

From Macmillan's Magazine.

PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

IN the course of a recent visit to the United States, the writer of this article had a short interview with President Lincoln, then just re-elected. Public men in America are very good-natured in granting these interviews even to people who have no business to transact with them; or rather perhaps the sovereign people is too exacting in requiring that its public servants shall always be accessible to every one who chooses to call. This tax upon their time is particularly burdensome, because, there being no regular civil service, they have no adequate assistance in the details of the work, which are cast, far more than they ought to be, upon the chief of the department. The White House and the departments of State have been judiciously placed at a considerable distance from the Capitol, to prevent members of Congress from perpetually dropping in upon the President and the members of the Cabinet. But probably a very large part of the morning of each of these functionaries is consumed in interviews which do not in any way promote the public service.

You pass into the President's room of business through an anteroom, which has, no doubt, been paced by many an applicant for office and many an intriguer. There is no formality — nothing in the shape of a guard; and, if this man is really "a tyrant worse than Robespierre," he must have great confidence in the long-sufferance of his kind. The room is a common office-room — the only ornament that struck the writer's eye being a large photograph of John Bright. The President's face and figure are well known by likenesses and caricatures. The large-boned and sinewy frame, six feet four inches in height, is probably that of the yeoman of the north of England — the district from which Lincoln's name suggests that his forefathers came — made spare and gaunt by the climate of America. The face, in like manner, denotes an English yeoman's solidity of character and good sense, with something superadded from the enterprising life and sharp habits of the Western Yankee. The brutal fidelity of the photograph, as usual, has given the features of the original, but left out the expression. It is one of kindness, and, except when specially moved to mirth, of seriousness and care. The manner and address are perfectly simple, modest, and unaffected, and therefore free from vulgarity in the eyes of all who are not vulgar themselves.

There was nothing in the conversation par-

ticularly worth repeating. It turned partly on the incidents of the recent election. The President was trying to make out from the polls, which had then not perfectly come in, whether the number of electors had diminished since the beginning of the war; and he flattered himself that it had not. His mind seemed to have been dwelling on this point. He remarked that, in reckoning the number of those who had perished in the war, a fair per-centage must be deducted for ordinary mortality, which would have carried off under any circumstances a certain proportion of the men, all of whom were generally set down as victims of the sword. He also remarked that very exaggerated accounts of the carnage had been produced by including among the killed large numbers of men whose term of enlistment had expired, and who had been on that account replaced by others, or had reenlisted themselves; and he told in illustration of this remark one of his characteristic stories: — "A negro had been learning Arithmetic. Another negro asked him, if he shot at three pigeons sitting on a fence and killed one, how many would remain. 'Two,' replied the arithmetician. 'No,' said the other negro, 'the other two would fly away.'" In the course of the conversation he told two or three more of these stories — if stories they could be called, — always by way of illustrating some remark he had made, rather than for the sake of the anecdote itself. The writer recognised in this propensity as he thought, not a particularly jocular temperament, much less an addiction to brutal levity, such as would call for a comic song among soldiers' graves, but the humour of the West, and especially of a Western man accustomed to address popular audiences, and to enforce his ideas by vivid and homely illustrations. You must have studied the American character — and indeed the English character of which it is the offspring — very superficially if you do not know that a certain levity of expression, in speaking even of important subjects, is perfectly compatible with great earnestness and seriousness beneath. The language of the President, like his demeanour, was perfectly simple; he did not let fall a single coarse or vulgar phrase, and all his words had a meaning.

"A brutal boor" is the epithet applied to the twice-elected representative of the American nation by certain English journals, and the assiduous repetition of this and equivalent phrases has probably fixed that idea of Mr. Lincoln in the minds of the unreflecting mass of our people. Those who hold this language, reason — in ignorance



