ABRAHAM LINCOLN

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED ON

LINCOLN DAY, 1907

IN

MEMORIAL HALL

CHICAGO

BY

CHARLES JOSEPH LITTLE

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MEMORIAL HALL
CHICAGO, ILL.

It has been the custom of the Grand Army Hall and Memorial Association on the 12th day of February in each year to observe with fitting ceremonies the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States during the rebellion period. On these occasions it has been usual to invite a distinguished and patriotic citizen to deliver the address. At the Lincoln day celebration for the year 1907, the Reverend Charles Joseph Little, President of the Garrett Biblical Institute at Evanston, Illinois, was invited to deliver an address upon Abraham Lincoln, which was enjoyed by a very large and distinguished audience. Upon the cessation of the hearty applause following the address, a motion was made and unanimously carried by a standing vote, requesting the Association to publish and distribute copies of the address.

The board of directors of the Association then sent a letter to Dr. Little, the speaker, as follows:

Chicago, February 22, 1907.

Rev. Charles Joseph Little,
Evanston, Illinois.

Dear Sir:

The undersigned, members of the Grand Army Hall and Memorial Association, and their friends, were more than delighted with the address you delivered on Lincoln Day at Memorial Hall, and we take this occasion to express to you our most sincere thanks therefor

The subject was so forcefully and beautifully treated in your address, that we feel it should have a wider hearing and influence than with the audience who were so fortunate as to listen to you on that occasion.

We therefore respectfully request that you furnish us a copy of the address for publication and distribution, pursuant to the resolution unanimously adopted by the audience when you had finished speaking.

Very respectfully, your obedient servants.
(Signed by Officers and Members of the Association.)

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Just forty-six years ago yesterday, Abraham Lincoln parted from his friends and neighbors, "not knowing," he said, "when or whether ever I may return and with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington." And then he added: "Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail." He never returned; only the shattered tenement of him was given back to the people of Springfield. The man himself, his mind, his magnanimous soul, his patient, resolute, indomitable will, the indestructible Abraham Lincoln, had entered into the hearts of his countrymen and into the memory of the civilized world, there to abide, an energy for political righteousness, so long as freedom and fraternity remain emblazoned upon the banners of human progress.

Abraham Lincoln was always nobler than his surroundings and wiser than his companions; but there has been in many places, and not seldom here in this great State to which his name and that of Grant have given imperishable lustre, a somewhat grudging recognition of his nobility and wisdom. His image has been obscured by the out-breathings of men who thought that he was altogether such an one as themselves and who fastened upon the defects of his massive nature as though they were the substance of his being; men who were fain to magnify their own pettiness by creeping into some crevice of his character.

You will permit me, therefore, to begin with a paragraph from one of his early speeches, a paragraph that lives in my mind as the cathedral utterance of Abraham Lincoln, because I can never recall it without the vision of some mighty structure soaring upwards like the dome of St Peter's or the spires of Cologne's beautiful temple into that ampler ether where a

sublime human achievement is made glorious by the greeting of the radiant skies

Speaking of the slave power, he exclaimed: "Broken by it, I, too, may be; bow to it, I never will. The probability that we may fail in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause which we deem to be just. It shall not deter me. If I ever feel the soul within me elevate and expand to those dimensions, not wholly unworthy its Almighty Architect, it is when I contemplate the cause of my country deserted by all the world besides, and I, standing up boldly and alone and hurling defiance at her victorious oppressors. Here without contemplating consequence, before high Heaven, and in the face of the world, I swear eternal fidelity to the just cause, as I deem it, of the land of my life, my liberty, and my love."

There is the key to the peculiar character of Abraham Lincoln. His soul was capable of infinite expansion; and under the inspiration of great opportunity and tremendous responsibility his soul did expand to dimensions not wholly unworthy of its Almighty Architect; but it was a soul whose final majesty, whose ultimate harmonious proportions were never quite comprehended by men who boasted that they too, were hewn from the same rough quarry and who flattered themselves that they, too, might have expanded to the same grandeur.

