

*With kind regards of Sister
J. O. Cunningham*

SOME RECOLLECTIONS
OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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I have been asked to occupy a part of the time upon this occasion in the presentation of a "talk" upon Lincoln. The only fact which can be counted upon to recommend me for this preference, is that when a very young man, young in years and in professional experience, it was my good fortune to perform my humble part as a lawyer along side of this now great historic character, and to mingle with him and his compeers politically in some of those memorable campaigns which led up to the greatest events in our history as a nation and to the career which made him so notable in the history of the world.

So far as I am personally concerned I was mostly an observer, not a participator to any extent in the matters which I shall try to present in this paper. Further, these things just happened and were not made to order nor with a purpose for

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future use. So they are not here told except at the desire of friends, whose wishes expressed to me, have called them out.

In a former paper read by me before this association, I indicated that I severed myself from my childhood's home in Clarksfield in 1852. With the ambitions of many another youth of this county, I then sought a home in the West, a location then in miles no farther away than now, but in imagination much farther.

After a year spent in Indiana, close to the Illinois line, the tales of the rich and boundless prairies laying unoccupied just across that line, led the two boys, who I said in that paper left Huron county in August of that year, to Urbana, the county seat of a county of Illinois containing 1000 square miles of that prairie, then and now known as Champaign county.

This county was then a part of the Eighth Judicial Circuit of Illinois, and the circuit courts of the eight counties constituting the circuit were presided over by the Hon. David Davis, afterwards one of the justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, and also, afterwards, a senator in the United States Senate from Illinois.

The majesty of the law in the county was then personified by a two-story brick courthouse, thirty by forty feet in size and a nearby log jail, twenty feet square. The county seat then consisted of a little cluster of wooden dwellings, some of which were of logs, a few stores and shops and two hotels of the western variety. It stood at the geographical center of the county and its expectations of a future of any consequence were based upon the conscious wealth of its lands and upon the hoped for population which it was predicted was to come and occupy them when the projected Illinois Central Railroad, then nearing the county, should connect it with the outer world. Until then this county was in all respects, save its location, a frontier county and town.

The two Huron county boys both aspired to the honorable profession of the law, so that the outlook, as above described, attracted them there and there they set their stakes, or rather set down their scantily filled carpet sacks, and set about the

affairs of life, soon winning from the generous population friends; and in time, clients.

The Circuit Court of the county, then the only court of general common-law and chancery jurisdiction, held two terms annually, each term occupying two or three days, only. Only two lawyers had before then fixed their abodes there and they, with lawyers from the neighboring counties, constituted the bar of Champaign county.

Among this ambulatory bar was Abraham Lincoln, a resident of Springfield, the capital of the state, seventy miles away. His only distinction at that time was the fact that he was deemed the best lawyer of that section, in civil matters; that he had served one term in the lower house of congress and several terms in the General Assembly of the state.

It was soon learned that for many years in the history of the county, upon the evening preceding the day set for the opening of each term of the court, in the spring and fall of each year, there arrived at one of the two hotels of the town, by private conveyances, consisting generally of a two horse wagon, antiquated carriages or on horseback, the judge and several of these foreign lawyers, of whom one was always Lincoln, all fresh from the discharge of legal duties at some nearby county.

A room or rooms, generally one room with several beds and an open fireplace, would be taken for the cavalcade, and was the headquarters and rallying place for the term for the court, lawyers and for such friends as were made welcome. During the evenings and the intervals of court, this room was the scene of good cheer and conviviality, made more interesting and entertaining by the stories told and songs sung.

Here Lincoln told his best stories and probably gained his first laurels as a conversationalist and entertainer. Davis, the judge, was not averse to unbending the judicial dignity and himself often leading in the hilarity. He would call one after another for this or that story, expressly for the amusement of some newcomer, who, he assumed, had not heard it.

In this manner was leisure time passed away in a place

barren of any amusements except that afforded by the semi-annual coming of the judge and lawyers, and the uneventful sessions of the court.

Daylight leisure often afforded opportunities for out of door pastimes, chief among which was that of strolling about the little town or upon the roads leading through the nearby forest. These strolls were a favorite manner of disposing of leisure time by Lincoln. Frequently alone and unattended he would be seen, in a thoughtful attitude, with his long arms thrown across his back, pacing by long strides in the direction of the open country. I have often seen him thus, myself, he seeming utterly abstracted from all existing things. If accompanied by friends his humor or mood would be different, and arguments along political lines, stories, narratives or poetical recitations would abound.