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016

of the man and of the class to which he belongs—from the undeniable fact that he was the son of a poor Western farmer, brought up in a log cabin, and living, till past the age of twenty, by the labour of his hands; which perhaps still retain, in the unaristocrat size often noticed by critics, the traces of their former toil. He eagerly sought knowledge, however; borrowed the books which he could not afford to buy; and made one of them his own, according to a current anecdote, by three days' hard work in pulling fodder. From the work of a farm labourer he rose to that of a clerk in a store, was for a short time a surveyor, and at last became a lawyer. His associates, of course, were Western farmers; but Western farmers, though inferior in polish, are probably not inferior in knowledge to English squires. They are as ignorant of Latin and Greek as the English squire generally is two years after leaving college; but they know a good many things which are not included in the squire's education. A friend of the writer, travelling in the West, was at a loss to explain to his companion the principle of the electric telegraph: their hired driver, overhearing the discussion, turned round and gave a perfectly correct explanation. The writer himself has conversed with men of the President's class and district, on subjects both of politics and religion; and he certainly, to say the least, would be slow to conclude that any one to whom they looked up must be in intellect a boor. On the political questions which concern them these farmers are probably as shrewd and intelligent as any set of men in the world. They are great readers of newspapers, and eager attendants at political meetings. Not unfrequently, in an electoral contest, the two candidates, instead of addressing their partisans separately, make their canvassing tour together, and speak against each other, at the different stations of the electoral district, before the electors of both sides. A chairman is appointed to moderate, and the disputation is carried on with order and good humour. Such an exercise must at least force a politician to think clearly. Mr. Lincoln encountered Douglas, the great champion of the democratic party, in a series of these tournaments during the canvas of 1858, and the ability which he then showed laid the foundation of his national reputation. It has been pretended by correspondents of the English press that his speeches were made for him by reporters sent down by his party, but it is not very likely that Mr. Douglas and his friends would have allowed fictitious speeches to be substituted for those which

their opponent really made. The story is merely an instance of the determination to maintain the theory that the President of the United States is nothing but a boor.

That he is something more than a boor his address at the dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg will in itself be sufficient to prove. The greatest orator of the United States pronounced on that occasion a long elaborate, and very eloquent discourse, with all that grace of delivery by which he is distinguished. The President, with a very ungainly manner, said these words:—

“Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

“Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

“But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here; but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us; that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

There are one or two phrases here, such as “dedicated to the proposition,” which betray a hand untrained in fine writing, and are proofs that the composition is Lincoln's own. But, looking to the substance, it may be doubted whether any king in Europe would have expressed himself more royally than the peasant's son. And, even as to the form, we cannot help remarking that simplicity of structure and pregnancy of meaning are the true characteristics of the classical style.

It is easy to believe that the man who had the native good taste to produce this address would be capable of committing gross indecencies—that he would call for comic songs to be sung over soldiers' graves?

Mr. Lincoln is not a highly cultivated politician; and it is much to be lamented that he is not; for he will have to deal, in the course of reconstruction, with political problems requiring for their solution all the light that political science and history can afford. Like American statesmen in general, he is no doubt entirely unversed in the principles of economy and finance; and it is quite credible that he may be, as is reported, the author of the strange scheme for raising money by issuing a kind of stock which shall not be liable to seizure for debt. But within the range of his knowledge and vision, which does not extend beyond the constitution, laws, and political circumstances of his own country, he is a statesman. He distinctly apprehends the fundamental principles of the community at the head of which he is placed, and enunciates them, whenever there is occasion, with a breadth and clearness which gives them fresh validity. He keeps his main object — the preservation of the Union and the Constitution — distinctly in view, and steadily directs all his actions to it. If he suffers himself to be guided by events, it is not because he loses sight of principles, much less because he is drifting, but because he deliberately recognises in events the manifestation of moral forces, which he is bound to consider, and the behests of Providence, which he is bound to obey. He neither floats at random between the different sections of his party, nor does he abandon himself to the impulse of any one of them, whether it be that of the extreme Abolitionists or that of the mere Politicians; but he treats them all as elements of the Union party, which it is his task to hold together, and conduct as a combined army to victory. To do him justice, you must read his political writings and speeches,* looking to the substance and not to the style, which, in the speeches especially, is often very uncultivated, though it never falls into the worse faults of inflation and rhodomontade so common in American State-papers. Perhaps his letter to Mr. Hodges, a member of a deputation from Kentucky, explaining his course on the subject of slavery, is as good a specimen as can be selected.

* Those political writings which emanate from himself alone. In his Messages to the Legislature his ministers have a hand. The part of the last message, for example, relating to Foreign Affairs, in which, by way of asserting American independence and greatness, the great powers of Europe are ignored, and the half-barbarous impotencies of South America brought into the foreground, may be safely pronounced to be the work of a subtler genius than that of the President.

“EXECUTIVE MANSION, WASHINGTON,
April 4th, 1864.

“A. G. HODGES, Esq., Frankfort, Ky.

