

His Character as Revealed by His Letters.

It is generally conceded by historians and biographers that a man's true character is best revealed by his letters. Nothing could better illustrate this than Abraham Lincoln's letters both before and after he rose to the exalted position of President.

Lincoln's character has come down to us through the pages of history so grave and austere that it is hard to think of him in any other light than as a statesman, philosopher, wit and seer. But Lincoln had his romantic side. One of his love letters to Miss Mary Owens presents him to us as a most solemn kind of a lover.

It should be remembered however that he had had a former love affair with Ann Rutledge, who died most tragically during their courtship. This event had cast a gloom over his emotional nature which he had not fully recovered from.

Following is one of his letters to Miss Owens, a village girl living in the little town of New Salem, Illinois, from whence Lincoln had recently removed to the capital, Springfield, which then seemed to him a large and bustling city, with a very pretentious society.

Dear Miss Owens;

I am often thinking of what we said about my coming to live in Springfield. I am afraid I would not be satisfied. There is a great deal of flourishing about in carriages here, which it would be your doom to see without being in. You would have to be poor without a means of hiding your poverty. Do you believe you could bear that patiently?

Whatever woman should cast her lot with me, should any ever do so, it is my intention

to do all in my power to make her happy and contented; and there is nothing that I can imagine that would make me more unhappy than to fail in the attempt. I know I should be much happier with you than the way I am, provided I saw no sign of discontent in you.

"What you have said to me may have been in the way of jest or I may have misunderstood it. If so, then let it be forgotten; if otherwise, I much wish that you would think seriously before you decide. What I have said I most positively will abide by, provided you wish it. My opinion is that you had better not do it. You have not been accustomed to hardship, and it may be more severe than you imagine.

"I know that you are capable of thinking correctly on any subject and if you deliberately mature upon this before you decide then I am willing to abide your decision.

"Affectionately yours,

"ABRAHAM LINCOLN."

Can any woman imagine a more dispassionate lover? Needless to say, Mary Owens refused him in quite as cool and dispassionate a manner as he proposed. But that Mr. Lincoln really thought more of the girl than he would let himself express, and thereby lost his suit, is evident from the following letter written to an intimate friend:

"I was mortified, it seemed to me, in a hundred different ways. My vanity was wounded by the reflection that I had so long been too stupid to discover her intentions, and at the same time never doubting that I understood them perfectly; and also that she, whom I had taught myself to believe no one else would have had,

actually rejected me with all my fancied greatness.

"And, to cap the climax, I then for the first time began to suspect that I was a little in love with her. But let it all go—I will try to outlive it. Others have been made fools of by the girls, but this can never be said of me. I most emphatically in this instance made a fool of myself.

"I have now come to the conclusion never again to think of marrying; I never could be satisfied with one who would be block-headed enough to hate me."

Yet only three years later he was engaged to the pretty, spritely Mary Todd, and then anon their engagement was broken. This affair so preyed upon Lincoln's sensitive and melancholy spirit that he wrote this lugubrious letter to a friend:

"I am now the most miserable man living.

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If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I cannot tell; I awfully forebode I shall not. To remain as I am seems impossible. I must die or be better it appears to me."

In 1842 Mr. Lincoln, after a reconciliation, married Miss Todd, and thereafter most of the letters which have come down to us have been on public questions and political subjects.

Just before the Republican National Convention met in 1860, Senator Lyman Trumbull, of Illinois, wrote to Lincoln, asking him if he were anxious for the nomination for President, and whether he would subordinate his own ambition if the good of the Republican cause seemed to require such a sacrifice on his part. To this Mr. Lincoln replied:

"As you request, I will be entirely frank. The taste is in my mouth a little; and this no doubt disqualifies me to some extent from forming correct opinions. You may confidently rely, however, that by no advice or consent of mine shall my pretensions be pressed to the point of endangering our common cause. A word now for your own special benefit: You better write no letters which can possibly be distorted into opposition to me. There are men who are on the constant watch for such things, out of which to prejudice my peculiar friends against you.

