

## TWO VICE-PRESIDENTS.

JOHN C. BRECKINRIDGE AND HANNIBAL HAMLIN.

**J**OHN C. BRECKINRIDGE was the first of ten of the public men of the country whose occupancy of the Vice-Presidency has given me an opportunity of acquiring a knowledge of their personal characteristics, as well as some judgment of their ability and merit as statesmen. He was elected Vice-President, with Mr. Buchanan as President, in 1856, the year in which I entered the public service at Washington. He had been four years a member of the House of Representatives from Kentucky, having been elected to that body in 1851. He was, in person, an elegant, high-bred Kentucky gentleman, over six feet in height, straight and lofty in his carriage, youthful and dashing — more like a Highland chieftain than a grave legislator. He was exceedingly affable, pleasant, and polished in his intercourse with his fellows, except under the excitement of heated debate. He would then bound over all barriers, as a knight rushing upon his foe, regardless of personal peril, and intent only on the blood of his victim. This impetuosity of temper in debate frequently involved him in personalities which required settlement outside of the House.

Near the end of his service in the House this uncontrollable fire resulted in a serious quarrel with Francis B. Cutting of New York, and a challenge passed between them. Breckinridge spent a week or ten days in unknown retirement at Silver Spring, the house of Francis P. Blair, senior, five miles out of Washington, in preparation for the encounter, which, however, never came off. The friendship which Mr. Blair showed to the young Kentuckian at this time was remembered, years afterward, when Jubal Early and Breckinridge halted their rebel army for the night at Silver Spring, on their way to attack Washington. They burned to the ground the house of Montgomery Blair, Postmaster-General under Lincoln, but they spared that of his father, although they drank up all the wines and ate all the good things they found in it, celebrating in advance the sure victory of the morrow, which their tarry for the night turned into defeat.

Mr. Breckinridge had in a remarkable degree the characteristics of his blood. He was born of one of the oldest and most celebrated

families of Kentucky, and he and his admirers were wont to boast that in him had been bred the blood of those families to a higher perfection than in any other of her sons then in public life. He was a genuine Kentucky thoroughbred, and exhibited in a marked degree the points of his lineage. He was distinguished more for personal impressiveness of speech and manner, of figure and address, than for intellectual power, and would be classed, not with the constructors of institutions, but rather with those who fashion and polish what others design and rough-hew.

He was, however, notwithstanding these pretensions, a general favorite. Everybody likes a full-blooded Kentuckian. After four years' service in the House of Representatives he was appointed minister to Spain; he was elected Vice-President at thirty-five, was the candidate of the Democratic party for the Presidency at thirty-nine, and was elected senator at forty. In the Confederacy, after he was expelled from the United States Senate for disloyalty, he was a major-general the same year, and secretary of war about four years later.

He was an honorable and (if there is any distinction in the two words) an honest man, and was conscientious in the discharge of every official duty, never betraying a trust and never doing a mean thing to advance a cause, however infatuated and blinded in its espousal. When the time came, as it did at last, that his convictions would no longer permit him to stand with the Union, he did not sneak away like a thief, as did Floyd and Thompson when they could no longer serve the rebellion in the official robes and with the official opportunities of the Union. Nor did he follow Twiggs in the footsteps of Arnold, in a traitorous surrender of the post he had been intrusted to defend; but openly, before the world, he announced his convictions, and left the office and the cause he could no longer serve for the field, taking up the sword, as a soldier might, for what he deemed the right.

While he was yet Vice-President, the opportunity came to him which came to no other man during the war, to turn order into chaos and to wreck the Union by the forms of an official edict. Nevertheless, though all his sympathy and nearly all his blood were on the side of the Confederacy, he resisted the temptation, and

discharged, with Roman fidelity, the duty imposed on him by the Constitution, and the nation was saved. This act, in my judgment, goes far to condone the errors of his after life.