Yet even these could not hide the fact that Lincoln had been always a being apart; friendly, sociable, kindly, helpful; but singularly although not offensively unlike his neighbors. The strength of a giant was the servant of "a heart as big as his arms were long." Like Garibaldi, the hero of United Italy, he could not bear the sight or sound of needless suffering. Bigger and stronger than any of his companions, he was the gentlest of them all. But the quality of his mind was wholly different from theirs; indeed it was of a quality exceedingly rare in the whole world. Lincoln had marvelous mental eyesight. He looked not so much *at* things as into them. His vision was not only accurate but penetrating. It was a vision unblurred by his own hasty fancies or his own wishes; and a vision undimmed by prevalent mis-statements or current mis-

conceptions; a vision never long perturbed by the sophistries of men skilled to make "the worse appear the better reason."

Speaking once of the declaration of Galileo that a ball dropped and a ball shot from the mouth of the cannon would strike the ground at the same instant, Mr. Lincoln said that long before he knew the reasons for it, it seemed to him that it must be so. Like Galileo, he saw the thing before and not merely after it was proved. He saw that the downward pull on both balls must be the same, and that the outward drive of the one had nothing whatever to do with the time of its fall. We may indeed wonder what might have been his career, if, like Michael Faraday, he had first read books of science instead of the Revised Statutes of Illinois or the Commentaries of Blackstone that he found in a pile of rubbish. Fate decreed however, that this rare quality of penetrative wisdom should be applied to law and to statecraft—especially to the problems then challenging the thought of the American people. This vision, moreover, was not only penetrative; it was prophetic. He could foresee consequences as distinctly as he could discern realities. It was not pure guessing, when he exclaimed: "This nation cannot continue half-free and half-slave." It was a prediction derived from steady and consecutive vision. For genuine logic, like the logic of Euclid that fascinated him, is after all a continuous seeing. Given the elements of a situation, the mind watches them as consequence follows consequence in sure and certain revelation. Never to befool oneself about an actual situation and never to befool oneself in reasoning upon it—these are the bases of science, physical and political. And science is the modern almanac, the handbook of prediction. When men like Douglas were attempting to manipulate and thwart the laws of God which determine national destiny, Abraham Lincoln was humbly studying them in the spirit of Galileo and of Francis Bacon.

Daniel Webster once declared that it is wholly unnecessary to re-enact the laws of God.

The saying, strictly construed, is true enough, but the implications of it, as Lincoln saw, are utterly false. We need not, indeed, re-enact the laws of God, but our statutes, if they shall work benefit and not disaster, must recognize and con-

form to them. The laws of God left to themselves leave us in impotence, and exposed to hunger, disease and disaster. All our mastery of the physical world depends upon our actively using, not upon our passively submitting to the laws of the material universe. In this sense every flying locomotive is a re-enactment of the laws of God; so is every telescope that opens to mortal vision the splendors of immensity, and every microscope with which we track to their hiding places the mysteries of life and death. So is every temple that we rear, every bridge that we build, every steamship that we construct, every mill that we erect and every machine into which we conduct the energy of steam or electricity. The whole progress of civilized man may be measured by the extent to which he has learned in his activities to obey and to employ the laws of God. So, too, in the political world, the great structures that we call commonwealths must, in this sense, be re-enactments of eternal principles. If they are to be beneficent and not malignant, those who create and control them must learn the laws by which alone benign results can be obtained. Constitutions can endure and statutes increase the welfare of the people only as they realize and do not contravene the principles of righteousness and progress. Penetrating to this simple but tremendous truth, Mr. Lincoln obtained his vision of the future; his prophetic gaze swept the political horizon and discerned the inevitable.

