

LINCOLN'S IMAGINATION.

CONSIDERING the affectionate curiosity with which the American people dwell on the traits of Lincoln's character, it is unfortunate that so much prominence has been given to his humor, his jokes and his little stories. Lincoln undoubtedly took great delight in a good story, and his sense of humor was quick and responsive. During his life-time, however, he was compelled to protest that many anecdotes and quaint sayings were unwarrantedly attributed to him; and, now that he is gone, the last of the Lincoln stories is yet to be invented. I have sometimes wondered how many of those who seize with delight on every reminiscence of Lincoln, ready to break into laughter, remember that he had many pleasant traits of character which do not strongly appear in Lincoln the statesman and politician, or Lincoln the story-teller of the White House.

It does not seem that Lincoln had a nimble fancy; his imagination was not fertile; if it was, he took pains to keep it under; but there was a vein of poetic sentiment which appears in many of his earlier writings and speeches. When the poetical tastes of Lincoln are mentioned, immediately there comes to mind that depressing and bilious poem, "Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?" Those verses, with their lugubrious and sentimental refrain, undoubtedly affected Lincoln strongly on the tragic side of his nature; but they have received a somewhat fictitious value as the expression of his literary taste. It is true, however, that he inclined toward the poetry which dwells on sad and pathetic themes. It has been said that this was a sort of prophetic indication of the tragical ending of his own life; and some have thought that they detected in "the far-away look of his eyes" the gaze of one who was destined to a violent death. It is not likely that such thoughts occurred to any of us while he was yet alive; they are, however, the most natural of afterthoughts.

Like many men who have a keen sense of humor, Lincoln was easily moved by the pathos which is so nearly allied to jocularity. This is the reason, I suppose, why he liked best the minor poems of Thomas Hood and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Of the latter's works, "The Last Leaf" was one of his special favorites, and it readily can be understood how the subtly mingled pathos

and humor of those verses should captivate the fancy of one of Lincoln's peculiar temperament. Few men ever passed from grave to gay with the facility that characterized him. He liked, too, sad and pensive songs. I remember that, one night at the White House, when a few ladies were with the family, singing at the piano-forte, he asked for a little song in which the writer describes his sensations when revisiting the scenes of his boyhood, dwelling mournfully on the vanished joys and the delightful associations of forty years ago. It is not likely that there was anything in Lincoln's lost youth that he would wish to recall; but there was a certain melancholy and half-morbid strain in that song which struck a responsive chord in his heart. The lines sunk into his memory, and I remember that he quoted them, as if to himself, long afterward. His powers of memory were very great. It was no evidence of his special delight in any poem, or bit of prose, that he was able to repeat it from memory without having the words before him. He once recited to me a long and doleful ballad, something like "Vilikins and his Dinah," the production of a rural Kentucky bard, and, when he had finished, he added, with a laugh, "I don't believe I have thought of that before for forty years."

Lincoln's reading, it would seem, was discursive. He could not have pursued any systematic course of study except that of the law; but, with a fine sense of fitness, he picked up whatever came in his way, reserving that which suited his purpose and leaving the rest. He never seemed to lose his hold upon what he liked in literature; when a young man he studied Shakspeare, and some parts of the plays he involuntarily committed to memory; these he repeated with surprising verbal accuracy. It is related of him that, spending a few days at Fortress Monroe, he took up a volume of Shakspeare and read aloud to General Wool's aid, who chanced to be near him, several passages from "Hamlet" and "Macbeth;" then, after reading from the third act of "King John," he closed the book and recalled the lament of *Constance* for her boy, beginning:

"And, father cardinal, I have heard you say
That we shall see and know our friends in heaven:
If that be true, I shall see my boy again."

These words, he said, with deep emotion, reminded him of hours when he seemed to be holding communion with his lost boy, Willie, yet knowing, the while, that this was only a vision. Consider the pathos of this incident. The worn and grief-burdened President was waiting for the results of a movement against Norfolk, then in possession of the enemy; and it was thus he beguiled the heavy hours.

Lincoln seldom quoted poetry in his letters or speeches, although in conversation he often made an allusion to something which he had read, always with the air of one who deprecated the imputation that he might be advertising his erudition. Occasionally, as in his farewell speech to his neighbors and friends in Springfield, he employed a commonplace quotation, with due credit to the unknown author. In that address he said, "Let us believe, as some poet has expressed it, 'Behind the cloud the sun is still shining.'" In a speech in Congress, on so unpromising a theme as internal improvements, then one of the issues of the time, he quoted Robert Herrick's lines:

"Attempt the end, and never stand to doubt;
Nothing's so hard but search will find it out."