The occasion to which I refer was when the time had arrived for determining officially whether Lincoln was elected — over whose election the South had already gone to war. There had been a wide-spread conviction during the whole winter that there existed a conspiracy to prevent, by fraud or violence, a declaration of the result by the Vice-President in the presence of the two Houses, as provided by law. The very uncertainty as to what means would be resorted to — whether the certificates would fail to appear upon that day; whether they would be wrested by violence from the hands which bore them across the rotunda from the Senate-chamber to the hall of the House, or would be manipulated or suppressed by the only official who could open them, that official being himself a candidate, and known to be in sympathy with the rebellion; or whether, at the last moment, he would refuse to declare the result — all this contributed to fill every patriotic heart with anxiety and fearful forebodings. But Mr. Breckinridge, whatever part he may have resolved ultimately to take if the war should continue, turned a deaf ear to those who tempted him to betray this sacred official trust. A breathless silence, painfully intense, pervaded the crowded chamber as he arose to make declaration of the result of the election. It was a supreme moment. The galleries were packed with hostile conspirators, but, interspersed among them, unknown to them and to the Vice-President, were a hundred armed policemen, selected from those most trusty in New York and Philadelphia. The Vice-President was pale and a little nervous, but firm on his feet and unflinching in his utterance. With a voice which dispelled the oppressive stillness, he said, "I therefore declare Abraham Lincoln duly elected President of the United States for the term of four years from the fourth day of March next." And thus the dead-point of peril was passed in safety.

Mr. Breckinridge continued in the service of the Union a few months longer as a senator during the extra session in July called by Mr. Lincoln after the rebels fired on Sumter. During that brief session he strove to satisfy the public judgment that the South had just ground for its course, and that, under the Constitution, there was no remedy for it, or help for the Union. He satisfied only himself, and sadly failed to convince others. One of the debates in which he took part in that session was so dramatic in some of its features that the impression it made upon me is still vivid. It oc-

curred a few days before the disaster at Ball's Bluff, in which the lamented Baker, one of the most effective orators who ever sat in the Senate, was killed. Breckinridge had taken the position in debate that the Constitution had made no provision for the exigency which confronted us, and was pressing for an answer to his question. "What will you do with us if you do conquer us? We can still vote. What hinders the vanquished from marching from the battle-field in solid column to the ballot-box, and beating you there, if we shall number there more than you do? You may defeat us in the field, but you cannot disfranchise us till after conviction and judgment of court; and you cannot do that till you have tried us by twelve of our own peers in the very State whose people have themselves revolted. So while you may conquer us in arms, we will afterward conquer you at the ballot-box." At that moment Baker entered the Senate-chamber in full uniform, fresh from his command at Ball's Bluff, and, placing his sword across his desk, plunged at once into the debate. The garb of the warrior in which he stood strangely emphasized the words of the legislator when he fiercely hurled back the answer, "We will govern you as conquered provinces." These men parted for the last time that day. A few days later one sealed his devotion to the Union with his life-blood. It had been better for the other if he had not survived him.

Mr. Breckinridge did not greatly distinguish himself in the service of the Confederacy, into which he entered immediately after the close of this short extra session, and in which he became a major-general, and afterward secretary of war. The downfall of that government was the downfall of all his ambitions, and he had no courage thenceforth for new undertakings. His spirits seemed utterly to forsake him, and he withdrew from the world, living several years in retirement abroad, and returning to his old home at Lexington only a few years before his death, which took place in 1875,— a sad failure of a life of rare promise and of exceptional opportunities.

A scene at his death-bed was too full of pathos, and too replete with lessons taught by the mysterious mutability of human affairs, to pass unnoticed. His last illness was a long and lingering one, and his light went out slowly. It happened that, shortly before his death, Henry Wilson, then himself Vice-President, was making political speeches in the vicinity of Lexington; and it came to the ear of Breckinridge that he had made kind and tender inquiry concerning his former associate in the public service. The sick statesman was deeply moved by this manifestation of regard on the part of an old political opponent, and caused it to be understood that a visit would give him plea-

sure. Mr. Wilson accordingly made a detour for that purpose. It is related that the scene at the bedside as the two—each, as it proved, within almost a handbreadth of the end of his career—took each other by the hand, and spoke of the past, its successes on the one hand and its failures on the other, was exceedingly touching. I will not attempt to describe it: it was a scene for a painter.

