

LIFE AND CHARACTER

OF

Abraham Lincoln.

A MEMORIAL ORATION

BY

S. F. MILLER,

DELIVERED AT FRANKLIN, N. Y.,

JUNE 1st, 1865.

DELHI:

STURTEVANT & McINTOSH, PRINTERS, REPUBLICAN OFFICE.

1865.

MEMORIAL ORATION

OF

S. F. MILLER,

ON THE

NATIONAL FAST-DAY, AT FRANKLIN.

Fellow-Citizens :—No man's life-work can be fully appreciated until we know the tools he had to use and the obstacles he overcame. Yet no man's fame is less dependent upon these considerations than our late President's. His work, itself, stands out grand, perfect and colossal, seen of every land, and will remain seen and admired through all the coming ages. But whatever concerned the man who did so much for his country and humanity, is of interest to us.

Abraham Lincoln, the Sixteenth President of the United States, was emphatically a child of the People. Probably no boy of honest parentage looked out upon the nineteenth century with less external advantages. He belonged to the humblest class of free white citizens. His family was of the poor whites of the South, with only means enough to escape from the shadow of slavery into the sunshine of free institutions, and always dependent upon labor for support. His predecessors in the Presidential office were probably the sons or grandsons of farmers or business men, for none of the families in this country are very old, or far removed

from the honest founder who paid for the first homestead by hard labor. But Mr. Lincoln was the first President that had himself belonged to the laboring class. He was a hired man upon a farm, a hired hand upon a flat-boat, had swung the axe and pulled the oar for daily or monthly wages. He had the same feelings, the same sympathies, the same rights and opportunities as the men of his class, and their opportunities for education and improvement were insignificant when compared with those of the laboring men of to-day.

Mr. Lincoln was a self-educated man. Many of our public men have been self-educated, and many young men at the present time secure for themselves the advantages of our best colleges. Yet self-education in an Eastern State, with its free school system, with its academies in every county, and in almost every town, with its numerous colleges and universities, is certainly a very creditable, but not a very difficult work. But self-education fifty years ago, in a new State of the West, with few schools, and those of the rudest rudimentary kind; with no academies, no colleges, no libraries, few books even in the best houses, was a very different undertaking. How little the boy Lincoln was indebted for education to any helps beyond his own genius and perseverance, is sufficiently shown by the fact that all his school days added together, did not amount to one single year.

Amid such bare surroundings, the genius of free institutions found him, and, kindly stimulating his ambition "to scorn delights and live laborious days," led him to the very front rank of the legal profession in his State, and to receive the highest legal degree from the first university in the land, and by the approving voice of the people, led him through the legislative halls of the State and Nation, to be the ruler of thirty millions of freemen.

Abraham Lincoln was the proudest, noblest human product of free American institutions. He stood as the

representative of the opportunities and possibilities of popular government, and was so recognized wherever his name was heard. There was not a Lancashire weaver but somehow knew the President of the United States represented those principles to which he looked for the elevation of himself and his children. There was not a republican heart beating under a Garibaldi shirt in Italy, that did not feel that Abraham Lincoln was the representative of the cause of the people.—Everywhere throughout Christendom, the prayers of the people went up for his and our success, thwarting the wishes and plots of hostile governments. How much we have been indebted to this peculiar sympathy of principle for peace abroad may never be known, but there can be no doubt its effect was very great.

The poverty of Mr. Lincoln's family, which made labor a necessity and delayed his early education and mental development, contributed, I think, not a little to his nomination and election in 1860. It made him the representative of the principle at issue in that contest. Freedom and Slavery, that had been allowed to grow up together under our government, had long ceased to be good neighbors. They were antagonistic in nature and interests. Slavery was arrogant and aggressive. Freedom was patient and long-suffering, knowing that the laws of population and of nature were her's, "that the stars in their courses fought on her side," and she stood on the defensive. But when Slavery sought to rob her of her fairest territories, that had been dedicated to her by solemn compact, the natural antagonism of the two could no longer be concealed. Slavery had fostered a small but powerful aristocracy, that monopolized nearly all the wealth and all political power in the Southern States of the Union.—In the North, Freedom had built up the most wonderfully prosperous communities that the world had ever seen, upon the Democratical idea of the fathers—the natural equality of all men. It is true that the South

was not quite unanimous for slavery and aristocracy, and the North still less unanimous for equality and slavery restriction, but the majorities in the two sections represented these hostile ideas, and the words North and South came to represent political principles, as well as geographical position. The disputes across the border became frequent, often angry, and always showed a radical, irreconcilable difference of opinion. In the last year of this war of words, before the dispute had been taken from the constitutional arena of debate, this dialogue was often heard :

South—Capital should own labor.

