

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

ADDRESS OF
ROBERT G. COUSINS

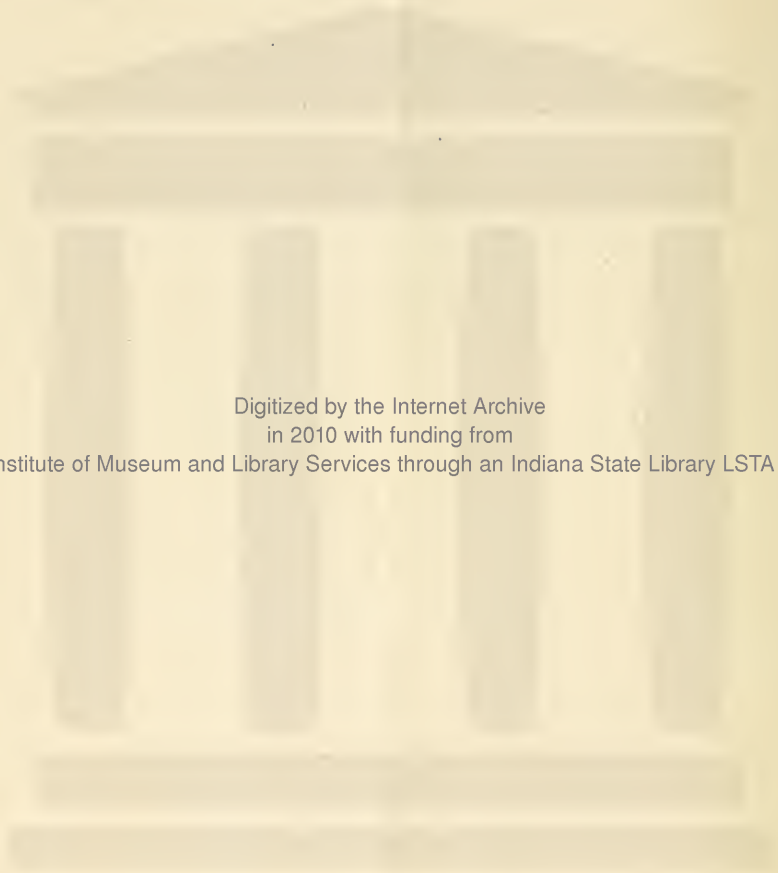
February 12, 1900

ANNUAL BANQUET

Republican Club of the
City of New York

Mr J. E. Booth
Respectful Compliments of
Robert G. Cousins

ABRAHAM LINCOLN



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IN every part and in almost every city of America, on this last anniversary in the century which produced him, a grateful people meet to pay their homage to the memory of Abraham Lincoln. Not that it is possible for human speech to add to his renown, but rather that we may dedicate ourselves and the Nation which he loved to a better understanding of his character and to the principles for which he lived and died.

The nineteenth century brings to the threshold of the twentieth perhaps the greatest and most distinguished names ever given to the list of the immortals by any single century of human progress, and chief of all those names is Lincoln.

Somebody said that the history of a nation is the history of its great men. If our century has produced greater, better, nobler men who have achieved more for the human race than any other century, it indicates, if it does not prove, the progress of our world. It is a great thing to feel that this is true.

The dream of the eighteenth century was free government—democracy—the thought that civilized and enlightened mankind could govern themselves, and that security, progress and endurance would attend that system. But it was doubted by the world even when our independence was achieved, doubted when Abraham Lincoln was born, doubted when a free people chose him as their President. The test of rebellion had not yet been made. When it finally came, most of the Old World's intellects volunteered the force and influence of their opinions against the possibility of the unity and survival of the Republic. Even Mr. Gladstone expressed a disbelief in the possible restora-

tion of the Union. But it should always be remembered in justice to that Empire of the snows, ruled by the imperial Czar, that when the supreme test of republican government and human liberty was being made, no voice of discouragement ever emanated from the Russian Empire.

The problem of human slavery—whether one human being could rightfully be claimed as the property of another—was the contention on which the tremendous test of republican government arose. Being a question of both property and morals, all the prejudice and all the selfishness of human nature were necessarily aroused. Destiny had not seen fit to give to the new republic the simple problem of solving the question of its unity, identity, and Federal authority by a mere abstract interpretation of the Constitution upon the direct issue as to whether, for any cause, the Union might be dismembered. It seemed as though Infinite Wisdom sought to couple with the problem every passion that could come from human avarice, every prejudice that might arise from forfeiture, every bias that material considerations could arouse. The terrible test must be made for all time and with every aggravation that could possibly attend it. To reach the summit of free government and to there proclaim to all the world and for all time the unity and independence of the American Republic, the pilgrim of human progress must bear the heaviest pack that all the hands of prejudice and politics and doubt could pile upon his back.