I know of no two lives in all American history which have been ordered in such sharp and instructive contrast from beginning to ending as the lives of these two men. One of them sprang from one of the proudest and most aristocratic, as well as ablest and most powerful, of the ruling families of Kentucky; the other was of an origin so humble and obscure that it could hardly be traced. One was born at the open gate of fortune, influence, and opportunity; the other was born in the lap of squalid want. Both set out in life under the influence of a controlling ambition. One thirsted for glory and power and fame; the other to be emancipated from poverty and neglect. The career of Breckinridge lay along an even pathway lighted up from the outset with the encouraging smiles of influential friends, and overhung with tempting prizes, which he gathered thick and fast at every step; while Wilson began the ascent of a steep and rugged mountain-path alone, and toiled upward without help, beset by discouragements, confronted all the way with difficulties, and cheered by no light ahead or reward in sight. The Vice-Presidency came to Breckinridge almost by force of gravity, as ripe fruit drops into a basket ready to receive it; it came to Wilson as tribute to a life of toil spent in the uplifting of down-trodden humanity. A just people has placed the cypress upon the grave of one, and the laurel on the grave of the other.

HANNIBAL HAMLIN, Vice-President under Lincoln, was as unlike his predecessor in office in all the characteristics for which men are remembered as could well be. He was the son of a simple, plain farmer, of no pretensions, of scanty means, toiling hard to wring out of an unwilling soil the precarious subsistence of a numerous family. He had no other pedigree to show than that of hard-fisted, clear-headed, honest progenitors, as far back as the record goes. By the death of his father he was compelled to take entire charge of the farm during his minority, and thus lost the chance of a college education, for which he had made some preparation. Afterward he took up the law. He was not, therefore, a man of such culture as comes from classical education, or study of books, or contact with scholars and learned men. His long public career, however,

brought him so constantly into daily intercourse with public men that the instincts of a true gentleman were developed in a remarkable degree. Never losing that plain, simple, unaffected manner which belonged to the life his fathers had lived before him, he nevertheless acquired an ease, almost reaching gracefulness, in his converse with men and women, which came to be quite charming. He was a true gentleman—not a handsome, elegant gentleman like his predecessor, but one that every one recognized had no alloy in his composition, nothing but genuine sincerity in the hand he offered. Mr. Hamlin was a little under six feet in height, stocky in his build, and unusually swarthy in his complexion. Although always neat and tidy in his attire, he seemed entirely indifferent to fashion or style in his dress. He wore all his life just such clothes as he was wearing when I first knew him forty years ago. I never saw him except in a black swallow-tailed coat, and without an overcoat; and he clung to the old-fashioned stock long after it had been discarded by the rest of mankind. He was an inveterate smoker, using a clay pipe in his room, and cigars only when abroad where others used them. He played cards incessantly—old sledge, whist, and eucher—till the day of his death, whenever he could find those who would join him in the game; but he would never gamble. He was no student of books—such men never are; but he was ever studying men and things, and few knew them better. His conversation was piquant, crisp, and pungent, but there never was any sting in it.

Hamlin was fond of a joke, and never spared an opportunity. He confessed, however, that a joke once cost him a United States senatorship. It happened in this way, he said. He was Speaker of the Maine House of Representatives, and one day, during a very dull debate, as he sat listless in his chair, his eye fell on a prim, dapper little gentleman who had got himself up with unusual care, even for him, and had smoothed down his hair with pomatum till every hair was straight and fast. For the fun of it, Hamlin sent a page, with the compliments of the Speaker, to inform him that one of the hairs on the top of his head had got out of place and was lying crosswise. The member was angry, and sent back word that he would take no such insult from any man. No apology, no atonement, would appease him. The next year there was a vacancy in the Senate, and Mr. Hamlin came within one vote of election. That vote he could never obtain. It was the insulted member who refused to the end to vote for him, and his party was compelled to take another man. A few years later, however, another va-

cancy occurring, he was elected, the irate member having in the mean time disappeared.

