

THE FAITH OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

BY L. E. CHITTENDEN.

THE endeavor now to write anything novel about President Lincoln is much like threshing old straw. While he has been gradually rising to the position he now holds in the world's esteem, it is not strange that those who had any acquaintance with him should each wish to contribute his mite to the aggregate of material concerning a man of such distinguished abilities. No American, possibly no public man anywhere, has had so many biographers; no biographers have ever written with a more imperfect knowledge of their subject than some of the authors of the so-called Lives of Lincoln. Some of these writers had private griefs to ventilate, and, not courageous enough to oppose the general opinion of his sterling worth, have descended in a shamefaced way to make public assumed defects in his character; and others, claiming to be his old associates and friends, have hinted at scandals connected with his origin and early life which had no foundation, and which would never have been heard of but for their officiousness. Their poor excuse is a desire to exhibit Mr. Lincoln as he was, and not as the world would have him to be. There have been in the lives of all great men occurrences upon which friendship lays the seal of silence, and it would have been more to the credit of these writers if they had emulated the dignified silence with which Mr. Lincoln treated unfortunate circumstances which he could neither prevent nor control. Examples of both these classes will be found in any collection of the lives of Mr. Lincoln, and conspicuously in one collection claimed to have been written by the "distinguished men of his time."

One consequence of the *cacoethes scribendi* about Mr. Lincoln is that all the events of his life, the incidents of his professional career, the apt stories attributed to him, many of which he never heard, have been rewritten so many times, with such variations as the taste or fancy of the writer at the moment suggested, that the points of some of the best have been lost, and others so mutilated that they are no longer recognizable. The resignation of the Treasury by Mr. Chase in June, 1864, has not escaped the gen-

eral mutilation. It was an important event; its incidents throw a flood of light over the characters of both the principals. As it has been described, it is a quarrel between two politicians, of little consequence to them, of none to anybody else. One of its versions by an ex-Senator actually begins with the nomination of Governor Tod, two or three days after the resignation—after most of its important incidents had passed. All the accounts that I have seen attribute the resignation to Mr. Chase's desire for the Republican nomination in 1864 for the Presidency, when, in fact, he had given up all hope of it for 1864 more than six months previously.

One of these old friends and associates declares that Mr. Lincoln had no faith. If Paul understood the subject, and faith is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," then no man ever had a faith more perfect and sincere than Mr. Lincoln. Once, as he lay upon his favorite lounge in the Register's office, whilst the Register and his messenger were engaged in their work, and, as he liked them to do, paying no attention to him, he broke into a magnificent outburst—a word-painting of what the South would be when the war was over, slavery destroyed, and she had had an opportunity to develop her resources under the benignant influence of peace. Twenty years and more afterward this scene flashed upon my memory with the vividness of an electric light as I recognized the word-picture of Mr. Lincoln in the following words of welcome by an eloquent Southerner to a Northern delegation: "You are standing," he said, "at this moment in the gateway that leads to the South. The wealth that is there, no longer hidden from human eyes, flashes in your very faces. You can smell the roses of a new hope that fill the air. You can hear the heart-beats of progress that come as upon the wings of heaven. You can reach forth your hands and almost clutch the gold that the sun rains down with his beams, as he takes his daily journey between the coal mine and the cotton field; the highlands of wood and iron, of marble and granite; the lowlands of tobacco, of sugar and rice, of corn and kine, of wine, milk, and honey." Such was the picture of the

South presented to the eye of Mr. Lincoln's faith.

I have written the following account largely from personal knowledge, from what I myself saw and heard. The principal incidents were written in my journal about the time they occurred. It has been the regret of my subsequent life that I did not at the time know how great a man Mr. Lincoln was; that I did not at the time write out and preserve an account of many other things said and done by him. This occurrence was an exception. I felt at the time that Mr. Lincoln was revealing himself to me in a new and elevated character, and I undertook to record the words in which that revelation was made.