But it must be remembered that in our world of strife and toil and suffering and glory, nothing which is easy can be great.

In the rumbling thunder of that approaching storm could be heard summons only for the bravest and the mightiest men. It was no place for pigmies. In the lightning's flash of that awful hour, human intellect, stimulated to

intensity, must foresee the way by which the dearest hope of all the centuries could march to certain and enduring victory, and carry its cause into the permanence of the ages. Ah, America, how great shall be thy gratitude to him who, standing in the flashlight of that crisis, shall discern with certainty the way for the new republic to work out its ultimate salvation—the way for liberty to live—the course by which a nation torn asunder shall reach a perfect and enduring Union.

Fifty years have passed and gone—half a century since all men learned his name—and now we come again, as citizens of that permanent and perfect Union, to voice our gratitude to him who studied out the way, to him who said: “We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last, best hope of earth.”

He came into the contest as a countryman, out of the loins of labor and from the very heart of the continent. No trumpet sounded his arrival. No family or pedigree gave him prestige. He had to reason his way out of the woods into the world, out of poverty into position, out of politics into statesmanship, out of greatness into glory, and finally, he went from life into the calendar of saints, which never happens except by the unanimous consent of all mankind.

America first knew him when he finished with Stephen A. Douglas. The torch of his intellect, shining above all others, attracted attention. He had driven Douglas to evade the tenet of his party, that slavery was a creature of the Constitution, illimitable and uncontrollable, and made him say: “The people of a territory can, by lawful means, exclude slavery from their limits, prior to the formation of a State constitution.”

This declaration of Mr. Douglas was made in answer to Mr. Lincoln’s famous second interrogatory in joint debate,

and it ruined Douglas with the extreme Democrats. It was heterodox for one undertaking to speak for the Democracy and for slavery to admit that slavery could be anywhere, or in any way, impeded. The question was propounded by Mr. Lincoln against the advice of all his political counsellors. They feared it would give Mr. Douglas a chance to say just what he did say, and thereby strengthen him with the conservative Republicans of Illinois. But by being careful in Illinois, he became an outlaw in Mississippi. Mr. Lincoln foresaw this. He was looking to the future and to a wider horizon than that of a single State. Some people thought his heart was set on the Senatorship of Illinois, but he was talking for the ages. He was running for a seat in that exalted place at the right hand of Infinite Justice. He was getting rid of Mr. Douglas so that the extreme Democrats in the coming Presidential campaign would nominate a candidate as extreme and as bad as they were themselves. He was driving the friends of human slavery to their logical position, and he was demonstrating to the world the wickedness of that position. He was saving the conservative men, the reasonable men of both parties, for the final conflict that was coming on the wings of war. This was fine work. Its diplomacy was worthy of a Talleyrand; its reasoning worthy of Abraham Lincoln.

When he had done with Douglas he was wanted everywhere. His reason had set a torch upon the hilltops. The close of the senatorial contest in Illinois was but the beginning of that larger contest which involved all States and all the future. The people of the country who had been confused by constitutional niceties, were everywhere repeating over and over again the wondrous words:

“A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this country cannot permanently endure half slave and half

free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction, or its advocates will push it farther until it becomes alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new, North as well as South."

Perhaps never were words spoken by man which made such deep impression on the public mind. It was a prophecy carrying conviction with its very utterance, and everywhere men wondered and inquired among themselves "What manner of man is this?" Ohio must have him in the campaign, Pennsylvania, Iowa, New Hampshire, Minnesota—every place in which the light of his unrivalled wisdom had proceeded called for him, and as Lord Lytton said about his famous Doctor Lloyd, finally "Abbey Hill let him feel its pulse." He was invited to New York. He came to Cooper Institute, and in the presence of such men as William Cullen Bryant, David Dudley Field and Horace Greely, he who has been mentioned as the "rude, lank Westerner," spoke to an audience described by the morning Tribune as an "assemblage of the intellect and mental culture of our city."

It was here that he described the friends of human slavery and their audacity as "sinners calling the righteous to repentance." It was here that his genius gave him national renown and his logic unfolded the principles of the Constitution from its originators and marked out the way of life for the Republic. It was here that he made it possible to be President and finally to be crucified.