Not until the national upheaval in public sentiment which followed the introduction by Senator Douglas of his bill for the organization of the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, did Mr. Lincoln, within my observation, pay any attention to politics. This measure in effect repealed the Missouri Compromise, then and for a third of a century a most sedative agent in allaying the friction between the opposing sections of the federal union. Those whose memory of public events extends back to 1854, will remember that at no epoch happening within the last century, save the firing upon the national flag at Fort Sumter, did public opinion at the North show greater resentment. Douglas was by far the most popular man of his party in Illinois, then largely dominant there, and Lincoln may be said to be quite as prominent in the Whig party there, tho' it never presented, save in a few districts or counties, any serious obstacle to the success of the dominant party. It was for him, then, to take up the challenge of Douglas and lead the opposition in the congressional campaign of 1854.

He spoke at Chicago, Springfield, Peoria and at Urbana, during the fall term of court. To the latter speech I listened to him for the first time where politics was the subject. I was fresh from a youth and early manhood spent upon the Western

Reserve, where I had listened to and learned from Corwin, Giddings, Root and the men of Oberlin, and with sentiments concerning slavery there inculcated and thoroughly backed up by parental teaching at home, had little patience at the moderation of the speaker when dealing with that issue and the course of our senator. His arguments against and denunciations of Douglas for his services in behalf of universal slavery, with little spoken derogatory of that institution itself, was so different from the political discussions to which I had listened, and came so far short of my views on the question, that I felt that he had failed to meet the demands of the hour. He knew, however, the temper and prejudices of the constituency he was addressing, largely drawn from Southern homes, and of the best manner of dealing with them better than I did; and his speech at that time, probably the third speech he had ever made in public opposing in terms the demands of slavery, proved to be wise and effective.

The campaign resulted in the complete fusion of the opposition to Douglas, made up of Democrats, Whigs and Free Soilers, which at the polls overwhelmed Douglas, and for the first time in the history of Illinois, returned a general assembly adverse to his party.

This result made Lincoln the logical leader of the successful but unorganized majority. It yet remained to organize and consolidate it into a working party with a name, which until that event it did not have.

Two years later and the Fremont and Buchanan campaign ensued, with Lincoln again at the head of the opposition to Douglas and his party, but at this time with a party with a name and organization behind him. He was now the acknowledged leader of the party of the Pathfinder.

During this campaign I heard Mr. Lincoln several times upon the stump in my county and elsewhere, and in all of his speeches there was a marked advance in the tone of his attacks upon the institution of slavery. He freely and severely denounced it and the late legislation in its behalf. His greatest effort of the campaign was made at a state convention of the

new party under its name, held at Bloomington on May 29, 1856, if not the greatest ever made by him. Unfortunately no report of it was made, and in the phraseology of historians it is now known and spoken of as the "Lost Speech." I listened to that speech. I chanced to be one of a company of my acquaintances from my own and from Vermillion county, who traveled with Mr. Lincoln from our county, where he had been in attendance upon court, to attend this convention. He had been upon one of his semi-annual rounds of the circuit, and feeling the importance of the coming convention at Bloomington, had used much effort to secure from our vicinity a good attendance there. Our company with him as the leader, was the result of his effort. He seemed happy at the result, and as we were all known to him as young attorneys and editors of his faith, politically, spoke in his most familiar manner to all, calling each by his familiar name, and indulged in stories and reminiscences with the greatest abandon and freedom from conventionalism.

Our route took us over the road now known as the Wabash Railroad to Decatur and thence north by the Illinois Central Railroad to Bloomington. We arrived at Decatur about the middle of the afternoon of May 28, where, on account of there being no train for Bloomington that evening, all remained for the night. A considerable portion of the day remained before us and the company kept well together, strolling about town, and finally, at the suggestion of Mr. Lincoln, all went together to the then nearby Sangamon timber. Here, seated upon the trunk of a fallen tree, which lay in a thicket of spice brush, we spent most of the remaining afternoon. Lincoln talked freely, as he had during the afternoon, of his hopes and fears of the results of the coming convention, and of his earnest wish that the old Whig element from Southern Illinois might be well represented there. He well knew that the radical anti-slavery element from the North would be there in force and hoped for enough of the conservative to give it, politically, a cosmopolitan character. He yet feared the effect upon the Whig element among the voters of any appearance of radicalism, and planned to avoid it. He

was among political friends and indulged in the greatest familiarity.