The resignation by Secretary Chase of his position as the chief financial officer of the United States closed his prospects as a Presidential candidate with the Republican, and did not improve them with the Democratic party. It was an act which was calculated to embarrass the President, for which there was no good excuse. He inferred from past events that his resignation would not be accepted; he hoped that it would demonstrate to the country that he had become a necessity of the financial situation, and thereby secure to him its more perfect control.

A question of forgery had arisen in the Assistant Treasury in New York. The Auditor, who signed checks for the payment of money, pronounced two checks returned to him as paid, amounting to nearly \$10,000, to be forgeries. The responsibility for the money lay between Mr. Cisco and the Auditor. If the checks were genuine, the Auditor—if they were forged, Mr. Cisco, must bear the loss.

Mr. Cisco claimed to *know* that the checks bore the genuine signature of the Auditor. He so testified in an examination which took place before a commission of the United States. He declined to admit a possibility that he could be mistaken. His experience, he said, enabled him to identify a genuine or to detect a forged signature with unerring certainty. No one could imitate his signature so as to cause him to hesitate. He was as certain that the disputed signatures were genuine as though he had seen them written.

Friends of the Auditor who were confident of his integrity, finding that the mind of Mr. Cisco was closed to all the presumptions arising from the long ser-

vice and the unblemished character of the accused, availed themselves of the assistance of experts and of photography. An expert wrote an imitation of the Assistant Treasurer's name, which that official testified was his own genuine signature. He was as certain of it as he was of the genuineness of the disputed checks. The evidence of the expert who wrote the imitation, and the enlarged photograph of the signatures to the checks, made their traced, painted, false, and spurious character so apparent that the Auditor was at once discharged, notwithstanding the positive evidence of his chief. The result so intensely mortified him that he promptly resigned his office of Assistant Treasurer, declaring that nothing should induce him to withdraw his resignation.

Secretary Chase was fond of those who recognized his eminence, and were ready to serve him as their acknowledged superior. Those especially who were watchful of his convenience, and of opportunities to contribute to his personal comfort, secured a strong position in his esteem. Maunsel B. Field, an attaché in the office of the Assistant Treasurer of New York, was conspicuously a person of this class. From the first visit of the Secretary to New York after he took office, Mr. Field had attached himself to his personal service. His devotion to that service was perfect; so that afterward, as the visits of the Secretary increased in frequency, Mr. Field attended to his social engagements, and became the authorized agent for communication with him. Mr. Field was a person of polished manners, who had the *entrée* into society. He was also a writer for the newspapers and a Democrat, without much position or following in his party. His service was so attentive that the Secretary came to regard him as a kind of personal society representative. The office of Third Assistant Secretary of the Treasury was created for him. He was appointed to it, and removed to Washington, where he was afterward employed in a confidential relation near the Secretary's person. There were facts of which it is impossible that the Secretary long remained ignorant, which, though not reflecting upon his personal integrity, it was represented, necessarily disqualified him for any position of trust or pecuniary responsibility. From time to time he absented himself from the Treasury, sometimes for weeks

together. No one seemed to know whither he retired, or to have any knowledge of the cause of his absence.

Mr. Cisco had filled his important office of Assistant Treasurer with great fidelity to the country and credit to himself. The fact that he was a member of the Democratic party, most earnest in his co-operation with the administration in all its measures for the suppression of the rebellion, had enabled him to contribute to the success of Mr. Chase's financial measures more powerfully, probably, than any Republican could have done in the same position, while his personal influence upon members of his own party had been strong, and always exerted to promote the cause of the Union. Very strong Republican influences were therefore brought forward to induce Mr. Cisco to reconsider his resignation, but he had apparently determined to return to private life, and peremptorily insisted upon its acceptance.

