

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

From *Lincoln's Yarns and Stories*

ALEXANDER MCCLURE, ED.

Lincoln is justly celebrated for the beauty and power of his eloquence, but he was also well known for his humorous stories, tall tales, and colorful jokes. As a backwoods attorney, he had often used jokes and stories to gain the good will of juries. Now as president, his story-telling and joke-making served to deflect unwanted questions, explain policies, and relieve his own spirits and those of his listeners. As Walt Whitman wrote, "Story-telling was often with President Lincoln a weapon which he employ'd with great skill. Very often he could not give a point-blank reply or comment—and these indirections, (sometimes funny, but not always so) were probably the best responses possible."

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Alexander McClure (1828–1909), a politician and close confidant of Lincoln's, collected many of these tales for Lincoln's Yarns and Stories: A Complete Collection of the Funny and Witty Anecdotes That Made Abraham Lincoln Famous as America's Greatest Story Teller (1900). In reading the three yarns excerpted below, ask yourself why Lincoln chose the particular joke or story related. What purpose does the story serve? Does the story have an object or moral?

“ABE’S” HAIR NEEDED COMBING.

“By the way,” remarked President Lincoln one day to Colonel Cannon, a close personal friend, “I can tell you a good story about my hair. When I was nominated at Chicago, an enterprising fellow thought that a great many people would like to see how ‘Abe’ Lincoln looked, and, as I had not long before sat for a photograph, the fellow, having seen it, rushed over and bought the negative.

“He at once got no end of wood-cuts, and so active was their circulation they were soon selling in all parts of the country.

“Soon after they reached Springfield, I heard a boy crying them for sale on the streets. ‘Here’s your likeness of “Abe” Lincoln!’ he shouted. ‘Buy one; price only two shillings! Will look a great deal better when he gets his hair combed!’”

RIGHT FOR, ONCE, ANYHOW.

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Where men bred in courts, accustomed to the world, or versed in diplomacy, would use some subterfuge, or would make a polite speech, or give a shrug of the shoulders, as the means of getting out of an embarrassing position, Lincoln raised a laugh by some bold west-country anecdote, and moved off in the cloud of merriment produced by the joke. When Attorney-General Bates was remonstrating apparently against the appointment of some indifferent lawyer to a place of judicial importance, the President interposed with: “Come now, Bates, he’s not half as bad as you think. Besides that, I must tell you, he did me a good turn long ago. When I took to the law, I was going to court one morning, with some ten or twelve miles of bad road before me, and I had no horse.

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“The judge overtook me in his carriage.

“‘Hallo, Lincoln! are you not going to the court-house? Come in and I will give you a seat!’

“Well, I got in, and the Judge went on reading his papers. Presently the carriage struck a stump on one side of the road, then it hopped off to the other. I looked out, and I saw the driver was jerking from side to side in his seat, so I says:

“‘Judge, I think your coachman has been taking a little too much this morning.’

“‘Well, I declare, Lincoln,’ said he, ‘I should not much wonder if you were right, for he has nearly upset me half a dozen times since starting.’

“So, putting his head out of the window, he shouted, ‘Why, you infernal scoundrel, you are drunk!’

“Upon which, pulling up his horses, and turning round with great gravity, the coachman said: “‘Begorra! That’s the first rightful decision that you have given for the last twelvemonth.’”

While the company were laughing, the President beat a quiet retreat from the neighborhood.

LINCOLN’S STORY TO PEACE COMMISSIONERS.

Among the reminiscences of Lincoln left by Editor Henry J. Raymond, is the following:

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Among the stories told by Lincoln, which is freshest in my mind, one which he related to me shortly after its occurrence, belongs to the history of the famous interview on board the River Queen, at Hampton Roads, between himself and Secretary Seward and the rebel Peace Commissioners. It was reported at the time that the President told a “little story” on that occasion, and the inquiry went around among the newspapers, “What was it?”

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The New York Herald published what purported to be a version of it, but the “point” was entirely lost, and it attracted no attention. Being in Washington a few days subsequent to the interview with the Commissioners (my previous sojourn there having terminated about the first of last August), I asked Mr. Lincoln one day if it was true that he told Stephens, Hunter and Campbell a story.

“Why, yes,” he replied, manifesting some surprise, “but has it leaked out? I was in hopes nothing would be said about it, lest some over-sensitive people should imagine there was a degree of levity in the intercourse between us.” He then went on to relate the circumstances which called it out.

“You see,” said he, “we had reached and were discussing the slavery question. Mr. Hunter said, substantially, that the slaves, always accustomed to an overseer, and to work upon compulsion, suddenly freed, as they would be if the South should consent to peace on the basis of the ‘Emancipation Proclamation,’ would precipitate not only themselves, but the entire Southern society, into irremediable ruin. No work would be done, nothing would be cultivated, and both blacks and whites would starve!”

Said the President: “I waited for Seward to answer that argument, but as he was silent, I at length said: ‘Mr. Hunter, you ought to know a great deal better about this argument than I, for you have always lived under the slave system. I can only say, in reply to your statement of the case, that it reminds me of a man out in Illinois, by the name of Case, who undertook, a few years ago, to raise a very large herd of hogs. It was a great trouble to feed them, and how to get around this was a puzzle to him. At length he hit on the plan of planting an immense field of potatoes, and, when they were sufficiently grown, he turned the whole herd into the field, and let them have full swing, thus saving not only the labor of feeding the hogs, but also that of digging the potatoes. Charmed with his sagacity, he stood one day leaning against the fence, counting his hogs, when a neighbor came along.

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“Well, well,’ said he, ‘Mr. Case, this is all very fine. Your hogs are doing very well just now, but you know out here in Illinois the frost comes early, and the ground freezes for a foot deep. Then what you going to do?’

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“This was a view of the matter which Mr. Case had not taken into account. Butchering time for hogs was ’way on in December or January! He scratched his head, and at length stammered: ‘Well, it may come pretty hard on their snouts, but I don’t see but that it will be “root, hog, or die.”’”