Mr. Hamlin was always a favorite with the people of Maine. Poor, and without family or other influence to advance him, he was elected, to the legislature at twenty-seven, three years after he was admitted to the bar; was reelected four times, for three years of which he was Speaker of the House; was elected to Congress at thirty-four, and to the Senate at thirty-eight; was reelected in 1851; resigned in 1857 to be candidate for governor, and, after being elected, was reelected as his own successor. He was elected Vice-President in 1860, and was again senator in 1869, serving till 1881, when he declined reelection. In addition to these elective offices, he held, by appointment under Johnson, the collectorship of the port of Boston, resigning it after one year; and after he left the Senate, the post of minister to Spain under Garfield, resigning that office after two years' service, and retiring in 1883 to private life at his old home in Bangor, where he continued to live till his death in 1891. His public service of forty-seven years has few parallels. In every place to which he was called he acquitted himself with credit and without reproach.

Mr. Hamlin made no pretensions to oratory, but nevertheless he was a debater of uncommon force and skill. He was distinguished for the cleverness and the directness of his statement. His style was terse and crisp, with a good deal of the Yankee in the quaintness and aptness of his way of putting things. His long service and absolute integrity added great weight to his opinions and judgment. He, however, spoke rarely; but in all legislative business—of far more importance at all times than oratory—he ranked among the first, and as a political adviser he was a leader.

He was the soul of honor, as well in his private relations and public duties as in all political transactions. He was born a democrat, and remained through life democratic in every fiber and impulse. He identified himself at the outset with the political party which bears that name, and was brought into public life by it as a favorite of promise, of whom it was justly proud. He continued to act with it till the Kansas-Nebraska struggle of 1852, although always a hater of slavery, and chafing more and more every year under the increasing domination of the slave power. The repeal of the Missouri Compromise was the last straw with him. He was at that time chairman of the committee on naval affairs in the Senate, and, as such, in some sense the official mouth-piece of the administration in all matters pertaining to the navy which came before the Senate. Finding that he could not follow the administration in the course it was pursuing,

he refused to occupy an equivocal position, and in a speech of exceedingly broad statesmanship as well as political philosophy he pointed out the necessity of his retirement from the official relationship which he then held toward the administration. Thereupon he joined the minority, carrying with him the respect as well as the sincere regret of those he left. Among the early acts of Andrew Johnson after he became President was the appointment, as collector of the port of Boston, of the man to whose place as Vice-President he had, under an inscrutable dispensation of Providence, succeeded. But scarcely a year had elapsed before Johnson had so far departed from the principles of the political party which elected him as to be at open war with it. Mr. Hamlin had not a pulsation in common with Johnson in this struggle; but believing that the office he held was of such a character as entitled the President to a representative of his own political views, he unhesitatingly tendered his resignation.

His swarthy complexion, which his political opponents made use of in the South during the presidential campaign of 1860 to arouse and intensify the prejudice they had engendered against the "Black Republicans," did not annoy him. He was too much of a man to be troubled by such trifles. Yet on one occasion a speaker declared that "the Black Republicans had nominated a nigger for Vice-President." This was done in the presence of a former associate of his in Congress, then a personal and political friend, who sat on the platform, but who, when he followed, had neither the manliness nor the courage to rebuke or correct the slanderer of his friend. Mr. Hamlin publicly denounced this meanness.

In 1871, I was traveling with friends in California, and was induced to go on a two days' journey into the interior to see a petrified forest, with a promise that I could stop for the night at Calistoga,—a Californian resort,—where I could partake of chicken broth flowing perpetually from one spring, and fresh soda-water from another, and gather ink enough from a third to supply the world. On reaching this wonderful half-way station, and going to the hotel register, I found the names of Hannibal Hamlin and Horace Maynard on the record of the day before. Commenting with my friend upon these names, I was overheard by the landlord behind the counter. "Hannibal Hamlin," said he—"Hannibal Hamlin! It seems to me I have heard that name before. Did n't he run for some office somewhere once?" On my representing to him the distinguished character of the guests he had been entertaining, he gave me a look as much as to say, "You can't palm off any Cali-

formia yarn on me"; and then broke out in a very uncomplimentary comment on the two strangers, one of whom he took to be a negro and the other an Indian. In a moment he saw that he had been saying something offensive; so he instantly apologized, and ended by inviting me to repair to the spring and take a bowl of chicken broth with him.