Always having great responsibility from the amount of public treasure entrusted to his care, the Assistant Treasurer at New York was at that time the most important public officer in the republic, next after the members of the cabinet. The bank presidents of New York city, Boston, and Philadelphia then represented the money of the nation, and acting together, as they usually did, they could promote the early success or delay and obstruct the financial measures of the government. That they had always hitherto supported the Secretary, and co-operated in the execution of his plans, had been largely due to the influence of Mr. Cisco. There had been occasions when these bank officers had attempted to defeat some of these plans, or, at least, to limit their success. But the strength of the Secretary was re-enforced by the persistent influence of Mr. Cisco, always discreetly but constantly operating, so that when Mr. Chase met these gentlemen in the Assistant Treasurer's office, as he so frequently did, his personal magnetism usually brought them to his support. It was therefore most desirable that Mr. Cisco's successor should, so far as practicable, possess his qualities, sustain his relations to the banks, and continue to exercise his good judgment. Such a man was not readily found. Ex-Governor Morgan, then a Senator from New York, a financier of wide experience, and intimately acquainted with all the conditions which

controlled financial movements in that city, took an active interest in the New York appointments. He was, perhaps, the most influential Republican in Congress, who was upon every ground entitled to be consulted in regard to those appointments. He suggested Mr. John A. Stewart, the president of the oldest and wealthiest trust company in the city, an able financier of ripe experience, a pure and patriotic man, as Mr. Cisco's successor. Secretary Chase approved, and the suggestion met with universal favor. But Mr. Stewart would not accept the appointment. He was unwilling to sacrifice his permanent position for one the tenure of which was uncertain, and this consideration was found to be controlling with other eminent financial men possessed of similar qualifications.

While it was generally understood that the Republican Congressmen of New York were looking for a suitable successor to Mr. Cisco, they were amazed by the discovery that Secretary Chase had sent the name of Maunsel B. Field to the President for appointment to that responsible office. The fact became public through Mr. Field himself, who disclosed it to Republicans to whom he applied for recommendations. It produced something like an explosion of indignant opposition.

It seemed impossible to account for this nomination upon the ordinary motives which control human action. It was one which Secretary Chase should have known was unwise to be made. The nominee had not one of the qualities which had made Mr. Cisco strong, or which had led to the selection of Mr. Stewart. He had no financial or political standing, and his natural abilities were of a literary rather than an executive character. It was not surprising, therefore, that Senator Morgan and other Republicans hurried to the President, and indignantly protested against Mr. Field's nomination. They did not measure their words. They claimed that such an appointment would be an insult to the Union men of New York; that it would injure the party and disgrace the administration; and finally they offered to procure a written protest against the nomination, to be signed by every Republican Senator and member of the House in the present Congress.

From the time the opposition to him was made public, the nomination of Mr.

Field became impossible. The natural course obviously was for the President to assume that Secretary Chase had suggested him in ignorance of the objections now urged against him; to request the Secretary to withdraw Mr. Field and make another nomination. But there had already been friction between the President and the Secretary on the subject of nominations, the latter insisting that as he was held responsible for the administration of the Treasury, he should hold the unrestricted power of appointment and removal. The President conceded his claim, but maintained that it should be reasonably exercised, and that he should not be requested to make an appointment to an office in a State the whole Congressional delegation of which opposed it, which would prove injurious to the party, or which was contrary to the traditions of the administration. In other instances the Secretary had shown himself unwilling to admit even these restrictions, and in the case of one appointment made against the wishes of the Republicans of a State, and rejected by the Senate, he threatened to resign his office unless the President renominated the rejected candidate a second time. Although the difficulty in the case referred to was compromised, the President anticipated that Secretary Chase would insist upon Mr. Field's appointment, notwithstanding all the objections—an opinion in which he was confirmed by the fact that the Secretary neither called upon nor communicated with him after some of the New York Republicans had remonstrated against the nomination to Mr. Chase in person.

After twenty-four hours' delay the President, waiving all ceremony, sent a polite note to the Treasury asking his Secretary to *oblige him* by sending him the nomination of some one who was not objectionable to the Senators from New York. Instead of withdrawing Mr. Field's name, Secretary Chase replied by note, asking for an interview. When two parties are seated actually in sight of, and begin to write formal notes to each other, they are neither very likely nor very desirous to agree. The President declined the interview, on the ground that the difference between them did not lie within the range of a conversation. In the mean time the ingenuity of Mr. Field himself devised a way out of the difficulty. Finding that

he would lose the appointment, he brought certain Democratic influences to bear to induce Mr. Cisco temporarily to withdraw his resignation, so that he (Field) might take a place in the New York office, nominally under Mr. Cisco, but really to prepare the way for his own appointment after the adjournment of Congress, and when the defeat of Mr. Lincoln should have been indicated by the early fall elections. Mr. Cisco unexpectedly complied, and the subject of contention was for the moment apparently removed.