North—Labor is the more honorable, and should have every opportunity to acquire capital.

South—The natural normal condition of labor is slavery.

North—Labor must be free, or the laborer cannot be respected.

South—We make the laborer a slave.

North—We make the laborer a—President.

Thus the issue was joined, and Abraham Lincoln, the noblest of the sons of toil, was selected as the standard bearer of the opponents of slavery and aristocracy. I repeat, he was nominated not merely because he was competent, and a true believer and advocate of the principles of his party, but because he was an embodiment of those principles, himself a living witness to the dignity of labor, and to the glorious opportunities of free institutions. It seems idle now to speak of justifying this nomination of Mr. Lincoln. Events have so endorsed its wisdom, he showed himself so fitted for the duties of his great office by that wonderful combination in his character of firmness and leniency, of energy and moderation, of courage in disaster and sobriety in victory, that we are more inclined to give thanks to Providence that He raised up this man for the work to be done. Yet I think that it can be truly said that neither his great abilities, nor his wisdom, nor his suc-

ness ever surprised those early friends who knew him best. His thirty years of professional life had promised and foreshadowed much of this. He had stood at the head of the Bar of the West. He had proved himself a match if not an overmatch, for the ablest debater of the United States Senate, in the Senatorial canvass before the people, and yet his great strength lay in his known integrity of character. No one ever doubted his claim to the name the people instinctively gave him, "Honest Abraham Lincoln." And he was as honest in politics as in the ordinary relations of business.

He was the most democratic of all our public men. I mean the most devoted to the Jeffersonian doctrine of the natural equality of all men. It is remarkable in looking over his speeches to see how often he recurs to the truths of the Declaration of Independence as the gospel of his political faith. This was the fountain to which he always came for new inspiration and vigor. Allow me to read a few of his sentences that will give some idea of the strength and intensity of his opinions on these points. In one of his speeches in the Senatorial contest, he said:—

These communities, (the thirteen colonies,) by their representatives in old Independence Hall, said to the whole world of men: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This was their lofty, and wise, and noble understanding of the justness of the Creator to his creatures. Yes, Gentlemen, to ALL his creatures, to the whole great family of man. In their enlightened belief, nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows. They grasped not only the whole race of men then living, but they reached forward and seized upon the farthest posterity. They erected a beacon to guide their children and their children's children, and the countless myriads who should inhabit the earth in other ages.

Wise statesmen as they were, they knew the tendency of prosperity to breed tyrants, and so they established these great self-evident truths, that when in the distant future some man, some faction, some interest, should set up the doctrine that none but rich men, or none but white men, or none but anglo-saxon white men, were entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, their posterity might look up again to the Declaration of Independence, and take courage to renew the battle which their fathers began—so that truth, and justice, and mercy, and all the humane and christian

virtues, might not be extinguished from the land, so that no man would hereafter dare to limit and circumscribe the great principles on which the temple of liberty was being built.

Now, my countrymen, if you have been taught doctrines conflicting with the great landmarks of the Declaration of Independence; if you have listened to suggestions which would take away from its grandeur, and mutilate the fair symmetry of its proportions; if you have been inclined to believe that all men are not created equal in those inalienable rights enumerated by our chart of liberty, let me entreat you to come back. Return to the fountain whose waters spring close by the blood of the Revolution. Think nothing of me—take no thought for the political fate of any man whomsoever—but come back to the truths that are in the Declaration of Independence.—You may do anything with me you choose, if you will but heed these sacred principles. You may not only defeat me for the Senate, but you may take me and put me to death. While pretending no indifference to earthly honors, I do claim to be actuated in this contest by something higher than an anxiety for office. I charge you to drop every paltry and insignificant thought for any man's success. It is nothing; I am nothing; Judge Douglass is nothing. But do not destroy this immortal emblem of Humanity—the Declaration of American Independence.

I introduce these opinions of Mr. Lincoln here, so that we may all see how impossible it was for him, being an honest man, ever to barter away the principles on which and for which he was elected in 1860, and how still more impossible it was for him, at a later day, ever to compromise away the fruits of that greater victory won by the rich blood of our heroes. Everything that could concern the prosperity or honor of the country that will be worthy of a thought ten years hence, was safe, and would have been safe in his hands.