The dreaming child of the Kentucky woodland, the country boy of Indiana, the flat-boat pilot of the Mississippi, the village postmaster, lawyer, legislator and logician of

Illinois, the orator and statesman of America, became our President. In the midst of the dissolving Union, standing before the Chief Justice who was to administer the oath of office, he had to say : " A disruption of the Federal Union, heretofore only menaced, is now formidably attempted." And then came the sentence which voiced the sentiment of loyalty in America for all time and showed the metal of this courageous and patriotic President :

"I hold that, in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution, the union of these States is perpetual."

Then finally came that matchless utterance of loyalty and love that lifts the name of Lincoln into the loftiest place of literature :

"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 battlefield and patriot grave to every loving heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

There have been men who ruled in this world by force and arbitrary mandates, and history calls them great. But in a republic, ruling power is granted only by the individual judgment and approval of the millions which can only be reached by reason. When Abraham Lincoln had finished his first inaugural and taken the oath of office, he had convinced the better judgment of America, not only of the justice of the Union's cause, but of his pre-eminent worthiness to represent that cause. His thought had reached the hearthstone ; his argument was on the lips of countrymen ; his love had touched the hearts of loyalty ; his gentle spirit permeated every fireside ; his matchless genius took possession

of superior minds; his wondrous reasoning reached like penetrating light, the intellects of all the land and consequently at his beck and bidding stood the grandest army ever organized upon this earth from civil life—the Grand Army of the Union.

Confronting it, there was the greatest force “ever forged into a thunderbolt of rebellion” against any nation. The conflict that ensued was awful and unequalled in the annals of our world. The memory of broken hopes, of blighted love, of scattered families shall remain forever as the shadows and the lines of care upon the sad and love-illuminated face of the immortal Lincoln. Every sorrow touched his tender heart and every sacrifice that heroism gave its country left a scar upon his sorrowful and kindly features.

But in all the trials of that tremendous war, his judgment proved unerring and his never failing reason was the guiding light. His was the master mind, not only in the matters of momentous policy and statecraft, but wisely practical in all the details of departmental difficulties. Not only was he the most unerring judge of men, but wondrous in his judgment of manœuvering and in foreseeing and in planning for emergencies. He was perhaps the first promoter of the ironclad. When he learned that one of the Confederate batteries at Charleston Harbor had been made to resist the heaviest shots by being covered with bars of railroad iron, he asked Mr. Fox, his assistant Secretary of the Navy, what difficulty there was in the way of using such defense upon a vessel. He was told that naval officers feared that “an armor heavy enough to make them effective would sink them as soon as launched.” “But is not that a sum in arithmetic?” inquired Mr. Lincoln. “On our western rivers we can figure just how many tons will sink a flatboat. Can’t your clerks do the same for an ar-

mored vessel?" From the idea of that conversation, undoubtedly the Monitor was built. The President was the friend of Erricsson and of Captain Worden. Two days before the famous battle of Monitor and Merrimac, he said: "I believe in the Monitor and her commander. If Captain Worden does not give a good account of himself, I shall have made a mistake in following my judgment. I have not made a mistake in following my clear judgment of men since this war began. I followed that judgment when I gave Worden the command of the Monitor. The Monitor should be in Hampton Roads now. She left New York eight days ago." When he was told by Captain Fox that it was not prudent to place any reliance in the Monitor, he replied :

"I respect your judgment as you have good reason to know, but this time you are all wrong. The *Monitor* was one of my inspirations; I believed in her firmly when that energetic contractor first showed me Ericsson's plans. Captain Ericssons plain but rather enthusiastic demonstration made my conversion permanent. It was called a floating battery then; I called it a raft. I thought then, and I am confident now, it is just what we want. I am sure the Monitor is still afloat and that she will yet give a good account of herself. Sometimes I think she may be the veritable sling with a stone that shall yet smite the Merrimac Philistine in the forehead."

On the second night after that utterance, anxiously waiting with officers of the Navy, he heard the joyful news of the victory from Hampton Roads. The idea which was born in his brain and developed by Ericsson had become the monarch of the seas and revolutionized the navies of the world.

