us, "settled down to a deeper poverty than any of his name had ever known; and there, in the midst of the most unpromising circumstances that ever witnessed the advent of a hero into this world, Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809.

In 1813 the family moved to a farm on Knob Creek, and in 1816 they again journeyed westward to Little Pigeon Creek in Indiana; and here, two years later, at the early age of thirty-five, Lincoln's mother died. Life in those newly settled regions was a hard struggle

for the barest existence. Privations and the absence of the commonest advantages of childhood probably produced that melancholy which lay at the foundation of Lincoln's character; but they also matured in him a sturdy self-reliance and a fertility of resource to which in later days he owed much of his success.

The mother was probably too delicate to stand the rough wear and tear of frontier life, and hence died in her early prime. But she seems to have imparted much of her own gentleness to her boy, and one of his intimate friends in later life tells us that Lincoln said, "All that I am or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother." She had taught him to read and write; she had implanted in him a love for truth and justice and for the Word of God which only deepened as the years of his life rolled on.

One authentic incident of this period is very touching. According to the common custom, his mother was buried

hard by the homestead, and no religious service was held in connection with the funeral, as there was no minister of the Gospel within reach. But Lincoln, although only nine years old, could not bear the thought of his mother's funeral without any religious rites. And so he wrote off—and possibly this was the first letter he penned—to David Elkin, one of the frontier itinerant preachers, who, when the winter was over, came and held a religious service over the mother's grave.

In 1819 Lincoln's father married a second time. The step-mother's influence proved of the greatest benefit to the lad. She was an earnest Christian, a pattern of thrift and industry, and her influence over the household was wholly for good. She was fully alive to the value of education, and so far as it lay in her power, secured it for all her children. But in that wild region, and at that early date, education, in the modern sense of the term, hardly existed.

Lincoln himself has sketched for us this part of his life :—

“There were some schools so-called, but no qualification was ever required of a teacher beyond ‘readin’, writin’, and cipherin’ to the rule of three. If a straggler, supposed to understand Latin, happened to sojourn in the neighbourhood, he was looked upon as a wizard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education. Of course, when I came of age, I did not know much. Still somehow I could read and write and cipher to the rule of three ; but that was all. I have not been to school since. The little advance I now have upon this store of education I have picked up from time to time, under the pressure of necessity.”

But Lincoln had acquired a love of study for its own sake, and hence he became his own best teacher. He read everything that came in his way ; and fortunately the bulk of the literature within his reach was of the highest class. First and foremost was the Bible. From his earliest years Lincoln was familiar with the best of books, and his most intimate friends are unanimous in the

assertion that his knowledge of the Bible was altogether exceptional. *Æsop's Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a *History of the United States*, and *Weam's Life of George Washington* were the remaining volumes of his library; and it may be questioned whether the world's literature, had it been at his disposal, could have provided other books better qualified to educate him for the great work of his life. These he read and re-read until they became a permanent part of his mental equipment.

As the years passed, he grew into a tall stalwart man, over six feet high. Many are the stories told illustrative of his kindness of heart, his strict sense of justice, and of his willingness to protect the weak. His step-mother's testimony is: "I can say what scarcely one mother in a thousand can say. Abe never gave me a cross word or look, and never refused in fact or appearance to do anything I asked him." He was always roused to a white heat of indignation by the sight of

any cruelty to animals. He once saved the life of the town drunkard, whom he found freezing by the roadside, by carrying him a long distance, and watching over him until he regained consciousness.

In 1830 Lincoln's father emigrated once more, and on this occasion went to Illinois, the great State with which the fortunes of Lincoln were to be inseparably associated.

EARLY MANHOOD

Lincoln now began to get out into the world on his own account. He made a trip in a flat-boat down the Mississippi to New Orleans in the spring of 1831. "At New Orleans," writes one of his fellow-voyagers, "we saw for the first time negroes chained, maltreated, whipped and scourged. Lincoln saw it; his heart bled: said nothing much, was silent, looked bad. I can say, knowing it, that it was on this trip that he formed his opinions of slavery."