Another example occurs in an address made to a delegation of colored men who had waited on him to obtain an expression of opinion on the subject of colonization. The President spoke at great length, and concluded by saying that he hoped that his visitors would consider the matter seriously, not for themselves alone, nor for the present generation, but for the good of mankind, and he added:

"From age to age descends the lay
To millions yet to be,
Till far its echoes roll away
Into eternity."

Amid all his labors, Lincoln found time to read the newspapers, or, as he sometimes expressed it, "to skirmish" with them. From their ephemeral pages he rescued many a choice bit of verse, which he carried with him until he was quite familiar with it. I am bound to say that some of these waifs would not receive the hospitality of a severe literary critic; but it was noticeable that they were almost invariably referable to his tender sympathy with humanity, its hopes and its sorrows. I recall one of these extracts, which he took out of his

pocket one afternoon, as we were riding out to the Soldiers' Home. It began:

"A weaver sat at his loom
Flinging his shuttle fast,
And a thread that should wear till the hour of
doom
Was added at every cast."

The idea was that men weave in their own lives the garment which they must wear in the world to come. I do not know who wrote the verses; but the opening lines were fixed in my mind by their frequent repetition by the President, who seemed to be strongly impressed by them. During the evening, he murmured them to himself, once or twice, as if in a soliloquy.

I think it was early in the war that some public speaker sent Lincoln a newspaper report of a speech delivered in New York. The President, apparently, did not pay much attention to the speech, but a few lines of verse at the close caught his eye. These were the closing stanzas of Longfellow's "Building of the Ship," beginning with:

"Thou too, sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!"

To my surprise, he seemed to have read the lines for the first time. Knowing the whole poem as one of my early exercises in recitation, I began, at his request, with the description of the launch of the ship, and repeated it to the end. As he listened to the last lines:

"Our hearts, our hopes, our prayers, our tears,
Our faith triumphant o'er our fears," etc.,

his eyes filled with tears, and his cheeks were wet. He did not speak for some minutes, but finally said, with simplicity: "It is a wonderful gift to be able to stir men like that." It is quite possible that he had read the poem long before the war for the Union gave to the closing portion that depth of meaning which it now holds for us.

Though Lincoln does not appear to have used much imagery in his letters and speeches, his innumerable good sayings were pregnant with meaning; as Emerson has said, his fables were so wise that in an earlier time he would have been a mythological character, like Æsop. His parables were similes. His figures of speech, used sparingly, were homely and vigorous, the offspring of an uncultivated imagination, rather than of a mind stored with the thoughts of the great men of all ages. The

simplest incidents of every-day life furnished him with similes. In one of his speeches in the famous campaign with Douglas, he said, referring to the suppression of political debate, "These popular sovereigns are at their work, blowing out the moral lights around us." This figure of blowing out the lights is not only a simple one, but highly suggestive of the homely incident which was in the mind of the speaker; an affected or fastidious person, would have weakly said, "extinguishing." In the same way, Lincoln insisted on retaining in his first annual message to Congress the phrase "sugar-coated pills"; and when remonstrated with by the printer, who was a personal friend, he defended his use of the figure by declaring that the time would never come when the American people would not know what a sugar-coated pill was. In like manner, too, representing the incipient stages of reconstruction in the lately rebellious states as an egg which might be crushed, but which should be hatched, he adhered to his homely illustration, in spite of all criticism. Such sayings as these became, in time, incorporated into the current speech of the people.

Lincoln's earlier addresses showed, perhaps, more imagination than did his later ones. Criticising that part of President Polk's message which referred to the Mexican war, Lincoln, then a representative in Congress, compared it to "the half-insane mumbling of a fever-dream." In the same speech he described military glory as "the attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood; the serpent's eye that charms to destroy." I do not now recall a more striking picture, drawn by Lincoln, than this description of the helpless state of the American slave in 1857: "They have him in his prison-house," said he. "They have searched his person and have left no prying instrument with him. One after another, they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys, which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key; the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places; and they stand musing as to what invention, in all the dominions of mind and matter, can be produced to make the impossibility of his escape more complete than it is."

Lincoln was a close observer of nature, as well as of men. He used natural objects to complete his similes. Into the wonderful

