

REMINISCENCES OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

LINCOLN'S RECEPTION TO TOM THUMB—HIS FAVOR- ITE BOOKS OF HUMOR—IN HIS COFFIN.

BY GRACE GREENWOOD.

My actual acquaintance with President Lincoln was slight, but the place it fills in my memory seems great, and is a very sacred one. During a visit to Washington, in late war time, I received an informal invitation to a reception *extraordinaire* at the White House. It was to meet Mr. and Mrs. Charles S. Stratton — “General Tom Thumb” — and his wife, Lavinia, then on their bridal tour. I suppose that Mr. Barnum, a good loyal Republican, had solicited an audience for his then most famous, comely and *comme il faut* human curiosities, and that the President and Mrs. Lincoln, with an amiable desire to share a novel little entertainment with their friends, had sent out a limited number of invitations. I think Mr. Lincoln’s quick sense of fitness led him to pass over all members of their circle, so stiffened by social starch or official solemnity as to be likely to find the occasion *infra dig.*, and so, unenjoyable.

I was presented to the President and Mrs. Lincoln by Mr. Lovejoy, and was made very happy and a little proud by being received by them as already “a friend,” having become known to them in their home in Springfield through my work in magazines and newspapers —

especially the *National Era*, the *Independent*, and my own publication, the *Little Pilgrim*; so I felt at home speedily.

Yet Mr. Lincoln, before I heard his sweet-toned voice, and saw his singularly sympathetic smile, was certainly an awesome personage to me. So tall, gaunt and angular was his figure—so beyond all question, plain, was his face, furrowed and harrowed by unexampled cares and infinite perplexities, while over all was a simple dignity which was more than sacerdotal—a peculiar, set-apart look, which I have never seen in any other man, never shall see.

Mr. Lincoln's dress was sombre black, unrelieved except by gloves of white or very light kid, which had a rather ghastly effect on his large, bony hands. But Mrs. Lincoln was gay enough in attire—a low-necked gown of rich pink silk, with flounces climbing high up, over a hoop-skirt trellis, and pink roses in her hair. She was not handsome, but her manner was pleasant and kindly. She must have had a good heart, after all said, for her husband loved her. She must have had a more than ordinary intelligence, for Charles Sumner respected her opinions, and he knew her well. She certainly lacked worldly wisdom, tact and judgment—fatal lackings in her case. The dizzy elevation of her storm-rocked position, and its perils, unsettled her brain in effect, and the tragedy which shook the world, cast her "quite, quite down." Most desolate and misunderstood of women was she at the last.

Of the President's household present that evening, I remember two young men, who I thought ought to make careers for themselves, not alone because they looked clever, thoughtful and scholarly, but because their daily

association with Abraham Lincoln must be a liberal education in noble ideas and aims, in manliness and mansuetude. These young gentlemen were the President's son, Robert, and his secretary, John Hay.

Rather to my surprise the high-toned and austere Secretary of the Treasury, Mr. Chase, was one of the guests, coming in early, as though in boyish haste to see the show. He was then but little past his prime, and a superb looking man. With him was his darling daughter, Kate — "the prettiest Kate in Christendom" — tall, graceful, her small Greek head borne royally, her lovely, piquant face untouched by care or sorrow, her exquisite dark eyes with their heavily fringed lids, full of a certain entangling charm.

Secretary Stanton was not there, to my disappointment, as in our younger days we had been familiar friends. Doubtless he thought this occasion a bit of fooling, unsuited to this most critical and sorrowful time of the imperilled Republic, when "men must work, and women must weep," their hardest and bitterest. He always was awfully in earnest. A pun once nearly cost me his friendship, and it was a good pun, too.

That night I first saw General Butler. It appears to me that he never changed much in all the years that followed till he died, in the house next to this — only yesterday, it seems. A little heavier grew that powerful face, a little less arrogant and audacious in expression, a little balder became that masterful, low, broad head without any "bump" of veneration, till in his coffin it looked like an antique bust of an old Roman emperor of the Augustan line — hard, but grand.

As was natural, perhaps, the autocrat of New Orleans had little sympathy with the quaint Commander-in-

Chief, whose big, soft heart so often played the mischief with military discipline through a flagrant exercise of the pardoning power; but he had to respect the moral steadfastness and purity of the man.

The reception took place in the East room; and when, following the loud announcement, "Mr. and Mrs. Charles Stratton," the guests of honor entered from the corridor, and walked slowly up the long *salon*, to where Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln stood, to welcome them, the scene became interesting, though a little bizarre. The pigmy "General," at that time still rather good-looking, though slightly *blasé*, wore his elegant wedding suit, and his wife, a plump but symmetrical little woman, with a bright, intelligent face, her wedding dress—the regulation white satin, with point lace, orange blossoms and pearls—while a train some two yards long swept out behind her. I well remember the "pigeon-like stateliness" with which they advanced, almost to the feet of the President, and the profound respect with which they looked up, up, to his kindly face. It was pleasant to see their tall host bend, and bend, to take their little hands in his great palm, holding Madame's with especial chariness, as though it were a robin's egg, and he were fearful of breaking it. Yet he did not *talk* down to them, but made them feel from the first as though he regarded them as real "folks," sensible, and knowing a good deal of the world. He presented them, very courteously and soberly, to Mrs. Lincoln, and in his compliments and congratulations there was not the slightest touch of the exaggeration which a lesser man might have been tempted to make use of, for the quiet amusement of on-lookers; in fact, nothing to reveal to that shrewd little pair his keen sense of the incongruity of

the scene. He was, I think, most amused by the interest and curiosity of his "little Tad," who seemed disposed to patronize the diminutive gentleman and lady, grown up and married, yet lacking his lordly inches. When refreshments were being served, he graciously superintended his mother's kindly arrangements, by which the distinguished little folk were able to take their cake, wine and ices comfortably, off a chair.