During the next few years Lincoln was feeling after his life-work, and experimenting in many different directions. In 1832 he served for a short time as a volunteer in a campaign against the Indians called the "Black Hawk" war. Lincoln's popularity was proved by the fact that his comrades elected him captain. He also aimed at a seat in the Legislature, but was unsuccessful in this first attempt. His election address, crude as it is in some aspects, exhibits that balance of mind and readiness to hear the other side which in later years gave him his profound political insight, and enabled him to pen addresses which rank high amongst the best models.

The question of what he should do in life became still more pressing, and in succession he filled the offices of shop-keeper, postmaster and surveyor. In the first of these enterprises he was unfortunate. He had a worthless partner, who ultimately decamped, leaving Lincoln to

face liabilities so large in amount that his friends facetiously described them as "the national debt." But scorning any of the easy and customary methods of escape, he paid to the uttermost penny debts for which the drunken partner was mainly responsible.

In 1833 he became postmaster for New Salem, and held the appointment three years. His thirst for knowledge grew, and he eagerly seized all means of increasing his store. It was reported that he read every newspaper which the mails brought to New Salem.

His influence had now begun to extend beyond his own immediate neighbourhood; and in 1834 he was elected to the State Legislature. This event brought to a close the first and hardest period of his early life, and laid the foundation of his later popularity. He had passed unscathed through the dangers and difficulties and temptations of the wild, rough, and yet vigorous frontier life; and although unaware of it yet

himself, had surmounted the greatest obstacles in his path. He was the best educated man, in many respects, of all that region, and already he was widely known as "Honest Abe Lincoln." And in the Western State, no less than in the polished centres of civilisation, character and ability were certain in the long run to enable their possessor to rise to a foremost position among his fellows.

Lincoln's residence at Vandalia, then the capital of Illinois, during the sessions of the Legislature, brought him into contact with the ablest men of the State, and afforded him many opportunities for carrying on his education. The only incident in this first term of public service worthy of note happened just as it was drawing to a close. The Legislature, faithfully reflecting the views of the majority of that time, had passed resolutions in favour of slavery. Lincoln drew up the following protest, which was formally entered upon the journals of the House:

"Resolutions upon the subject of

domestic slavery having passed both branches of the General Assembly at its present session, the undersigned hereby protest against the passage of the same. They believe that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy, but that the promulgation of Abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than abate its evils."

A very mild protest this, judged by after events and in the light of the present day. But it was thought a bold deed at the time of its occurrence, and it stands out as a great landmark in Lincoln's career.

LIFE IN SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

In 1837 Lincoln removed to Springfield, which had then become the State Capital. Here he entered into partnership with a friend named John T. Stuart, and began the study and the practice of law. He began to manifest an eager interest in the political life of the nation, and it

was in this rough Western school that he acquired the ready wit, the apt speech, the knowledge of men and things, which stood him in such good stead during the last ten years of his life.

In 1842 he married Miss Mary Todd of Lexington. This period was one of mental and spiritual growth. His biographers assert that "the late but splendid maturity of Lincoln's mind and character dates from this time, and although he grew in strength and knowledge to the end, from this year we observe a steadiness and sobriety of thought and purpose, as discernible in his life as in his style."

In 1846 Lincoln was nominated as candidate for Congress and was returned as member by a very large majority. In his second session he introduced a bill for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and aroused violent opposition; it had no chance of passing, and is interesting only as an index to his

mind and political aims at this time. He was not a candidate for re-election, and this brief spell of two years was all the experience of Congress he was to enjoy.