And this foresight was both profound and far-reaching. In learned information his horizon might be termed a narrow one; but in his grasp of principles and of their ultimate and universal consequences he was broader and deeper than any statesman of his age. The only time I ever saw him was at the flag-raising in Philadelphia on Washington's birthday in 1861. I could not hear his voice, so great was the intervening crowd, but the words that I could not hear I have read and pondered often since.

"I never have had a feeling," said the predestined martyr for whom assassins even then were lying in wait, "that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence; the sentiments which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world for all future

time. It was these that gave promise that in due season the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men and that all should have an equal chance. And if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, I was about to say, I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it." If this be narrowness of vision, then may God contract the eyes of American statesmen to a similar horizon.

Such was the mind of Abraham Lincoln, a mind that gravitated gladly to the truth of things; a mind that loved light and hated darkness; a mind that found rest only in eternal principles, and inspiration in prophetic visions and exalted political ideals.

Possibly under different surroundings he might have become a renowned scientist; more probably through his radiant and steady intellect united to his great heart would have made him even under other conditions a supreme statesman. For the scientist seeks chiefly for causes and is satisfied to find and to show them; if he concerns himself for beneficent results, as he often does, these are not his principal quest. He searches for the seeds of things and delights to see them grow. The statesman, on the other hand, seeks first, last, and always the welfare of the people. And Mr. Lincoln loved the people, craving their happiness and hating oppression even when it assumed the form of law. Monarchs and oligarchs strive mainly to perpetuate their privileges and to increase their power; even in republics there be those who usurp free institutions in order to enlarge their wealth and to entrench their tyranny. Mr. Lincoln perceived too clearly and felt too keenly the burdens of the common man ever to become the active or the passive instrument of any power that would abridge his liberties or diminish the opportunities of his children. The Declaration of Independence, so often mentioned in his speeches, he recognized as the embodiment of the principles that determine all political progress. Human governments are sanctioned and favored by Almighty God, so long, and so long only, as they promote the welfare of the people and further the progress of mankind. Directly they become instruments of oppres-

sion, or strongholds of tyranny, they provoke the judgments which are righteous altogether, when "the wealth piled up by unrequited toil" shall be sunk in the divine wrath "and every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword."

And he recognized himself, humbly and gladly as a product of the principles that he defended. Freedom had made it possible for his own soul to expand to dimensions not unworthy of its Almighty Architect. One need only to read the story of modern Italy, of her exiles and her patriots dying in dungeons and upon the scaffold, to see how utterly impossible would have been such a career under the Italian skies. It is enough to make one weep tears of blood to know the tremendous price that the descendants of Dante and of Galileo paid for unity and liberty. And her Garibaldi grew strong in the shelter of our Declaration of Independence. But a poor lad like Abraham Lincoln, even though capable of penetrative, prophetic and profound vision—a poor lad, awkward in body, homely in features and unaggressive in disposition, with no capital but his strong arms, his big heart and his luminous brain, could expand to proportions worthy of his divine Creator only in the bracing air of freedom and social equality. Nay, he could not have reached these splendid dimensions except in a free state of the American Union—not even in the Kentucky of Henry Clay, or in the Virginia that had ceased to think the thoughts of Thomas Jefferson.

Combined with these rare qualities of mind, Mr. Lincoln possessed a gift of exact expression that bordered on the marvelous. His fidelity of speech matched his fidelity of vision. He could say what he saw and make others see what he said. "Well! Speed! I'm moved!" he exclaimed with laconic humor after carrying his saddle-bags upstairs to his friend's room. "Judge Douglas has the high distinction of never having said either that slavery is right, or that slavery is wrong. Almost everybody else says one or the other, but the Judge never does." Such was the sen-

tence with which he transfixed his dodging antagonist before the astonished people of Illinois.

"If one man enslaves another, no third man has the right to object!" Into those thirteen words he distilled the malignant meaning of the Dred Scott decision.

"The central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy," such is the terse statement of the first inaugural, followed by a demonstration as lucid as the proposition.