There seems to be a kind of affinity in great minds for the sea and for sea-craft. No nation has ever become great in the world of nations that has not taken its place fearlessly and permanently as a cotenant of the ocean. The

sea is treacherous to ignorance; to enlightenment it is kind. Queen Elizabeth used to say "*Quid mihi Maris scribet?*" What does the sea say to me? On that memorable Sunday night, March 9, 1862, the sea said to Abraham Lincoln, "Henceforth we shall be friends. The child of your mind has become the master of the mighty deep." A little while ago the sea said to President McKinley, "Come this way." And in the gray dawn of the morning Admiral Dewey carried the stars and stripes, the emblem of civilization, by the cannon of Cavite, saying to Gridley, "You can fire when you are ready," and when the smoke had cleared away, the world beheld the banner of the stars triumphant in Manila Bay. It said to Sampson and to Schley, to Clark and Wainwright, to Fighting Bob. and Praying Phillip, "Catch Cervera, and I'll give your country rich possessions near to Nevis of the Lesser Antilles, the birthplace of Alexander Hamilton," and in less than two hours the sea gulls looked in vain for a Spanish flag! Such are the exploits of the ironclad, the child of Abraham Lincoln's genius.

Being himself great, he was a judge of greatness. He recognized ability when he saw it. Therefore the greatest military genius of the century did not escape his keen, observing eye. He watched the movement of the Western army. He saw the triumphs at Belmont, Donnelson and Shiloh. He saw the Army of the Tennessee, with the hope of all the centuries, trying to find a way to cross a river with no place to embark and no place to land; he saw the final triumph at Vicksburg and with the millions of America he called for General Grant to take command of all the Union forces. He listened to some small general enviously say, "Grant drinks," and then he calmly and ironically said "What does he drink? I want to send some of the same brand to all my generals." Henceforth Grant was unmolested, and within two years

from the time America really knew she had a Grant, the banner of the stars was shining on the continent, the stars and stripes were floating over Richmond. * * *

Abraham Lincoln saw the final triumph. He witnessed the fulfilment of his mission. He carried out his proclamation of universal liberty. His wisdom bound together the matchless army of the Union which made forever good the declaration of his first inaugural: "The union of these States is perpetual." He went to Gettysburg and with his living heart upon the hearts of comrades dead, his lips pronounced those words of love and eloquence that live forever as the matchless gem of concentrated speech in all our literature. With stockinged feet before the White House grate, he watched the flickering fire on many an anxious night, just as he had done in Old Kentucky and in Indiana and in Illinois, in youthtime and in early manhood, and in fancy saw fantastic, figures sometimes droll, amusing him in lonely hours, and then, sometimes, he saw ambition in its selfish form and hated it. He saw the widowed mother and her hungry child; he saw the lover dying on the battlefield for country's sake, and then he saw the face of his betrothed in agony at home. He saw the charge of cavalry and heard the crash of death; he saw the steady lines of infantry starting for the cannoned crest and felt the shot and shell that mangled human forms. And there in the last, long flickering light, he saw the emblem of the Union carried to the eternal heights. With sad but hopeful heart he laid his head upon the pillow in the mansion where Washington had slept. At early morn he awoke from troubled sleep from day to day until 'twas done—the mission of a mighty soul.

Bone of the bone and sinew of the sinew, heart of the very heart of the American Nation, incarnation of its spirit, he reasoned out its course in the darkest epoch of its troubled, glorious history.

The most assuring fact which the twentieth century takes from the last great lesson of the nineteenth is this: In the greatest revolution ever known upon this earth—the struggle for the unity and survival of free government—the guiding spirit of the Union's cause and the greatest general who bore his shield, were born and bred and reared in the average environment and among the middle classes of the commonwealth, where their illustrious examples and their wholesome, patriotic precepts are learned, revered and practiced by the great majority of the successive generations who constitute American citizenship.

Abraham Lincoln was chosen President by the better judgment of the populace which his reason had convinced before the actual strife began. Called again by the unanimous voice of loyalty, when the contest had practically ended, he sat securely in the seat of triumph and of glory, when the greatest tragedy of fact or fiction in the annals of our tragic world took him from the vision of mankind before their grateful hearts could hear his final blessing and his benediction.

I think it was Theophile Gautier who conceived in his imagination a magician who could exchange the souls of men. If by some magic power the soul of J. Wilkes Booth could have been placed in the breast of the martyr President, after the fatal shot was fired, so that it could have gone to the judgment seat with the face of Abraham Lincoln, it might have passed the pearly gates unchallenged. And if the spirit of the murdered President would have entered the breast of that most depraved of all assassins, the murderous hand might momentarily have been forgiven the greatest crime in history, just for the sake of keeping in our sad and grateful world, even for a little while, the loftiest soul, the sweetest spirit it has ever known in mortal man.