In this manner, we, as a lot of boys would have done, spent the afternoon, Lincoln being only the big boy of the crowd. He told us of his coming with his father's family to Decatur about twenty-five years before then, in an ox wagon, as an immigrant from Indiana, and of his beginning life along the Sangamon river. I should not have seen greater familiarity in the company had I suddenly been transferred back to my Clarksfield home and again engaged with my boyhood friends there, in a coon hunt or husking bee. All were boys again, and none were surprised to see the leader of a great movement in Illinois as much of a boy as was any one in the company.

Early next morning all took the train bound northward for the convention, and were in due time among the many representatives from all portions of the state.

I need hardly repeat what has become a matter of history, the doings of that memorable convention, of which, and of its platform utterances, Lincoln was the directing and controlling spirit, and that, too, among the greatest and wisest political managers of Illinois.

Coming from the door of the hall which held that convention, at its close, was Lincoln, a future president of the United States, whose memory a world reveres; Yates, the great war governor of Illinois; Palmer, who succeeded Yates as governor and who was a major-general in the war of the rebellion and later a senator from Illinois; O. H. Browning, a future cabinet member and United States senator; seven men who were afterwards chosen to seats in the lower house of Congress; one foreign minister, besides many who were afterwards members of the General Assembly and judges of the courts of Illinois.

I must not leave this part of my subject without again referring to the great speech delivered by Mr. Lincoln, and which has gone down into history, as the "Lost Speech."

At this period there was, as my older hearers will remember, much wild talk on the part of many of the Southern politicians, of disunion. To this kind of talk Lincoln turned his

discourse for a time, and adopting, as was his frequent habit, the form of speech made use of in his first inaugural upon the steps of the capitol at Washington, he addressed his argument to a supposititious audience of Southerners, urging the unwisdom of disunion, and the direful consequences to the country of an attempt at it upon their part. He assured his audience that Northern men had no desire for a separation and would never consent to it. Warming up with his topic to vehemence, and still using the pronoun in the second person, he closed this part of his speech with these remarkable words: "*We won't go out of the Union, and you shan't!*"

This was said with marked deliberation, he raising his figure to its greatest height, his eyes, usually so mild and playful, now flashing with determination, and with forcible gestures with his head and arms. Homely, emphatic, prophetic words! How the echoes of that declaration thundered down the years of the civil war and upon every battlefield! How they met and vanquished every proposition from friend and foe alike, looking to the termination of the war by any other means than the permanent retirement of the armed opposition to the enforcement of the law!

Naturally the hearer will draw a comparison between the Lincoln of the day before, at Decatur, and the Lincoln at the convention. In one case he appeared the natural and unconventional man, a boy among boys, as if he was again back in the forests of Indiana and enjoying a holiday with his unlearned boy friends, while in the other, with argument, philosophy and adroit comparisons, with all the skill of a Cicero, he held his audience and moved them to his way of thinking until the elements which came together, unsympathetic and adverse to each other in their way of looking at the dominating question of the day, were fused into an active, aggressive and as it proved, successful party.

During the campaign of 1858 in Illinois, known as the Lincoln and Douglas campaign, wherein the personal contest of these two giants for the seat in the United States Senate held by the latter was the real issue, with the slavery question, now

freely and unhesitatingly argued upon every occasion as the foundation, Lincoln shone out replendently. The general facts of that campaign have gone down into the history of the nation and need not generally be alluded to here.

I will, however, introduce so much of the facts as fell under my own personal observation, for the lesson in character which they afford.

About August 23, 1858, I received from Mr. Lincoln, in answer to my letter to him, a letter in his own handwriting, of which this is a copy:

"Ottawa, Aug. 22, 1858.—J. O. Cunningham, Esq., My Dear Sir:—Yours of the 18th, signed as secretary of the Rep. Club, is received. In the matter of making speeches I am a good [deal] pressed by invitations from almost all quarters, and while I hope to be at Urbana sometime during the canvass, I cannot yet say when. Can you not see me at Monticello on the 6th of Sept.?"

