LINCOLN
AND HIS CABINET

A LECTURE DELIVERED BEFORE THE NEW HAVEN COLONY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TUESDAY, MARCH 10, 1896

BY

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF WAR, 1863–65



SOUVENIR OF THE
THIRTEENTH ANNUAL LINCOLN DINNER
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that Mr. Lincoln did not come of a trifling, silly, or stupid family. He belonged to the Lincolns of Hingham, Massachusetts, and he was related to the famous Governor Lincoln. Many stories about his marriage, too, are not so. Lincoln was a straight, upright, respectable man. He was a poor man, picking up knowledge as best he could, and rising by his own talent, until he reached a great place in the bar of Illinois, and finally became President of the United States.

I regard the book which Mr. McClure is publishing as a public benefaction. With this book presenting all these minute details, and with the great work of Hay and Nicolay, Mr. Lincoln's private secretaries, giving the

most important documents, we shall have amply satisfactory and faithful accounts of perhaps the greatest man in modern American history, perhaps the greatest man in the modern history of mankind.

Let me bring these reminiscences to a close with another story, which relates to the last day of Mr. Lincoln's life. It was one of my duties in the War Department to receive the reports of the officers of the Secret Service in every part of the country. One cloudy afternoon I got a telegram from the provost-marshal in Portland, Maine, saying, "I have positive information that Jacob Thompson will pass through Portland to-night, in order to take a steamer for England. What are your orders?"

Jacob Thompson of Mississippi, as you know, had been Secretary of the Interior in President Buchanan's administration. He was a conspicuous secessionist, and for some time had been employed in Canada as a semi-diplomatic agent of the Confederate government, getting up raids, of which the notorious attack on St. Albans, Vermont, was a specimen. I took the telegram, and went down and read it to Mr. Stanton. His order was prompt: "Arrest him!" But as I was going out of the door he called to me, and said, "No, wait; better go over and see the President."

At the White House all business was over, and I went into the President's business room without meet-

ing any one. Opening the door, there seemed to be no one in the room, but as I was turning to go out Mr. Lincoln called me from a little side room, where he was washing his hands:

"Halloo, Dana!" said he. "What is it? What 's up?"

Then I read him the telegram.

"What does Stanton say?" he asked.

"He says arrest him, but that I should refer the question to you."

"Well," said he, slowly, wiping his hands, "no; I rather think not. When you have got an elephant by the hind leg, and he is trying to run away, it 's best to let him run."

With this direction, I returned to the War Department.

"Well, what says he?" asked Mr. Stanton.

"He says that when you have got an elephant by the hind leg, and he is trying to run away, it 's best to let him run."

"Oh, stuff!" said Stanton.

That night I was awaked from a sound sleep with the news that Mr. Lincoln had been shot, and that the Secretary wanted me at Manager Ford's house. I found the President lying unconscious, though breathing heavily, on a bed in a small side room, while all the members of the cabinet, and the Chief Justice with them, were gathered in the adjoining parlor. They seemed to be almost as much paralyzed as the unconscious sufferer within the little chamber. The surgeons said there was no hope. Mr. Stanton alone was in full activity.

"Sit down here," said he; "I want you."

Then he began, and dictated orders one after another, which I wrote out and sent swiftly to the telegraph. All those orders were designed to keep the business of the government in full motion till the crisis should be over. It was perhaps two o'clock in the morning before he said, "That 's enough. Now you can go home."

The next morning, just about daylight, I was awaked by a rapping on a lower window. It was Colonel Pelouze of the Adjutant-General's office, who said:

"Mr. Dana, the President is dead, and Mr. Stanton directs you to arrest Jacob Thompson."

The order was sent to Portland, but

Thompson could n't be found there. He had taken the Canadian road to Halifax.

And so Lincoln finished his marvelous career and passed to the other world, leaving other men to deal with the arduous and perilous questions of reconstruction. He had, indeed, done enough, and it may be he was even fortunate in the tragedy of his death. Who knows?

But, as we bid him farewell to-night, we can declare that while he was great in genius, in character, and in opportunities, he was even greater in sanity of heart and elevation of spirit. While he was entirely human, there was no mean fiber in his composition, no base, petty, selfish impulse in his soul.