Secretary Chase had many subordinates who regarded it as their duty to magnify his office and exalt his name. He was firmly of opinion that no one but himself could maintain the national credit; these subordinates assured him that such was the prevailing opinion, and it had become an article of faith in the department. He had no doubt whatever that the President had embraced it. He believed that his offer of resignation would create a general public demand that he should continue at the head of the Treasury, and upon a recent occasion the President had confirmed his belief in that respect by urgently requesting him to change his purpose to resign. Although there was no adequate occasion for it, he thought the present an excellent opportunity to repeat both the resignation and his former experience. He therefore again tendered his resignation, accompanying it with an intimation that the failure to nominate Mr. Field had rendered his position one of embarrassment, difficulty, and painful responsibility.

The resignation was written and forwarded on the 29th of June. It was not unexpected to President Lincoln, and he dealt with it with wise deliberation. During the day he requested me to call at the White House at the close of business. I found him undisturbed, and apparently in a happy frame of mind.

"I have sent for you," he said, "to ask you a question. How long can the Treasury be 'run' under an acting appointment? Whom can I appoint who will not take the opportunity to run the engine off the track, or do any other damage?"

I was too much troubled and surprised to answer him directly. "Mr. President," I exclaimed, "you will not let so small a matter as this New York appointment separate yourself and Governor Chase? Do not, I beg of you! Tell me where the

trouble lies, and let me see if I cannot arrange it."

"No; it is past arrangement," he said. "I feel relieved since I have settled the question. I would not restore what they call the *status quo* if I could."

"But," I continued, "think of the country, of the Treasury, of the consequences! I do not for a moment excuse the Secretary. His nomination of Field was most unaccountable to me. But Secretary Chase, with all his faults, is a great financier. His administration of the Treasury has been a financial miracle. Who can fill his place? There is not a man in the Union who can do it. If the national credit goes under, the Union goes with it. I repeat it—Secretary Chase is to-day a national necessity."

"How mistaken you are!" he quietly observed. "Yet it is not strange; I used to have similar notions. No! If we should all be turned out to-morrow, and could come back here in a week, we should find our places filled by a lot of fellows doing just as well as we did, and in many instances better. As the Irishman said, 'In this country one man is as good as another; and, for the matter of that, very often a great deal better.' No; *this government does not depend upon the life of any man*," he said, impressively. "But you have not answered my question. There"—pointing to the table—"is Chase's resignation. I shall write its acceptance as soon as you have told me how much time I can take to hunt up another Secretary."

"The Treasury can be run under an acting appointment two or three days," I answered. "It ought not to be run for a day. There is an unwritten law of the department that an acting Secretary should do nothing but current business. No one whom you would be likely to appoint would consciously violate it."

"Whom shall I appoint acting Secretary?" he asked. "I have thought it would be scarcely proper to name one of the Assistant Secretaries after their chief is out."

"If you ask my opinion," I replied, "I should advise the appointment of the First Assistant. I fear the effect of this resignation upon the country, and it would be unwise to increase its evils by departing from the usual course. An intimation from you that nothing but current business should be transacted will certainly be respected."

"That seems sensible; I thank you for the suggestion," he said. "But I shall have to put on my thinking cap at once, and find a successor to Chase."

"Where is the man?" I exclaimed. "Mr. President, this is worse than another Bull Run defeat. Pray let me go to Secretary Chase, and see if I cannot induce him to withdraw his resignation. Otherwise I shall not sleep to-night."