"Douglas and I, for the first time this canvass, crossed swords here yesterday: the fire flew some, and I am glad to know I am yet alive. There was a vast concourse of people—more than could get near enough to hear. Yours as ever, A. Lincoln."

This was written at Ottawa, Illinois, upon the day succeeding the first joint debate, as will be seen.

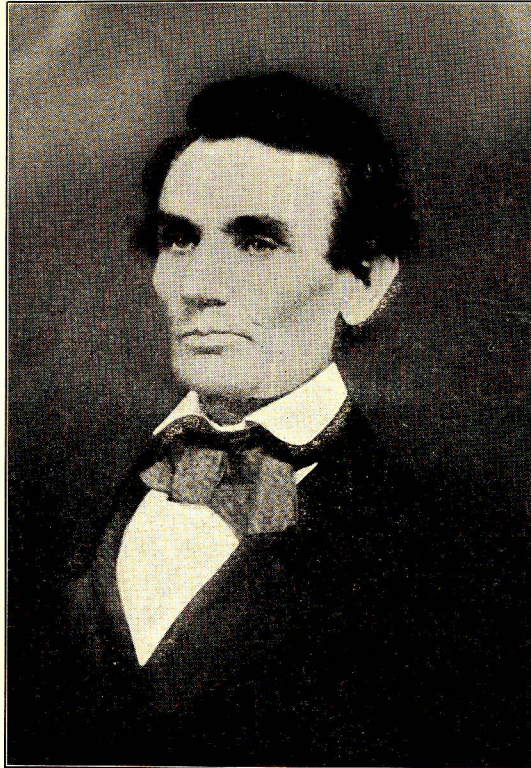
I did meet Mr. Lincoln, as he suggests, at Monticello, Illinois, on September 6, following, where arrangements were made with him to follow Douglas at our fair ground, in Urbana, upon September 24, the day after Mr. Douglas was advertised to speak. The last day of the county agricultural fair had been fixed for Mr. Douglas by his friends, by consent of the officers of the association, and he was to speak from the bandstand, which he did.

Lincoln came the next day as per his agreement, and altho' one day after the fair, was greeted by a large audience.

I refer to this particular coming of Mr. Lincoln, while he very often came to our town as a political speaker, on account of the happening then of an event which, in my estimation, so

well showed the element of unassumed humility in the man's character. Not a simulated phase for effect, but a spontaneous and natural incident, without ostentation or premeditation.

I was one of the marshals of the day in control of the multitude of people who, in procession, met the speaker at the railroad station, two miles or more from the grounds where he was to speak. The escort was lengthy and occupied a long time in making the distance. When nearing the fair ground, I was riding upon horseback near the carriage of Mr. Lincoln, when he called me to him and asked, "Will there be a dinner served upon the grounds?" The question raised the presumption in my mind that, as it was then nearly twelve o'clock, he was feeling the need of refreshment, so he was answered, "Yes. Mr. Lincoln, you will be served with a good dinner as soon as we reach the grounds." He at once replied, "That is not what I wanted to know for. If dinner is to be served, feed the people at once and then let me talk to them." At the entrance to the grounds he was met by a committee of ladies and escorted to a seat at the head of the table supporting an abundance of barbecued food, at which particular seat had been placed the best of the spread for the use of the honored guest. He took the seat prepared for him, while the long tables were assailed by his followers, and began eating his dinner. Looking around, he saw an old woman standing not far away looking intently at him. He at once recognized her as a waiter and dish-washer at the hotel in Urbana, whom everybody knew as "Granny." He said to her, "Why, Granny, have you no place? You must have some dinner. Here, take my place." The old lady answered, "No, Mr. Lincoln, I just wanted to see you. I don't want any dinner." In spite of her protestations, Lincoln arose from his seat at the head of the table and compelled her to take his place and have her dinner, while he took his turkey leg and biscuit and, seating himself at the root of a nearby tree, ate his dinner, apparently with the greatest satisfaction: meanwhile Granny Hutchinson filled the place at the head of the table and ate her dinner as he had insisted she should do.



A. Lincoln

Picture referred to in text.