“MY DEAR SIR, — You ask me to put in writing the substance of what I verbally said the other day, in your presence, to Governor Bramlette and Senator Dixon. It was about as follows: —

“I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel, and yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling. It was in the oath I took that I would to the best of my ability preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. I could not take the office without taking the oath. Nor was it my view that I might take an oath to get power, and break the oath in using the power. I understood, too, that in ordinary civil administration this oath even forbade me to practically indulge my primary abstract judgment on the moral question of slavery. I had publicly declared this many times, and in many ways. And aver that, to this day, I have done no official act in mere deference to my abstract judgment and feeling on slavery. I did not understand, however, that my oath to preserve the Constitution to the best of my ability imposed upon me the duty of preserving by every indispensable means, that government, that nation, of which that constitution was the organic law. Was it possible to lose the nation and yet preserve the Constitution? By general law, life and limb must be protected, yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life; but a life is never wisely given to save a limb. I felt that measures otherwise unconstitutional, might become lawful, by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the Constitution, through the preservation of the nation. Right or wrong, I assumed this ground, and now avow it. I could not feel that, to the best of my ability, I had even tried to preserve the Constitution, if to save slavery, or any minor matter, I should permit the wreck of government, country, and constitution altogether. When early in the war, General Fremont attempted military emancipation, I forbade it, because I did not then think it an indispensable necessity. When, a little later, General Cameron, then secretary of war, suggested the arming of the blacks, I objected, because I did not yet think it an indispensable necessity. When, still later General Hunter attempted military emancipation, I again forbade it, because I did not yet think the indispensable necessity had come. When, in March, and May, and July, 1862, I made earnest and secessive appeals to the Border states to favor compensated emancipation, I believed the indispensable necessity for military emancipation and arming the blacks would come, unless averted by that measure. They declined the proposition, and I was, in my best judgment, driven to the alternative of either surrendering

the Union, and with it the Constitution, or of laying strong hand on the colored element. I chose the latter. In choosing it I was not entirely confident. More than a year of trial shows no loss by it in our foreign relations, none in our home popular sentiment, none in our white military force, no loss by it anyhow, or anywhere. On the contrary, it shows a gain of quite a hundred and thirty thousand soldiers, seamen, and labourers. These are palpable facts, about which, as facts, there can be no caviling. We have the men; and we could not have had them without the measure.

“And now let any Union man who complains of the measure test himself by writing down in one line, that he is for subduing the rebellion by force of arms, and in the next, that he is for taking these hundred and thirty thousand men from the Union side, and placing them where they would be best for the measure he condemns. If he cannot face his case so stated, it is only because he cannot face the truth.

“I add a word which was in the verbal conversation. In telling this tale, I attempt no compliment to my own sagacity. I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now, at the end of three years' struggle, the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man devised or expected. God alone can claim it. Whither it is tending seems plain. If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the the North as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new causes to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.

“Yours truly,

(Signed)

“A. LINCOLN.”

Few will deny that a modest and patient sagacity finds its expression here.

Like most of the Western republicans, Lincoln belonged not to the extreme Abolitionists, but to the party who resisted the extension of slavery; and of the principals of this party he was a steady and unflinching advocate. His course, therefore, on this subject, has been consistent throughout.

The religious sentiments expressed in the last paragraph of the letter pervades all the President's productions; and it seems to be genuine. He is no Puritan: It is said that in Illinois, among his rough and jovial companions, he is, in conversation at least, rather the reverse—but he has a real sense of the presence and providence of God; and this feeling has probably helped to keep him, as he has been, calm in peril and temperate in success. It is curious to contrast the following passage, giving his idea of the revelations of Providence to rulers, with the language of Cromwell and the Puritan chiefs on the same subject. The passage occurs in an answer to a deputation

from the churches at Chicago, which had pressed upon him the policy of immediate emancipation:

“The subject presented in the memorial is one upon which I have thought much for weeks past, and I may even say for months. I am approached with the most opposite opinions and advice, and that by religious men, who are equally certain that they represent the Divine will. I am sure that either the one or the other class is mistaken in that belief, and perhaps in some respect both. I hope it will not be irreverent in me to say that, if it is probable that God would reveal His will to others on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed He would reveal it directly to me; for, unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. And if I can learn what it is I will do it! These are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible, and learn what appears to be wise and right.”