alembic of his mind everything was received, to be brought forth again as aphorism, parable, or trenchant saying. In woodcraft, for example, he was deeply skilled, his habit of close observation leading him to detect curious facts which escaped the notice of most men. Riding through a wood in Virginia, he observed a vine which wrapped a tree in its luxuriant growth. "Yes," he said, "that is very beautiful; but that vine is like certain habits of men; it decorates the ruin that it makes." At another time, when we were in Virginia together, just after a fall of snow, I found him standing on the stump of a tree, looking out over the landscape. He called attention to various subtle features of the view, and said, among other things, that he liked the trees best when they were not in leaf, as their anatomy could then be studied. And he bade me look at the delicate yet firm outline of the leafless tree against the sky. Then, pointing to the fine net-work of shadows cast on the snow by the branches and twigs, he said that that was the profile of the tree. The very next day, somebody was discussing with him the difference between character and reputation, when he said,—with a look at me, as if to remind me of what he had been talking about the day before,—perhaps a man's character was like a tree, and his reputation like its shadow; the shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing. The President was at that time weighed down with anxieties; it was a few weeks before General Hooker's crossing of the Rappahannock, at Fredericksburg; and he was daily expecting to hear of an attack on Charleston. I remember that it seemed to me a marvelous thing that he could unfix his mind from all these great cares long enough to consider such trifling things.

In his letter declining an invitation to attend the Illinois Republican Convention, in 1863, Lincoln made use of two or three striking figures. Reviewing the military events of the past year, which had been favorable to the cause of the Union, he said: "The Father of waters again goes unvexed to the sea." And, referring to the fact that Southern Unionists and ex-slaves had done something to help on the good work, he said: "On the spot, their part of the history is dotted down in black and white." There was something in the phrase "dotted down in black and white" which mightily tickled the popular fancy. At the time, however, criticism was provoked by this odd figure

employed by the President: "Nor must Uncle Sam's web-feet be forgotten. At all the watery margins they have been present not only on the deep sea, the broad bay, the rapid river, but also up the narrow, muddy bayous, and wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been and made their tracks." Lincoln was amused by the discussion in the newspapers to which the use of the phrase "Uncle Sam's web-feet" gave rise. He explained that the remarkable feats performed by the gun-boats, in making their way through sloughs and bayous, heretofore considered unnavigable, reminded him of the stealthy passage of water-fowl. The pleasantry concerning light-draught steamers going where "the ground is a little damp" is familiar to everybody.

It will be a long time before our people will forget Lincoln's homely simile of "elder-squirts charged with rose-water," as applied to the conservative programme for prosecuting the war. This was used in a letter addressed to Cuthbert Bullitt, of New Orleans, in which letter he also said that the conser-

vatives were like complaining passengers on a ship—"The mutineers must go untouched, lest one of these sacred passengers should receive an accidental wound." His imagination was powerfully stimulated by any reference to the history of the republic. His address at Gettysburg, now one of the great historical speeches of the world, suggests, rather than expresses, a crowd of images. To Lincoln's mind, apparently, American history was filled with noble and pathetic figures. In some of the loftier flights of his eloquence may be found traces of a strong poetic fancy—an imagination fired by love of country, and inspired by the contemplation of the stirring events that have marked its history. No more striking example of this can be found anywhere than in the memorable words which closed his first inaugural address:

"The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

LALAGE.

PART I.

TEN o'clock of a burning summer morning. Ten o'clock in an Indian jungle. A tangle of rich green vines and many large-leaved shrubs and bushes, feathery palms, and the quaint huldoos, with its superb drooping branches, making heavy masses of shade. Velvety undergrowth of long, rich grass, strangely crushed and beaten down, as if by some struggle, or as if some heavy body had lain there. The tree trunks are worn and polished near the ground, as if by the whetting of a cat's claws; but what a gigantic cat! The sun is dripping down in golden flecks and patches through the interlacing boughs. On the right is a tree loaded with white, waxy blossoms, whose heavy sweetness fills the whole warm air. On the left, another tree, the semal with its red cup-shaped blossoms flaming among its glossy leaves. In the center, a saul-tree, whose trunk was cleft while young, and which now stands apart in two well-defined trunks. There is no cry of cockatoo or gay paroquet, no noisy chatter of nimble black monkeys running along the boughs. Everywhere a death-like quiet reigns. Everywhere the air quivers

with heat, and the sky burns blue and intense. Everywhere is that strange crushed look to the grass, and that polished look to the tree-trunks. What does it mean? Every Indian sportsman knows. This inclosed bit of jungle is a lair. Just before the cleft tree, lying along in splendid length in the rich, warm grass, is a royal tigress. Her tawny golden sides, marked with black velvety bands, swell slowly in and out; her tail sweeps from side to side with a slow motion, making the grass rustle under its weight; her noble head is drawn back slightly between her shoulders; she does not move it; her great, velvety fore-paws rest lightly before her; her mouth is slightly open, showing a gleam of strong white teeth; her cat-like whiskers move softly back and forward, back and forward; her great gray-green eyes look steadily, with an intense, level gaze, at one spot; their pupils are narrowed to mere black lines. At what are those wonderful, glittering eyes looking? On the opposite side of the lair is a man, whose smooth young face is browned by the fierce kisses of the Indian sun,—a tall, slight fellow, in full hunting gear. One hand pushes