This episode was characteristic of Lincoln. It required no unbending of assumed dignity, for, while he was at all times manly, he put on no airs of dignity. Instinctively he sympathized with the lowly wherever he met them, and the look of the lowly woman, standing aloof from those who were being fed, with no one to speak to her, appealed to his sense of right and he placed her in his preferred place, he taking for himself the lowly attitude. It was that same instinct that made him the friend of the black slave, and the emancipator of the race.

The dinner being disposed of the crowds of people assembled around the stand where Douglas had spoken the day before and listened to Lincoln's reply, for an hour and a half. Five days before, these men had met at Charleston in their fourth joint debate, and the speeches at Urbana were substantially a repetition of that debate.

I should not depart from this personal portion of my paper without telling you what I have often related of Mr. Lincoln elsewhere, and what has also been told by some writers of considerable note, in their publications. The incident in more ways than one throws light upon the character of the man with whom we are dealing.

During the spring term of our circuit court, 1858, and but a few weeks before Lincoln entered with Douglas upon their celebrated debate, I was one morning in the rooms of an artist in Urbana whose business was to make pictures then known as ambrotypes, before the science of photography had become in general use in our place. Soon, in walked Mr. Lincoln, with the remark to Alschuler, the artist, that he had been informed that he, Alschuler, wished him to sit for a portrait. Alschuler said that he had sent such a message to Mr. Lincoln, glancing at his subject, who was attired in a long linen duster, but that he could not take the picture in that coat, and asked if he had not a dark coat in which he could sit. Mr. Lincoln said he had not; that this was the only coat he had brought with him from his home. Alschuler said he could wear his coat, and gave it to Mr. Lincoln, who pulled off his long duster and put on the artist's coat. Alschuler was a very short man in height, with

short arms, but with a body nearly as large as the body of Mr. Lincoln. The arms of Lincoln extended through the sleeves of Alschuler's coat a quarter of a yard, making him appear quite ludicrous; at which he, Lincoln, laughed immoderately, and sat down for the picture to be taken, with great effort at looking sober enough for the occasion.

I have related a few instances and observations which tend to illustrate and explain the many phases, eccentricities, if you please, of this many-sided character, and which, with many others, have so recommended Lincoln to the popular tastes and demands of society as to endear his name to men of every caste as has no other man in history!

The reasons underlying this condition are not entirely due to his public services as a successful leader of the nation during the most trying period of the history of our Republic, but rather, or quite materially, to reasons connected with his personality as a man and member of society before his advancement to the presidential chair. This part of his life distinguishes him and his relations to history over the great majority of men who have succeeded in raising themselves above the level of the common herd of humanity.

Heroditus was the father of history; Homer was great as a poet; Michael-Angelo as an artist and as a builder; Caesar as a soldier; Cicero as an orator and Marco Polo as an explorer; but who among all of the world's great and noble has so identified himself with the plodding lowly ones of earth as to earn, deserve and receive their applause, as does Abraham Lincoln? For what other man in history are the sooty hands of toil raised in praise, as for him? Does any one ask why? Leonard Swett, a near friend and associate of many years, has answered the query in these words: "Because he was, in life, the most simple and direct in character; at one time the humblest citizen of the land, at another the most exalted."

Abraham Lincoln in his life personated his ideal of government, for he was, as a man, "Of the people, by the people and for the people."

It was to no life of luxury and ease that this child of the

Kentucky forest was born, for he was no son of affluence! It is not from such that the Great Republic generally chooses her favorites! He was born to orphanage, for, at an early age he lost his mother; to toil; to penury; to a youth of struggles for existence! In his boyhood no partial friend made the acquisition of knowledge easy and paved his way to collegiate honors! No ample library at his home or town afforded him the means of mental recreation and the acquisition of useful knowledge! No graded school received him at six and carried him into college at sixteen! His childhood, that period of poetry, was devoid of poesy, so hard were its conditions! His school of science was only the open book of nature,—the woods and hills of Kentucky and Indiana! His only help to getting on in the world were his own brawny hands and his stout heart, spurred on by an American boy's ambition! He wore the homespun clothing of flax and wool, prepared by the nimble fingers of his mother, and early exchanged the ease of even such a childhood for the labors of the fields and woods! His hours of recreation were taken from those of repose, and his hands were calloused by the use of the axe and the plough! The truth, briefly told, is, that nature made him a nobleman: adverse circumstances and poverty failed to stamp out the impress.