Later, while the bride and groom were taking a quiet promenade by themselves up and down the big drawing-room, I noticed the President gazing after them with a smile of quaint humor; but, in his beautiful, sorrow-shadowed eyes, there was something more than amusement—a gentle, human sympathy in the apparent happiness and good-fellowship of this curious wedded pair—come to him out of fairyland.

After they were gone I had my little talk with, or rather from, Mr. Lincoln; for, naturally, I said but little during those golden moments. He was in one of his most genial moods; and judging, perhaps, from my newspaper connections that I was not a fool, he even favored me with a few of his "little stories," which he told very simply and tersely, yet with inimitable drollery. As was characteristic of him, he evidently was most amused by one wherein the joke was against himself. As I recall it, the story ran that a certain honest old farmer, visiting the capital for the first time, was taken by the member from his "deestrick" to some large gathering or entertainment, at which he was told he could see the President. Unfortunately, Mr. Lincoln did not appear; and the Congressman, being a bit of a wag and not liking to have his constituent disappointed, pointed

out Mr. R., of Minnesota, a gentleman of a particularly round and rubicund countenance; the worthy farmer, greatly astonished, exclaimed: "Is that Old Abe? Well, I du declare! He's a better-lookin' man than I expected to see; but it does seem as if his troubles had driven him to drink."

After this evening I only saw Mr. Lincoln at two of his public receptions, when the people—or torrent of humanity—surged into the White House, and swept past him, every soul-wave mirroring clear his pale, patient face, and taking a glint from his kindly eyes. Each time I was made happy by an instant and smiling recognition and a few words of special welcome.

To pass into the presence, as one of a great crowd, even, was to receive from Mr. Lincoln a real, honest, hearty handshake, which you felt to the tips of your toes. Nowadays the official fashion is less neighborly and more perfunctory. The great man touches your fingers an instant, while looking over your shoulder for the next comer, or clutches your hand any way, pulls you forward and passes you on. You *think* he has said a word or two, but you are not quite sure.

Every moment that I found it possible on those occasions to linger near Mr. Lincoln, I spent in studying the face of the man on whose single life hung the destinies of a country and the redemption of a race. It was always the same impression. Under the pleasantest light of his eyes, I divined a depth of melancholy unfathomable.

- Yet I recognized then, almost as clearly as I do now, the "saving grace" of those gifts of imagination and humor, which gave him temporary "surcease from sorrow," and the soul-weariness of helpless pity, through

poetry, the drama, and those droll "little stories," so often wisdom in homely disguise — parables of subtle significance. It takes nothing from my respect for him, as a hero and a Christian, to know that he kept on the stand by the side of his bed, volumes of his favorite humorists. When, in the dreary watches of the night, the bitter waters of his "sea of troubles" were rising to his lips, I doubt not he found the buoyant wit of "Pickwick" more potent to bear him up than the bat-wings of Young's "Night Thoughts." Doubtless there was for him more heart-lightenings in Artemus Ward than in Isaac Watts; and he may have found in the homely diet of Hosea Biglow more stimulating mental aliment than in all the philosophy of Athens or Concord. I believe that one good, hearty laugh did him more good than any number of those recitations of "O Why should the Spirit of Mortal be Proud?" he was addicted to in his low and sentimental moods.

Not till that woful time when a tidal wave of national mourning swept across the continent, did I look again on the face of Abraham Lincoln. It was at Philadelphia — one of the stations in the great funeral progress. He lay in state, in Independence Hall, where one could almost believe that he had a double guard of honor, one invisible to us — the august shades of men whose patriotic act made that chamber glorious forever.

Accorded a private view, I was able to remain as long as I could bear to stay beside the casket, gazing down on what seemed to me a dread *simulacrum* of the face of our great friend — so unlike was it, though so like. The color was not the pallor I remembered, but a sort of ashen gray; the mouth looked stern, and then, the total eclipse of those benignant eyes! People said the face

was "peaceful"; but it was an awful peace, there remained such touching shadows of mortal sorrow, struggle and strain. It was as though the soul, sunk deep beyond deep in God's rest, had left in its garment of flesh the perfect mould of its mortal cares, its piteous yearnings, its unspeakable weariness.

I have always pitied those who have only such recollections of Abraham Lincoln, and have been fervently thankful that while he yet lived I looked on that now historic figure and found it heroic in its grand ungainliness; on that worn and rugged face, and found it both lovable and impressive; that my hand has been grasped, in greeting and farewell, by the hand that performed the grandest work of the century; that my eyes have gazed full into those sad, prophetic eyes, whose tired lids were pressed down at last by the long-prayed-for Angel of Peace.

And I am thankful that it was my privilege to know some of his greatest generals, and those splendid aids of his, the "war governors" of the North and West, and also the faithful statesmen and patriots, who here at the Capital "upheld his hands"—Stanton, Chase and Seward, Henry Wilson, Hannibal Hamlin, Thaddeus Stevens, Joseph Holt, all gone—the type gone!

— "O, woe is me,
To have seen what I have seen—see what I see!"

WASHINGTON, March 19th, 1895.