I shall carry the memory of his next words as long as I live. Every time I think of them, Mr. Lincoln will seem to grow greater as a man—to be the greatest American who ever lived. Consider the circumstances. The country was in the fiercest throes of civil war; the President was weighted with the heaviest responsibilities; his Secretary of the Treasury was tendering his resignation when there was no good excuse for the act, manifestly to embarrass him and to increase his difficulties. Then weigh these words:

"I will tell you," he said, leaning back in his chair, and carelessly throwing one of his long legs over the other, "how it is with Chase. It is the easiest thing in the world for a man to fall into a bad habit. Chase has fallen into two bad habits. One is that to which I have often referred. He thinks he has become indispensable to the country, that his intimate friends know it, and he cannot comprehend why the country does not understand it. He also thinks he ought to be President; he has no doubt whatever about that. It is inconceivable to him why the people have not found it out—why they don't, as one man, rise up and say so. He is, as you say, an able financier; as you think without saying so, he is a great statesman, and, at the bottom, a patriot. Ordinarily he discharges a public trust, the duties of a public office, with great ability—with greater ability than any man I know. Mind, I say *ordinarily*, for these bad habits seem to have spoiled him. They have made him irritable, uncomfortable, so that he is never perfectly happy unless he is thoroughly miserable and able to make everybody else just as uncomfortable as he is himself. He knows that the nomination of Field would displease the Unionists of New York, would delight our enemies, and injure our friends. He knows that I could not make it without seriously offending the strongest supporters of the government in New York,

and that the nomination would not strengthen him anywhere or with anybody. Yet he resigns because I will not make it. He is either determined to annoy me, or that I shall pat him on the shoulder and coax him to stay. I don't think I ought to do it. I will not do it. I will take him at his word."

Here he made a long pause. His mobile face wore a speaking expression, and indicated that he was thinking earnestly; but with perfect coolness he continued: "And yet there is not a man in the Union who would make as good a Chief Justice as Chase." There was another pause; his plain homely face was illuminated as he added: "And if I have the opportunity, I will make him Chief Justice of the United States."

I thought at the time, and I have never since changed the opinion, that a man who could form such a just estimate and avow such a purpose in relation to another who had just performed a gratuitous act of personal annoyance intended to add to his responsibilities—already the greatest which any American had ever undertaken—who seemed wholly incapable of any thought of punishment or even reproof, must move upon a higher plane and be influenced by loftier motives than any man I had before met with. In the entire interview there was not an indication of passion or prejudice; there was a complete elimination of himself from the situation. There was nothing but the impartiality of a just judge, the disinterestedness of a patriot, the stoicism of a philosopher. I was silenced, and about to take my leave, when he said:

"Well, then, I understand I can take three days of grace. In that time I shall find somebody who will fit the notch and satisfy the nation. Perhaps I shall find him to-night. My best thoughts always come in the night. As soon as I find him, you shall know. I must first write my acceptance of Chase's resignation."

On the following day, June 30th, the President sent the nomination of Ex-Governor Tod, of Ohio, as Secretary of the Treasury to the Senate for confirmation. There is no occasion now to inquire after his motives. Undoubtedly his first thought was of an Ohio man, his opinion being settled that it was better not to select a Secretary from any of the Atlantic States. The nomination was not well received, and it was a relief to his friends

when, during the evening, Mr. Tod, by telegraph, peremptorily declined it.

Before sunrise the next day I was again sent for. I rode to the White House in the dawning light of an early summer morning, and found the President in his waistcoat, trousers, and slippers. He had evidently just left his bed, and had not taken time to dress himself. As I entered the familiar room, he said, in a cheerful, satisfied voice:

"I have sent for you to let you know that we have got a Secretary of the Treasury. If your sleep has been disturbed, you have time for a morning nap. You will like to meet him when the department opens."

"I am indeed glad to hear it," I said. "But who is he?"

"Oh, you will like the appointment, so will the country, so will everybody. It is the best appointment possible. Strange that I should have had any doubt about it. What have you to say to Mr. Fessenden?"

"He would be an eminently proper appointment," I answered. "The chairman of the Senate Committee on Finance; perfectly familiar with all our financial legislation; a strong, able man, and a true friend of the Union. He is also next in the direct line of promotion. But he will not accept. His health is frail, and his present position suits him. There is not one chance in a thousand of his acceptance."