While stately mansions in the surroundings of culture and refinement furnished homes for such of his predecessors as Washington, Madison, Monroe, Van Buren and Buchanan, the rude forest cabin was the home of Lincoln's childhood, as it was also of Jackson, the Harrisons, of Taylor and of Garfield.

The few books that did come under his observation, must have been well studied and their lessons well remembered, for we find him at an early age with distinct opinions upon some of the current topics and able to debate them to the edification of his older associates.

This condition of the young man well assures us that neither obscurity of origin nor paucity of opportunity can excuse a permanent lack of needful education in the American youth.

New Salem, or his first permanent residence in Illinois, saw much advance in Lincoln, mentally. In speaking of his

early life, imbibed a hatred of human slavery, even as mildly practiced in his native state. Herndon tells of him that in one of his visits to the city of New Orleans, as a flat-boatman, he chanced to be in the slave market during a sale at auction of slaves, and there saw men, women and children sold upon the auction block as chattels, which experience called to his mind the actual horrors of the system. Years afterwards, in relating to Mr. Herndon, then his law partner, the event, he enlarged somewhat upon the slavery question and closed with this remark: "If ever I get a chance to hit that thing (slavery) I'll hit it hard." Little did he or anyone else think that within thirty years from the time he saw this revolting object lesson in the New Orleans slave market, it would be the hand of this humble flat-boatman, wielding the armies and navies of the United States, that would inflict the death blow to negro slavery in the United States, and in fact in the world.

This remark with that above recited as a part of his Lost Speech, force the conclusion that a hand higher than any earthly hand was, even then, shaping the humble lawyer of the Eighth Circuit for the work then needed in order to make of our country what it professed to be, "The Land of the free and the home of the brave."

I have said that his life up to the time of his encounter with Douglas' Squatter Sovereignty doctrine, was but a formative period. Referring now again to that period, about 1855, we find him always most democratic in his tastes and tendencies, yet with an individuality the most marked; qualities which followed him into his high official position. He doubtless committed many blunders in etiquette, but in diplomacy and statesmanship, he was unerring. If in the drawing room he was awkward and embarrassed, he was at home when he met the skilled diplomats of the world, who would only have been too glad to have foiled him along the lines of international questions. Whitney, in his "Life on the Circuit with Lincoln," in discussing this feature of his character says: "At the White House his approachability, manner and behavior were the same as at Danville, Urbana or Springfield."

He always remembered his old friends on the Circuit. Up to 1860 he could, without doubt, have called more men, women and even children in Illinois by their proper names than any man living, and would always do so when meeting them. This, too, entirely freed from the arts of the common demagogue, and coming alone from his generous love of all he met.

He was modest, quiet and unobtrusive in manner; sympathetic and cordial in every social contact. Without this he was never loud, aggressive nor defiant, except when in his flights of eloquent denunciation of wrong he addressed himself to the assumed presence of an opponent who questioned his logic, as in the quotation just made from his "Lost Speech," at Bloomington, on May 29, 1856.

After all is it not true that real greatness in an individual is best shown by a recitation of his personal peculiarities, as we here rehearse those of Lincoln. He was great in his charity and great in his gentleness.

It was with this gentle and generous spirit that he welcomed the dissolving views of the rebellion as they began to exhibit themselves in the spring of 1865, and with the same spirit he uttered toward the wayward South that epigrammatic, psalm-like expression contained in his last inaugural: "*With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the Nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.*"

This utterance of his, at the zenith of his power, was no new-born sentiment; it was no mere gush over a fallen foe; but it was the expression of a settled rule of his life, in defeat and obscurity, as well as in victory and prosperity!

Could he have spoken that dreadful night at Ford's theatre, after treason had done its worst deed, he would doubtless have adopted the spirit of those words of prayer and forgiveness which fell from the divine lips at Calvary, in behalf of His

enemies! Vengeance and retribution in life, and doubtless in death, were to him not to be thought of!

A world looks with amazement upon the career which I have only imperfectly told of here; but it also adores the memory of Freedom's greatest hero. While it glorifies his great deeds, it loves to remember that he came from the common people and that he never ceased to love the common people!

A favorite quotation of Mr. Lincoln was this:

“Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor prison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
Can touch him further!”

And so we leave him.

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