Mr. Hamlin was a true gentleman. Punctilious himself in the observance of all the requirements of gentlemanly intercourse, he was equally exacting of every courtesy due him from others. He permitted no man to be rude to him, or to assume the attitude of a superior. On one occasion one of the able men and leaders of the Senate, distinguished for a self-conscious, lordly air in his deportment, in the change of seats which occurs once in two years in the Senate-chamber had gained a seat by the side of Mr. Hamlin, and began at once to practise upon him those little exactions and annoyances which he had been accustomed to impose upon others. After a few days of yielding to these encroachments, Mr. Hamlin turned, and in a tone that did not require repetition said, "Sir, if you expect to be treated like a gentleman, you must prove yourself one." There was never occasion afterward to repeat the admonition.

The nomination of Mr. Hamlin for Vice-President came to him unsought and unexpected. We at Washington had no other thought but that Mr. Seward would head the ticket, and that Mr. Lincoln or some other Western man would be selected for the second place. Our hearts were broken with disappointment. The news of Mr. Lincoln's nomination reached Washington in the afternoon, that of Mr. Hamlin late in the evening. The intermediate time was spent in nursing our anger. But when the nomination of Mr. Hamlin was announced, a stormy multitude crowded his hotel, and forced him out upon the balcony. The night was gloomy, and the crowd was more so. But his first sentence, "What is one man in this crisis?" lifted the cloud, and let in the light. Before he ceased we were ready to lay aside our idol, and pledge our loyalty to a new leader.

The displacement of Mr. Hamlin and the substitution of Andrew Johnson on the ticket at Mr. Lincoln's renomination caused much discussion at the time, which was renewed with some bitterness upon the death of Mr. Hamlin. There was no mystery about it in Washington when it was done, and there would have been no dispute over it afterward had not the result proved so disastrous. Mr. Lincoln, from the beginning of his administration, felt the necessity of securing and preserving the support of the War Democrats; and with that end in view he was ever seeking place and oppor-

tunity for all of them who could be induced to take active part in the work he had on hand. Specially did he desire to broaden the base of the party which was maintaining the Union; and therefore a Unionist from the South had a double welcome. These views led him, with entire respect for Mr. Hamlin, and with the highest appreciation of his worth, nevertheless to think it wise that a more pronounced and recent War Democrat should be associated with him on the ticket. And when the way seemed to his friends to be open, in the person of Mr. Johnson, to secure this, and at the same time to refute our opponents' charge of sectionalism by a ticket from the North and the South combined, as had formerly been the usage, he felt that those who had brought it about, without any agency of his, had acted wisely in the selection which was finally made.<sup>1</sup> Just at that time, too, Johnson was a hero in the eyes of all Union men. He had fought in the Senate a terrific fight for the Union, and his life had been openly threatened on the floor of the Senate. A single incident will show how great was the confidence Northern men reposed in him. The Massachusetts delegation to the convention at Baltimore, which nominated him in the place of Hamlin, were supposed to have contributed to the result. Two of them visited Washington after it was over. They called on me, and I took the liberty of deprecating the action of the convention in this respect in as strong language as I could command. They went from my room to call upon Mr. Sumner, and brought back this message from his lips: "I only wish the ticket had been turned round." Hamlin's rejection wounded deeply a faithful public servant. But the wound bled only internally, for no visible sign of it was ever revealed to the public.

Mr. Hamlin was sent back into public service in the Senate by his State at the first opportunity, and continued, as senator and as foreign minister, till his voluntary retirement in 1883. The remainder of his life was spent at his home in Bangor with that dignity and simplicity of deportment which became his character and service, and with the esteem of his fellow-citizens.

His death occurred on the 4th of July. What could be more fitting than that such a life should come to a close on that day? He was the third of those who had held the Vice-Presidency whose lives ended upon the nation's birthday.

<sup>1</sup> For other views of Mr. Lincoln's attitude toward this nomination, see "Abraham Lincoln," by John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Vol. IX, page 73, and "Two War-Time Conventions," by Noah Brooks, in *THE CENTURY* for March, 1895.—EDITOR.