

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

NUMBER 1157

JUNE 11, 1951

## HAWTHORNE'S PORTRAYAL OF LINCOLN

The distinguished literary coterie of New England were slow in recognizing their strange western contemporary Abraham Lincoln as a person of unusual talents. Ridicule rather than praise was the general reaction to the new President and in the resort to caricature Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of the chief offenders. The novelist visited the White House in 1862 and upon his return to his Massachusetts home submitted a story to the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled: "Chiefly about War Matters." Some references which Hawthorne made to the President were "derogative and damning with faint praise." The editor of the magazine, James T. Fields, although a close friend of the contributor refused to print the more intimate descriptions of the chief Executive, advising the author that "considered as the portrait of a living man it would not be wise or tasteful to print." The expurgated monograph was used, however, in the issue for July 1862 but it was signed anonymously "A Peacable Man."

The first observation which should be made about the questionable data is the fact that Hawthorne did not wish to be known as the author of the contribution as he signed the article *nom de plume*. It is never considered a courageous or assuring act on the part of a witness to testify unidentified.

Politically, Hawthorne was unsympathetic with Lincoln having inherited from his father his philosophy of government. Supporting his early political leanings he became a great admirer, and close friend in college days, of Franklin Pierce. At thirty-four years of age Hawthorne began to write for *The Democratic Review*, edited by John L. O'Sullivan, which paper furnished his main income for a period. He was also appointed "weigher and gauger" of the city of Boston. In the month of August 1852 he published a campaign biography of Franklin Pierce, democratic candidate for the Presidency. He had no sympathy for those agitating the anti-slavery controversy. He did however, reservedly side with the north in the Civil War.

One of Hawthorne's biographers states with reference to the *Atlantic Monthly* article in 1862: "The tone of this paper was half-bantering, a tone perfectly natural to the man whom the situation harrassed and angered as much as it pained." He continued through the war to oppose the viewpoint of the administration that the Union should be preserved. While on a visit to the White Mountains in New Hampshire with ex-President Pierce he passed away.

Several years after both Hawthorne and Lincoln were dead Editor Fields, in his book *Yesterdays with the Authors* published by Houghton, Mifflin Co., released the objectionable portions of Hawthorne's 1862 contribution which had been withheld. One reviewer of the questionable description of Lincoln refers to it as a "truthful portrayal made by an acute observer and finished artist." With a knowledge of Hawthorne's political background, and his remarkable and recognized ability as a creator of imaginative literature one would not be willing to accept the portrait of Lincoln which follows as an objective description of the President. It is, however, worth being preserved as an imaginative novelist's view of

Lincoln written after a visit to the White House. An excerpt from the critical monograph:

"By and by there was a little stir on the staircase and in the passageway, and in lounged a tall, loose-jointed figure, of an exaggerated Yankee port and demeanor, whom (as being about the homeliest man I ever saw, yet by no means repulsive or disagreeable) it was impossible not to recognize as Uncle Abe. Unquestionably, Western man though he be, and Kentuckian by birth, President Lincoln is the essential representative of all Yankees, and the veritable specimen, physically, of what the world seems determined to regard as our characteristic qualities. It is the strangest and yet the fittest thing in the jumble of human vicissitudes, that he, out of so many millions, unlooked for, unselected by any intelligible process that could be based upon his genuine qualities, unknown to those who chose him, and unsuspected of what endowments may adapt him for his tremendous responsibility, should have found the way open for him to fling his lank personality into the chair of state,—where, I presume, it was his first impulse to throw his legs on the council-table, and tell the Cabinet Ministers a story. There is no describing his lengthy awkwardness, nor the uncouthness of his movement; and yet it seemed as if I had been in the habit of seeing him daily, and had shaken hands with him a thousand times in some village street; so true was he to the aspect of the pattern American, though with a certain extravagance which, possibly, I exaggerated still further by the delighted eagerness with which I took it in. If put to guess his calling and livelihood, I should have taken him for a country schoolmaster as soon as anything else. He was dressed in a rusty black frock-coat and pantaloons, unbrushed, and worn so faithfully that the suit had adapted itself to the curves and angularities of his figure, and had grown to be an outer skin of the man. He had shabby slippers on his feet. His hair was black, still unmixed with gray, stiff, somewhat bushy, and had apparently been acquainted with neither brush nor comb that morning, after the disarrangement of the pillow; and as to a night-cap, Uncle Abe probably knows nothing of such effeminacies. His complexion is dark and sallow, betokening, I fear, an insalubrious atmosphere around the White House; he has thick black eyebrows and an impending brow; his nose is large, and the lines about his mouth are very strongly defined.

"The whole physiognomy is as coarse a one as you would meet anywhere in the length and breadth of the States; but, withal, it is redeemed, illuminated, softened, and brightened by a kindly though serious look out of his eyes, and an expression of homely sagacity, that seems weighted with rich results of village experience. A great deal of native sense; no bookish cultivation, no refinement; honest at heart, and thoroughly so, and yet, in some sort, sly,—at least, endowed with a sort of tact and wisdom that are akin to craft, and would impel him, I think, to take an antagonist in flank, rather than to make a bull-run at him right in front. But, on the whole, I like this sallow, queer, sagacious visage, with the homely sympathies that warmed it; and, for my small share in the matter, would as lief have Uncle Abe for a ruler as any man whom it would have been practicable to put in his place."