But not to anticipate, Mr. Lincoln entered upon the duties of his office not unmindful of its great dangers and responsibilities. Having eluded the assassins at Baltimore, he reached Washington and took upon himself the solemn oath to “preserve, defend and protect the Constitution of the United States.” The fleeing traitors of Mr. Buchanan's Cabinet had left the Government unarmed and almost defenseless in the hands of a dotard. A Rebel Government, fully organized and armed, bade defiance to the federal authority, and had already fired upon the flag of the nation. The situation was critical, and was entirely new. There was no

precedent to follow. The Ship of State had been driven into unknown and untried seas, with no chart to direct her course. Storm and darkness closed about her and shut out all the starry guides of the heavens. The fate of the nation, under Providence, depended upon the wisdom of the new President. He called to his aid as constitutional advisers, the ablest men of all sections of the Union party. He even offered prominent positions to some of the leading Bell-Everett statesmen of the South who claimed to be for the Union, but they declined unless he would guarantee slavery in the territories south of the parallel 36, 30. This was a price he could not pay for any man's services.

His cabinet contained statesmen of great ability, long educated in the school of public affairs, yet Mr. Lincoln was always the President—always the responsible head. Although all the different shades of opinion in the party were represented in the Cabinet, and the members were often divided upon questions of policy, yet the President was never under the control of any man or any clique. He patiently and gladly listened to all suggestions and all arguments, but decided for himself, under his own responsibility to the people. No President since General Jackson, was so clearly responsible for the policy of his administration, as Mr. Lincoln.

It is charged that he often changed his policy. There may be some apparent truth in this, meaning thereby only that he attempted different means to secure the same certain fixed purpose. He certainly never deviated from the paramount object in view, to restore and preserve the Union of the States, under the complete and constitutional authority of the Federal Government. His policy was undoubtedly sometimes changed to meet changed circumstances. He said, himself, "I cannot do what I would, but only what circumstances will admit of my accomplishing." In this he showed the wisdom of a true statesman. Napoleon the Great, once wrote, "The more one attains greatness, the less

he can have his own way. Such an one is dependent upon events and circumstances. For myself, I believe that I am the veriest slave among men. My master has no compassion, and that master is the nature of things." This, of course, is much more true in a Republic than in a Monarchy or an Empire. True statesmanship, I think, is first to decide upon a noble object, then to turn all events and circumstances—all the real forces of the present, to the attainment of the end in view. Mr. Lincoln never hastened these changes of means; possibly he was too slow, but he certainly had few to repent of. He knew this was a Government of the people, and that he could do nothing without their aid. He aimed to keep up with public opinion, and not ahead of it. Yet his policy was never vacillating. He took no step backward. Every advance the people allowed him to make, was held as a new base for another forward movement. His object was to save the Union, and his policy was to increase the number of its friends, and divide its enemies. In the early part of the war the Free States could be counted for the Union, and the Gulf States decidedly against it, while the Border States were doubtful, debatable ground; their slaveholding aristocracy being for rebellion, and the majority of the people disposed to be loyal. Mr. Lincoln's policy was to secure these States, thus to strengthen our side and weaken the enemy. I did not like to have so much deference paid to the wishes and opinions of these Border States, and I presume most of you did not.—We thought it cost too much time, and something too much of humiliation. Yet it is no more than justice to admit that we have since learned that the South was then well prepared for war, and the North poorly prepared, and the gaining of time was an advantage to us. But whether this policy was the wisest or not, there can be little doubt that it saved the States of Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri from rushing headlong over the precipice of secession, with the Gulf States.

At a later day he sought, by the same policy of dividing the strength of the enemy, to secure the aid of three millions of black people to the cause of the Union. He believed the necessities of the military situation demanded and justified the measure. For a long time he was obliged to restrain his own wishes, until public sentiment had so nearly come up with him as to make it possible and safe to act. He was an anti-slavery man from the first, as he could not fail to be, believing so firmly in the truths of the great Declaration. Of all the public men I ever knew, I had the most confidence in him on this question. I wish to read a short extract from a speech he made at Philadelphia, on his way to Washington. It was on the occasion of raising the national flag on old Independence Hall :

I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the Colonies from the mother land ; but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but I hope to the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise, that, in due time, the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men. This was a sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Now, my friends, can this country be saved on this basis? If it can, I shall consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help save it. If it cannot be saved on that principle, it will be truly awful. But 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.