No calumny, to all appearance, can be more grotesque than that which charges Mr. Lincoln with aiming at arbitrary power. Judging from all that he says and does, no man can be more deeply imbued with reverence for liberty and law, or more sincerely desirous of identifying his name with the preservation of free institutions. He sanctioned, though he did not originate, the military arrests; but he did so in the conscientious belief that the power was given him by the constitution, and that the circumstances had arisen in which it was necessary to exercise it for the salvation of the State. His justification of these acts is scrupulously and anxiously constitutional. To the remonstrants who tell him that the safeguards of habeas corpus and trial by jury “were secured substantially to the English people after years of protracted civil war, and were adopted into our constitution at the close of the revolution,” he replies, “Would not th demonstration be better if it could have been truly said that these safeguards had been adopted and applied *during* the civil wars and *during* our revolution, instead of *after* the one and at the *close* of the other? I too am devotedly for them after civil war and before civil war, and at all times, ‘except when in cases of rebellion or invasion the public safety may require their suspension.’” The words he here quotes are from the constitution; and they ought to be known to those who accuse Mr. Lincoln of flagrant and inexcusable usurpation.

The effects of Mr. Lincoln's legal training are visible both in his mode of reasoning on

constitutional questions, and in the occasional acuteness of his replies to objectors, of which the sentence last quoted is a specimen. But, fortunately for him, he entered the legal profession rather late, when he had had time to form his character and understanding on an unprofessional basis.

Few, even of those who call him a tyrant and an usurper, have ventured to charge him with personal cruelty. It is scarcely possible to obtain his consent to the execution of a deserter or a spy. He has set his heart on carrying through the revolution, if possible, without shedding any blood except on the field of battle. This is the more creditable to his humanity, since it is believed, and he shares that belief, that an attempt was made to assassinate him at Baltimore immediately after his first election.

That he has made mistakes in his choice of men, especially of military men, is not to be denied. In fact, as regards the military appointments, nothing could direct him or any one else to the right men except the criterion of experience, fearfully costly as it was. It is true that he has, in some cases, appointed men to military commands from political motives; but the political motives were connected, it is believed, not with personal or party jobbery, but with the necessities, real or supposed, of the public service. Sigel, for example, was appointed to the command in which he failed, because the Germans, whose idol he was, would not serve so readily under any other general. No soldier who had really proved himself competent has been passed over, though the President's good nature has delayed the removal of those whose incompetence had appeared.

It is another current fiction that the President is excessively garrulous, and "always on the balcony." Most American statesmen are open to this imputation; but the President is an exception. "I am very

little inclined on any occasion to say anything unless I hope to produce some good by it." To this maxim, from the time of his election, he has very steadily adhered; and perhaps it would be difficult to show that he had ever made an uncalled-for speech, or, when called upon to speak, said more than the occasion required.

There is another great meed of praise to which Mr. Lincoln is entitled. Chief of a party in one of the most desperate struggles of history, he has never, by anything that has fallen from his lips, gratuitously increased the bitterness of civil war. His answer to those who came to congratulate him on his reelection was thoroughly generous, chivalrous, and patriotic. He "did not wish to triumph over any man." He "had never wilfully planted a thorn in any man's bosom." It is true that he has not.

Our great public instructor told us the other day that Lincoln's re-election was perhaps on the whole the best thing that could have happened for this country, because having already said as much against England as was necessary to secure to him the Irish vote, he had probably exhausted his malignity on that subject. All who know the simplest facts of American politics are aware that to talk of Mr. Lincoln's securing the Irish vote is about as rational as it would be to talk of Lord Derby's securing the vote of the Chartists. But Mr. Lincoln, it is believed, is one of the few public men in America who have never joined, or affected to join, in the profligate denunciations of England which were a part of the regular stock-in-trade of the Democratic party, and of the slaveowners who were its chiefs. Whether he is a great man or not, he is at least an honest one; he can feel responsibility; and his re-election was to be desired not only for the good of his country, but for the peace of the world.

GOLDWIN SMITH.

THE AUTHOR OF "ORION." — "Perhaps one of the most, if not the most, melancholy spectacles in the Blue Mountains is that of Richard H. Horne, the author of 'Orion,' one of the best poems in the English language, passing his life away amid the dreary solitudes of Newbury, 'buried alive' in a locality whose only popula-

tion is about six souls, and half that number of dogs. To see a true poet cutting wood, cooking his own food, and wasting his energies on a barren soil, in the service of an unappreciative government, is a sight harrowing alike to the mental and outward vision." — *Melbourne Herald*, Sept. 28.