"While I have no more suspicion of you than I have of my best friend living, I am kept in a constant struggle against suggestions of this sort. I have hesitated some to write this paragraph, lest you should suspect that I do it for my own benefit, and not for yours; but on reflection I conclude that you will not suspect me. Let no eye but your own see this, not that there is anything wrong or even ungenerous in it, but it would be misconstrued.

"Your friend, as ever,

"A. LINCOLN."

This letter shows how Lincoln was ever willing to sacrifice his personal ambition for a principle and to aid his party and his friends.

Lincoln had a very high ideal of the legal profession, and that he had no patience with a current notion that a lawyer could not be honest is evident from this letter which he wrote when a young man:

"Let no young man choosing the law for a calling yield to that popular belief. Resolve to be honest at all events. If in your judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer. Choose some other occupation, rather than one in the choosing of which you do in advance consent to be a knave."

While Mr. Lincoln was practising law in Springfield he received a letter from New York asking about the financial standing of a brother lawyer. He wrote this characteristic answer:

"I know the gentleman of whom you inquire. He has a wife and baby that ought to be worth fifty thousand dollars to any one; a table for his books and papers worth one dollar and fifty cents, and a big rat hole

in the corner of his office that is worth looking into."

This letter illustrates how Lincoln could see the humorous aspects of anything however commonplace, and shows also how readily he could invent a story that would convey more in a few words than any long-drawn-out explanation.

During the war, when General McClellan was delaying an attack without any cause, and as an excuse had sent word to the President that his horses had sore tongues, Lincoln wrote back:

"I have just read your dispatch about fatigued and sore-tongued horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since Antietam that fatigues anything?"

President Lincoln, however, was not captious or hard to please. When a man had accomplished something he was ready and eager to give due and hearty praise, as is evident from this letter to General Grant, written just after the victory at Vicksburg:

"Major-General Grant:

"My Dear General—I do not remember that you and I ever met personally. I write this now as a gratifying acknowledgment for the almost inestimable service you have done the country. I wish to say a word further. When you first reached the vicinity of Vicksburg I thought you would do what you finally did—march the troops across the neck, run the batteries with the transports, and thus go below; and I never had any faith except a general hope that you knew better than I that the Yazoo Pass Expedition and the like could succeed. When you got below and took Port Gibson, Grand Gulf and vicinity I thought you should go down the river and join General Banks, and when you turned northward east of the Big Black I feared it was a mistake. I wish now to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right and I was wrong.

"Yours very truly,

"A. LINCOLN."

In all his letters the simple, unostentatious nature of the man shines forth, ever willing to acknowledge a fault or mistake of his own and praise the worth of another.

As soon as Mr. Lincoln was elected, on November 6, 1860, he became practically the backbone of the Republic, without waiting to be inaugurated. While threats of secession were in the air, and there was faltering and wavering and indecision on every hand Lincoln let his firm policy be known.

The following extracts from three of his letters to Senator Lyman Trumbull in December, 1860, show his position unequivocally:

"Let there be no compromise on the question of extending slavery. If there be all our labor is lost. The dangerous ground into which some of our friends have a hankering to run is Popular Sovereignty. Have none of it. Stand firm. The tug has to

come and better now than at any time hereafter.

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"If any of our friends do prove false and fix up a compromise on the territorial question, I am for fighting again, that is all. It is but repetition for me to say that I am for an honest enforcement of the Constitution, fugitive slave clause included.

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"Despatches have come two days in succession that the forts in South Carolina will be surrendered by the order or consent at least of the President.

"I can scarcely believe this; but if it prove true, I will, if our friends at Washington concur, announce publicly at once that they are to be retaken after the inauguration. This will give the Union men a rallying cry and preparation will proceed somewhat on their side, as well as on the other.

"Yours as ever,

"A. LINCOLN."