Galileo used to say that God had written the laws of nature in geometrical characters; Mr. Lincoln believed that political principles could be stated with geometrical clearness, and he confronted his adversaries whenever great issues were involved not by denunciation but by illumination. If he could not show them, he could at least show other people just where they stood and just what they meant.

It is to the enduring honor of the people of Illinois that they were large enough to recognize the expanding dimensions of this strong soul; that when this clear-eyed defender of liberty and union appeared among them their sight was sharp enough to see above him the beckoning hand of destiny. How long is the tradition to endure that handsome presence and sonorous voice, swollen periods, glittering platitudes, reckless assertions, delusive epigrams, and the sneers of the sophist suffice for popular leadership? They suffice only when the people are unworthy of great statesmen, or when inferior and selfish leaders are unopposed by clear thinking, plain speaking and intrepid action. They suffice never when a soul expanded by the inspiration of great principles grapples with a spirit so swollen and heated with ambition, that it has grown indifferent to the dignity of its Almighty Architect. Douglas was skilled in the arts of plausible address, adroit, audacious, evasive, self-assertive, denunciatory; full of the forms of logic, yet reckless of the truth. How shriveled and shrunken he appeared when illuminated by the ever-expanding mind of his conqueror! Stripped of his pride, of his self-delusions, of the garments of party leadership for which he had surrendered the cardinal

principles of democracy, how small the human remnant looked! His antagonist's soul had expanded to a temple of light; his own brain had dwindled to a gaudy tabernacle of ambitious craving and bewildering inconsistencies. "He bargained with us and then under the stress of a local election his knees gave way; his whole person trembled." Such was the railing accusation in 1860 of his accuser and fellow-bargainer, Judah P. Benjamin. How the accusation degrades them both, even after more than forty years. "He bargained with us and then betrayed us." Some day parties and communities will learn that men who betray their principles in a bargain will betray their purchasers in an extremity, wrecking themselves along with those that bought them.

Not Lincoln's mind alone expanded to dimensions worthy of its Almighty Architect, but his whole being took on majesty as he assumed responsibilities and set about a task which to him seemed even greater than that of Washington. His entire administration was a protracted magnanimity. He was great in his forebearance as he was great in his performance. Often tempted to use his strength against men who, like Greeley, assumed an impatient and dictatorial tone; his endurance strained to the breaking point by schemers and place-seekers and the cormorants that batten and fatten in war times upon the miseries of the people; peering anxiously into the skies above him for some token of hope dropped from the hand of God; the Lincoln that once carried the village postoffice in his hat bore the destinies of millions upon his mighty heart and expanded to the stature of the suffering savior of the nation. He mastered his cabinet with serene self-control; he sustained with matchless generosity the successive commanders of the several armies, slow to change but swift to praise; with patient vigilance he studied the movements of the public mind, waiting for it to become the footstool of his great purpose of emancipation, while with the diplomatic skill of an imperturbable wisdom, he averted the perils of a foreign war.

But let me recall two dates that illuminate each other strangely and disclose the rare quality of Mr. Lincoln's mag-

nanimity. On the 5th of August, 1864, when his re-election seemed doubtful and almost hopeless to himself, there appeared in the New York Tribune a three-columned manifesto signed by Benjamin F. Wade and H. Winter Davis, two notable leaders of the Republican party. "They had read," so they began, "without surprise but not without indignation the proclamation of July 8th.". "A more studied outrage on the legislative authority of the people," they continued, "has never been perpetrated." They sneeringly inquired "upon what the President's hopes of abolishing slavery through the nation rest." If he wishes the support of Congress he must confine himeslf to his executive duties, and they conclude with ill-concealed malignity, "the supporters of the government should consider the remedy for these usurpations, and having found it, fearlessly execute it." White as my hair has grown, there is blood enough in my heart to heat it with anger even now as I recall the gloomy August day of 1864 on which I first read these cruel words. They ought, as we knew long since, never to have been written. They were wrong, utterly wrong; and it was unspeakably mean to publish them when the destiny of the country was trembling in the balance.