From 1849 to 1854 Lincoln pursued his work as a Springfield lawyer. He threw himself with renewed energy into his old pursuits. He had been brought into contact with other men and other currents of thought in the national capital, and it is very characteristic of the man to note how he realised some new defects in himself, and how he set about removing them with his accustomed vigour and application. To strengthen his power of close and sustained reasoning, he gave himself to the study of logic and mathematics, mastering, among other things, once and for all, the first six books of Euclid. During these years he was the acknowledged head of the Circuit in which he practised.

A friend records that upon one occasion he said to a man who tried unsuccessfully to enlist him in what to Lincoln

seemed an unjust case, " Yes, there is no reasonable doubt but that I can gain your case for you. I can set a whole neighbourhood at loggerheads ; I can distress a widowed mother and her six fatherless children, and thereby get for you \$600 which rightfully belong, it appears to me, as much to them as to you. I shall not take your case, but I will give you a little advice for nothing. You seem a sprightly, energetic man. I advise you to try your hand at making \$600 some other way."

LINCOLN AS AN OPPONENT OF SLAVERY EXTENSION

The Secession movement of 1861, culminating in the formation of the Confederate States and the great civil war, was due to powerful influences acting over more than one generation ; and no person in any full measure acquainted with the facts can fail to see that slavery

was the one efficient cause of the war. The battle raged in public life, in Congressional and Presidential Elections fifteen years before the fateful guns opened fire upon Fort Sumter. In fact their opening fire was but the sign that the "irrepressible conflict," as Seward termed it, had been transferred from the senate to the camp.

It was during these fifteen years that Lincoln won the heart of the great West, established his reputation as the ablest speaker and one of the most far-seeing men of his time, and by a development in which there was nothing accidental, came to be recognised as the one man to whom in the most critical moment of American history the new, vigorous and resolute anti-slavery party could entrust almost absolute power.

Prior to 1856 the political parties had ranged under the names of Democrats and Whigs, to which Lincoln belonged. But it was a time when the old order was breaking up and new combinations were

in the process of formation. The most powerful of the latter was the gradual organisation of a great party opposed absolutely to the *extension* of slavery and known by the name Republican.

The Illinois section, of which Lincoln was the trusted leader, took definite shape in 1856. Two years later, Stephen A. Douglas had to seek re-election as senator for Illinois. Lincoln was at once and unanimously nominated as his Republican opponent. The canvas soon resolved itself into the greatest political conflict of that generation. Douglas was a speaker of consummate ability, of great reputation and experience, and a prominent candidate for the next Presidency. But Lincoln saw deeper into the true bearing of things, and had a clearer vision for the signs of the times.

The campaign was long and arduous, and the voting power very equal. But Lincoln was beaten by the defection of the Whig remnant. Like other men, he smarted under defeat, but he had the

consolation of knowing that he had given a powerful impulse to reform. He had done his best, and though apparently defeated, had won the great victory of his life. Little as he dreamed it then, it was his able, high-principled, and elevated conduct of this keen personal conflict that enabled the new and growing Republican party of the West and North-West to recognise in him their true leader, and slowly but irresistibly to resolve that to his hands, so far as they could secure it, the destinies of the country should be entrusted.

Lincoln was ultimately elected President, and the pro-slavery party, at once recognising this as a death blow to their "balance of power," and slavery extension views, prepared to combat it by a revolutionary, disguised as a "State right" movement. They resolved that the Federal Government not only had no right to interfere with State domestic institutions, such as negro servitude, but also had no right

to maintain the Federal Union whenever any one or any group of States wished to withdraw. This somewhat delicate question soon passed from the Senate to the battle-field, and was ultimately settled by the arbitrament of war.

LINCOLN'S INAUGURATION AS PRESIDENT

Four months elapse between the election of a President of the United States and his entrance upon office. These four months were turned to good use by the Southern Party. The majority of the retiring Cabinet were Secessionists, who devoted their remaining period of office to disabling in every possible way the government they had sworn to maintain. Without any vigorous effort to check them, seven Southern States seceded; and on February 4, 1861, at Montgomery in Alabama, their

delegates met to form a Southern Confederacy. On February 8 a provisional government for the Confederate States of America was adopted, and by March 11 a constitution based upon negro slavery and State rights was elaborated. Meanwhile, Jefferson Davis had been elected and inaugurated President of the Confederate States, amid wild rejoicings and confident assertions that the old Union was severed for ever.