This speech, wholly unprepared and almost prophetic, shows the inmost convictions of his heart. Yet with such strong convictions, he withheld the blow that struck the shackles from the slave and made his own name immortal, until the people could see its necessity and endorse its wisdom. He thought (and I believe he was the best judge of public opinion of any man in this country,) the people would not pile up mountains of debt, and pour out rivers of blood to free the slave, but they would to save their country ; and that emancipation was only possible, when seen to be necessary to the life of the nation. And now I am no longer so much offended at the delay, as I am filled with wonder

at his cool head that could so restrain that great, warm heart, ever throbbing, as I know it was, in sympathy with the oppressed. At length the opportunity came. Great calamities had opened the eyes of the people to the necessity of the measure. The rebellion was nearly everywhere victorious on its own soil. Our grandest campaign had failed, our proudest army had been driven back in defeat. The blind, inexorable draft was calling for the first born from many a family, sparing the conservative no more than the radical. It was a day of gloom and of darkness, but the very lightnings of disaster showed the path of duty and of safety. The voice was heard, "Let my people go," and a strong cry came up from the land to rally the black men who had sustained the Confederacy, around the flag of the Republic. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued. It flashed over the land, and while it blinded the rebels with rage, it melted the chains of their slaves. In the light of recent events and of recent victories, I think no loyal man now doubts the necessity or the wisdom of the measure. And, I believe it will prove still more important in the future as a means to the restoration of the Union, and as a guarantee of lasting peace. It knocked out the corner stone of the slaveholder's Confederacy. It demolished the black idol of his worship, and made it once more possible for him to pay his devotions at the altar of his country. No act of Mr. Lincoln's administration will stand higher in the judgment of foreign nations and of posterity, than this. Even now, with us, it must be classed in magnitude and grandeur, with the preservation of the Union itself. These two acts, like two lofty peaks, rise high above all surrounding events—above the storms and clouds of faction, crowned with eternal sunshine. And they will stand forever, bright and eternal monuments to the patriotism and statesmanship of Abraham Lincoln—the savior of his country, the liberator of a race.

Every Department of Mr. Lincoln's administration

will furnish subjects for the admiration of the future historian. The skill with which the national honor has been preserved abroad, while hostile governments have been prevented from finding any possible pretext for intervention—the financial ability that, starting with a bankrupt treasury, has paid out thousands of millions of dollars without a foreign loan, and has created a national currency so long a desideratum, without violating the constitutional scruples of the strictest constructionist—the almost creative talent of the War Department that has organized one of the largest and best armies the world ever saw, from the most peaceful people—the skill that has taught the world so many new lessons in naval construction and ordnance, has destroyed old systems and plans, and made the fleets of Trafalgar and the Nile no longer to be feared—all these, and more, will be recounted with joyful pride to succeeding generations.

Those measures of his administration that had called forth the criticism of its friends or the opposition of its enemies, were signally endorsed by the people. He was nominated for re-election with scarcely a show of opposition. He was elected by the largest majority in the electoral college that any man has received since Washington. He saw the rebellion crumbling away before the moral effect of this firm expression of the popular will, and the strong blows of our victorious armies. The masterly plans of his great Lieutenant were culminating in victories. Richmond fell, the great army of Lee was captured, the chiefs of the Confederacy were fugitives. He returned to Washington amid the acclamations of a joyful people. Suddenly, when sharing in the popular festivities, a mad, reckless assassin lays our deliverer cold in death. That great brain which bore so long the weight and fate of the nation is pierced by a murderous bullet:

“Oh! fallen at length, that tower of strength
That stood four square to all the winds that blew.”

Sorrow seizes all hearts. Eyes that have looked un-

bleached on the lightnings of battle, are wet with tears. Voices that have held listening senates, and voices that have been heard firm in command above the roar of cannon, are broken in sobs. But duty is not forgotten in grief. A strong hand takes the helm. Every rope is manned, the headlands are rounded, thank heaven! the good ship is safely entering the harbor of peace. But never, never shall we forget or cease to honor "the pilot that weathered the storm."

The only title of honor or endearment that Abraham Lincoln had not won for himself, this mad act of the assassin gave him. He, so brave in disaster, so firm for principle, so tender and true, is by that act forevermore canonized in the hearts of the American people, as a martyr for country and liberty. Men in loving sorrow gather up each incident of his life, as tenderly as the little children are said to have gathered the precious drops of his blood on the spot where he was assassinated. I can add little to these sacred relics.

I often met the President, on business for my constituents, and received nothing but kindness at his hands. He was one of the few men of national reputation that grew, the nearer you approached him. I was from the first impressed with his conscientious honesty and his kindness of heart. I remember to have called on him one day with the brother of a deserter who had been arrested. The excuse was that the soldier had been home on a sick furlough, and that he afterwards became partially insane, and had consequently failed to return and report in proper time. He was on his way to his regiment at the front to be tried. The President at once ordered him to be stopped at Alexandria and sent before a board of surgeons for examination as to the question of insanity. This seemed to me so proper that I expressed myself satisfied. But on going out the brother, who was anxious for an immediate discharge, said to me, "the trouble with your President is that he is so afraid of doing something wrong." This

complaint, which was the only one he could make, I remembered as the highest praise. Mr. Lincoln was a brave man, but he had not the courage to do what he thought was wrong. I several times had occasion to present the application of mothers for the discharge of the last surviving son—in some cases where two or three had died in the service. The statement of the case always touched his sympathies—you could almost hear the throbbings of his great heart. Yet these were a few of thousands of similar applications all over the land—many of them presented in person—and even where the request could not be granted, they went away feeling that the chief of the nation appreciated all the hardships of war, and fully sympathized with the sorrows it brought.