"He will accept; have no fear on that account. I have just notified him of his appointment, and I expect him every moment."

At this moment the door suddenly opened, and Mr. Fessenden almost burst into the room, without being announced. His thin face was colorless; there was intense excitement in his voice and movements.

"I cannot! I will not! I should be a dead man in a week. I am a sick man now. I cannot accept this appointment, for which I have no qualifications. You, Mr. President, ought not to ask me to do it. Pray relieve me by saying that you will withdraw it. I repeat, I cannot and I will not accept it."

The President rose from his chair, approached Mr. Fessenden, and threw his arm around his neck. It may seem ludicrous, but as I saw that long and apparently unstiffened limb winding like a ca-

ble about the small neck of the Senator from Maine, I wondered how many times the arm would encircle it. His voice was serious and emphatic, but without any assumption of solemnity, as he said:

"Fessenden, since I have occupied this place, every appointment I have made upon my own judgment has proved to be a good one. I do not say the best that could have been made, but good enough to answer the purpose. All the mistakes I have made have been in cases where I have permitted my own judgment to be overruled by that of others. Last night I saw my way clear to appoint you Secretary of the Treasury. I do not think you have any right to tell me you will not accept the place. I believe that the suppression of the rebellion has been decreed by a higher power than any represented by us, and that the Almighty is using His own means to that end. You are one of them. It is as much your duty to accept as it is mine to appoint. Your nomination is now on the way from the State Department, and in a few minutes it will be here. It will be in the Senate at noon, you will be immediately and unanimously confirmed, and by one o'clock to-day you must be signing warrants in the Treasury."

Mr. Fessenden was intellectually a strong man, one of the last men to surrender his own judgment to the will of another, but he made no effort to resist the President's appeal. He cast his eyes upon the floor, and murmured, "Well, perhaps I ought to think about it," and turned to leave the room.

"No," said the President; "this matter is settled here and now. I am told that it is very necessary that a Secretary should act to-day. You must enter upon your duties to-day. I will assure you that if a change becomes desirable hereafter, I will be ready and willing to make it. But, unless I misunderstand the temper of the public, your appointment will be so satisfactory that we shall have no occasion to deal with any question of change for some time to come."

At this point the conversation terminated, and all the persons present separated. The result is well known. Mr. Fessenden's appointment was entirely satisfactory, and the affairs of the Treasury went on so smoothly that no change in the financial policy of Secretary Chase was attempted; and from this time until

the resignation of Mr. Fessenden there was no further friction between the Treasury Department and the Executive.

Chief Justice Taney died in the following October. The friends of Secretary Chase immediately put forth the strongest effort possible to secure for him an appointment to the vacancy. They were assured that no such effort was necessary, that he would receive the appointment without asking for it. They would not and could not accept the assurance. They said that Mr. Chase had made some very harsh observations about Mr. Lincoln which must have come to his knowledge; that nothing would induce him to overlook those remarks, unless there was practically a united demand from all the leaders of the Republican party for the appointment. I am sincerely grateful that I had at that time so true an appreciation of Mr. Lincoln's character that I knew that such remarks would make no impression whatever upon his mind. I was confirmed in my opinion by the information I received of the experience of the friend of another candidate, who attempted to improve his chances by repeating to the President some of these remarks of his former Secretary. The President at first replied that the Secretary was probably justified in his observations, but when the advocate pressed the point more earnestly, he received a reproof from the President which permanently suppressed further effort in that direction.

The appointment was made in November, as speedily as was appropriate after the vacancy occurred. The only direction of the President I ever consciously violated was when, after the appointment, I had the satisfaction of informing the Chief Justice that his appointment had been decided upon on the 30th of the previous June, after which the President had never contemplated any other. Not many days afterward I was shown a copy of a letter such as Mr. Chase alone could have written, in which he expressed his gratitude for the appointment, which he said he desired more than any other. Thus was the *entente cordiale* restored between these two eminent Americans, never again to be broken or interrupted. Among the sorrowing hearts around the dying bed of the republic's greatest President there was none more affectionate than that which beat in the bosom of his Chief Justice.