Meanwhile, Lincoln, waiting quietly at home in Springfield, looked forward to the fearful conflict which he so clearly foresaw, and in which he knew, if life were spared, he was destined to take the foremost place. On February 11, 1861, he left Springfield, and began his progress towards Washington. At the railway station, when about to enter the carriage, amidst a crowd of old familiar friends and neighbours, he uttered a few heartfelt words of farewell which enable us to understand the spirit in which he entered upon the greatest task

undertaken by any man of the nineteenth century :—

“ My friends, no one not in my position can realise the sadness I feel at this parting. To this people I owe all that I am. Here I have lived more than a quarter of a century. Here my children were born, and here one of them lies buried. I know not how soon I shall see you again. I go to assume a task more difficult than that which has devolved upon any other man since the days of Washington. He never would have succeeded except for the aid of Divine Providence, upon which he at all times relied. I feel that I cannot succeed without the same Divine blessing which sustained him ; and on the same Almighty Being I place my reliance for support. And I hope you, my friends, will all pray that I may receive that Divine assistance, without which I cannot succeed, but with which success is certain. Again I bid you an affectionate farewell.”

His progress through the different cities of the West aroused great enthusiasm. But it is significant of the fierce passions then raging that a conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln as he passed through Baltimore was dis-

covered, and the President came on secretly to the capital. On March 4 he was duly inaugurated. It is the custom for the President of the United States to deliver his inaugural address standing on the magnificent eastern front of the Capitol, facing the statue of Washington. Public interest centred in what Lincoln would say and do. Everything that malice and slander could do, had been done to arouse prejudice against him. By many he was supposed to be a frontier savage, more at home in a lumber camp than in a senate chamber, and who had been raised to a dignity, which he could not possibly adorn, not by any native worth or ability, but simply by unscrupulous party politics. What those who knew him saw was a tall kindly man, full of profound thoughts on State policy, and of earnest longing for his country's weal in a time of extreme danger. What his hearers heard was the first of those great utterances on public affairs which

have placed Lincoln in the front rank of the world's statesmen.

He maintained two propositions, viz., that the Union of the States must be perpetual, and that the laws of the Union must be faithfully executed in all the States. He pleaded for quiet thought upon the issues then before the nation, and he closed with a solemn appeal to both North and South, based upon the self-sacrifice of their fathers in the struggle for independence :—

“I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

THE EMANCIPATION OF THE SLAVES

On April 11, 1861, the great Civil War was begun by the South. Their wish was to shatter Lincoln's administration on the very threshold of existence; what they did was to still faction at the North, and to arouse an enthusiasm for the Union which never fully spent its force until the Confederacy was in ruins, every slave set free, and the men who scoffed at Abraham Lincoln in 1861 had become in 1865 fugitives from the power they had schemed to overthrow.

The turning-point in the struggle was the emancipation of the slaves, and with this great deed Lincoln's name is for ever associated. In the execution of it he exhibited to the full his great qualities. He refused to be hurried into premature action. The strongest pressure was brought to bear upon him to declare for it in the first months of the war, but he steadily refused. He did take action at

the moment when the proclamation could deal a most deadly blow to the Confederacy, and so become a powerful agent in securing its own fulfilment.

On September 22, 1862, he issued the great proclamation, declaring that on January 1, 1863, the slaves in all the States, or parts of States, in rebellion against the United States Government, would be declared free men. On January 1, 1863, he signed the final proclamation.