Contrast now these self-righteous statesmen (for statesmen they were of no small stature) with the man that they assailed. They were imperiling the nation to satisfy their wounded pride. Mr. Lincoln's one thought was to save, to save, to save the Union.

On the 23rd of August he gave to the members of his cabinet, sealed, to be opened only after the election, the following memorandum:

"This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President-elect as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards."

O! gloriously expanded soul! O! temple of the Living God not unworthy of its Almighty Architect. Happy the

people whose destinies in the hour of impending disaster are entrusted to a heart so big, a mind so clear, a will so patient and so adamantine! No wonder, therefore, that his final utterances fall upon us with such benignity; that they seem more like the solemn music of infinite wisdom, and of infinite tenderness, than like the speech of mortal man. Did some still small voice within him tell him that he, too, must be a victim of that partisan malignity which he had never shared and never fostered, that it would be a part of the punishment allotted to his people that he should be taken from them, even before the mighty work was done and when as yet the need of him was very great? Brother Americans, we can repair that great loss only by entering into his spirit; not by statues of him of marble or bronze; not, God help us, by reshaping the image of him until it dwindles into something like ourselves; but by reshaping ourselves, our own souls, until they resemble his in its expansive power and ultimate nobility.

If he could return from that bourne from which, alas! the sages come not back to bring us wisdom, and frequent for a while the Union that he saved, how we should crowd around him! What honors and what eulogies would we heap upon his transfigured form! But after we had told him proudly of our territorial expansion, of our enormous wealth, of our splendid cities with their monumental buildings soaring towards the skies, of our flag, the symbol everywhere of a new world power, of our great industries and our colossal fortunes, I think I hear him ask: "But what of your men?" Do their "souls expand to dimensions not unworthy of their Almighty Architect?" Are they inspired by principles that enlarge them to divine proportions? What about the Declaration of Independence? Are its principles denied and evaded as they used to be, or are they cherished and lived up to and exalted? Are its ideas of free government applied or are they being supplanted by those of class and caste and special privilege? Are you deceived by forms and sonorous phrases? By men who talk liberty and mean slavery? By men who adore the Constitution with their lips

while their hearts are far from it? Do you fancy, I hear him ask, that because you call no man duke or king, you are, therefore, free and independent owners of yourselves? That because you offer no man openly a crown, you are sovereign citizens and self-governing communities? Have you not yet learned the difference between the forms and the power of self-government? What about your worship of the Constitution? There were men in my time who adored it in their speech and who were yet doing their utmost to pervert it and to destroy it value. Have the enemies of social justice revived the old diabolical trick of interpreting it to defend oppression, or have the people mastered the divine art of reading it in the light of its sublime intention "to form a more perfect union and to promote the general welfare?" And what about your legislatures, state and national? Have they improved with your material progress? Are statutes carefully prepared and wisely considered? Do they enact the laws of God or the will of some powerful interest? Do they conform to immutable principles of political wisdom, or are hirelings and demagogues, misguided incompetents and ambitious leaders, all wearing the livery of freedom, still telling you that you can evade and thwart and even nullify with impunity the principles of righteousness and equity? Have your political leaders eyes, and can they see? Have they brains and can they reason? Or do they darken counsel with a multitude of words? Or shelter themselves in cowardly silence? Have they principles for which they are ready to be assassinated, or have they principles only for platforms or parade or purchase?

Fixing upon us those piercing and melancholy eyes, he would warn us to learn wisdom in the time of our power and our wealth and our opportunity, lest we, too, provoke the righteous judgment of God upon ourselves and our posterity. He would remind us with pathetic solemnity that all the miseries of those terrible years in which he suffered for us came from judicial blindness, from the sacrifice of consicence, and truth, and freedom of speech, to avarice and ambition and the lust of power; and lifting his hand to

the "Almighty Architect" of his own expanded and transfigured soul, he would call upon us all "to here highly resolve that the dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."