He was always industrious. The labors of his early life were nothing in comparison with those of his office. Few men in the country actually labored more hours in a day than its President, to say nothing of a nation's cares he always bore. His ear was ever open to the people's wishes and complaints. The ante-room to his office was crowded by people of all classes, and they had all his time that could be spared from the great duties of the state. He had none of the pride or insolence of office. He was frank, and, "as the greatest only are, in his simplicity sublime." These traits of his character misled some of the artful politicians in the early part of his administration. His frankness invited approach, and his simplicity led them to think he could be easily overreached. He would patiently hear their suggestions, but they often went away with some queer story in their ear that they could not help laughing at, but which somehow left the awkward impression that this plain man had looked right through them, and read their most secret motives. He had a due appreciation of the dignity of his office, but also of his own dignity; and he never thought it necessary to be anything else than honest, plain Abraham Lincoln in the Presidential chair.

He was carefully truthful. Of all the disappointed applicants for office and favors that I saw, (and they were many,) I heard no one charge the President with having broken a promise. A promise once made, was ever after sacred with him. On questions of principle he was as firm as granite, but on non-essentials, easily persuaded. This firmness of principle, and flexibility on questions of minor importance, most wonderfully fitted him to be the head of a party and of a people in revolutionary times.

He was ever kind and generous towards political opponents, if he thought them patriotic, and killed the venom of opposition in most men who approached him. His wit and humor made him a delightful companion. They were seldom used for display, but always for illustration. On close inspection you found his wit was half logic, and his logic was half wit. Those letters for the people—the one to the Albany Committee, on arbitrary arrests, and the one to the Illinois convention, on the Emancipation Proclamation, furnish good illustrations of this peculiar combination of wit and logic. And I think it may be doubted if any better political letters were ever written in this country. Mr. Lincoln abhorred slavery, and every form of oppression, but he fully appreciated the embarrassments of the slaveholder, and was most anxious to make the charge as easy for him as was compatible with justice to the slave.—In short, he did everything from a sense of duty, and nothing from passion or malice. He seemed the best fitted of all men, to heal the wounds of civil war with the fewest scars, and at the same time to secure the full fruits of the great sacrifice.

But why recount his virtues? They only enhance our loss. He is dead. A nation weeps. The admiring world—the presage of the voice of history—pays him such honors as a mortal never before received. He is gone; but nothing shall deprive us of the rich legacy of his shining example, his devotion to principle, his

kindness to all, his sacrifice for the oppressed. He has gone.

"Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy—nothing
Can touch him further."

He died for us. He had not a single personal enemy. He died because he represented and carried out our principles. That insignificant villain Booth, is not the assassin. The fell spirit of slavery, that has so long distracted our country; that has set neighbor against neighbor, and torn friend from friend; that has put violence above law; that has mobbed peaceful citizens; that struck down our senators in the council halls of the nation; that has muzzled the pulpit, and shut the book of life; that has filled our homes with mourning; that has starved Union prisoners; that has desecrated the graves of our dead heroes; that has drenched our country in blood; that has ridged our land all over with new made graves: this demon, Slavery, has murdered our President! Oh! let us not, in our desire to punish the accomplices and tools, allow the great criminal to escape. But here, before the new grave of our beloved President, let us swear that we will cease no effort, we will shrink from no labor, we will be cheated by no device, we will be satisfied with no lesser criminal, while one breath of life remains in this vile monster, to plot new rebellions, and to instigate new assassins. Do we, my friends, so promise and swear? Then let his holy spirit, that so hated this great wrong, and so suffered by it, record our solemn oath.

He is gone—so great and so beloved. His body has been borne to its last resting place, on the quiet prairie, amid the lamentations of a mighty nation,

"Mourning when their leaders fall,
And sorrow darkens hamlet and hall."

He died for his country, and his country honors him.— He broke the chains of the poor, the despised, the oppressed, and he has gone up to receive the welcome

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me." He stepped from the topmost round of earthly greatness into the company of the heroes and martyrs who lived and died to bless mankind. And on the anniversary of the death of his great Master, who died to make men holy, he died to make men free.