Great was the rejoicing in the loyal States. It was felt instinctively that God's great purpose was now fulfilled—that the sacrifices of blood and treasure were not in vain, that final victory was secure, and that at last the nation was free from the guilt of an awful crime.

THE GETTYSBURG SPEECH AND THE SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Part of the battle-field at Gettysburg was occupied by a cemetery. The

Government purchased the adjoining land as a national burying-ground for the thousands of soldiers who fell in that murderous struggle. On November 19, 1863, it was consecrated to this sacred purpose. The President, the Cabinet, public men, foreign ministers, officers, soldiers, and citizens, gathered in great numbers. Edward Everett, a famous orator, delivered a speech of great ability. But Lincoln uttered the true words of consecration—in words which came straight from his heart, and which went straight to the hearts of all who heard them. As soon as Everett had finished, Lincoln rose, and in complete self-forgetfulness, under the full spell of the hour and of the associations of the place, standing on the spot where thousands of the best men in the nation had died to maintain its liberty, he spoke as follows :—

“ Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the

proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We are met to dedicate a portion of it as the final resting-place of those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

“But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we *say* here, but it can never forget what they *did* here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work that they have thus far so nobly carried on. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to the cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that the dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

The season for another presidential

election had arrived. Among the peace-at-any-price section of the North there was great dissatisfaction. For the great bulk of the nation there was but one possible candidate. They determined to act upon Lincoln's caution about the folly of swapping horses while crossing a stream, and nominated him. Moreover he was coming very close to the heart of the nation. All men of discernment were beginning to realise something of his greatness, his self-sacrifice, his unwearied patience, his noble and devoted patriotism, and bearing down all opposition the Republican party nominated him as their candidate for a second term. His opponents played into his hands by selecting as their candidate the most conspicuous failure of the war, General McClellan. When the voting day came Lincoln was re-elected by an enormous majority.

On March 4, 1865, he stood for the second time upon the steps of the Capitol addressing his fellow-citizens, only this

time in the crowd stood long lines of invalid and wounded soldiers who had taken part in the war that had raged for nearly four years. Behind Lincoln were four such years as few men have ever passed. In 1861 the future was dark and uncertain; in 1865 the clouds were still heavy, but he could see the light beyond; peace was near at hand. Looking on with a steady gaze to the responsibilities towards the Southern States which he expected to assume in a few weeks, Lincoln uttered his second inaugural, a speech worthy in all respects to rank with the Gettysburg address.

CLOSING DAYS

On April 4, a month after his inauguration, Lincoln entered Richmond, and was hailed as their deliverer by thousands of liberated slaves. On the 9th the Civil War came to a close. The hearts of all men in the North were full of joy and gladness. Lincoln himself was "like a

boy out of school." On April 14, after hearing from his son, who was present, the details of Lee's surrender, and receiving the congratulations of friends, he attended at noon a meeting of the Cabinet. In the afternoon he went for a drive with his wife, with whom he cheerfully sketched out plans for the future—how when his term was over they would return to the old home and the old life. It had been announced that he and General Grant would be present in the evening at Ford's theatre. He was unwilling to go, but Grant was prevented by an engagement, and Lincoln was unwilling to disappoint the people. At 10.30 a man named John Wilkes Booth, an actor and a member of a band of conspirators who had plotted to murder Lincoln, Grant, Seward, and other public men, entered the box, shot the President in the back of the head, and made his escape across the stage. The assassin was shot dead on April 21 by one of the soldiers pursuing him.

Lincoln became instantly unconscious, was carried to a neighbouring house, and died about seven o'clock the next morning. His death plunged the whole land into the deepest gloom, and changed the glad rejoicings at the return of peace into lamentations for the simple kindly-hearted man who had done so much to win the victory, and who had now crowned the nation's sacrifice by the loss of his own life. After ceremonies imposing from their very simplicity at Washington, the mortal remains of the beloved President were taken by way of Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Albany, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, and Chicago, to Springfield, where he was laid to rest "among his own people."

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