

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S LETTER TO MRS. BROWNING

Some of the mistakes which Abraham Lincoln made, both in private and public life, have been magnified out of all due proportion to their importance. In no instance is this fact more pronounced than the criticism heaped upon Lincoln for the contents of the letter which he wrote to the wife of his close friend, Orville H. Browning. Many personal notes intended for private interpretation, when displayed for general perusal, appear to have been indiscreet. So this note may be classified among correspondence of that type.

Some authors have attempted to interpret this letter as a serious composition in which Lincoln's character is revealed as that of a vulgar, dishonest charlatan. One recent critic claims that the writing was motivated by the fact that Lincoln had been jilted by a young lady. To use the words of the author, "he was enraged and he then proceeded to disgrace her by a vulgarity of words." Inasmuch as several months had intervened between the time of the aforesaid courtship and the writing of the letter, this was rather a long period for one of Lincoln's disposition to keep up his anger.

Possibly no one should approve the sending of a comic valentine, but, when it is quite clear to the recipient that the sender has made himself the chief object of ridicule, then the offense may be tempered somewhat. Anyone who will read through Lincoln's long letter to Mrs. Browning without any preconceived notions as to its contents, will conclude that he intended no reproach upon anyone but A. Lincoln, and that the whole epistle was written to show what a fool he had made of himself.

The very tone of the letter convinces one that it was written in a light and humorous vein with no thought of accuracy as to detail, but rather with a very noticeable trend towards exaggeration. There is not a serious note in the whole letter, and it is apparently just the kind of a writing that Lincoln hoped to receive in return, when he wrote in his concluding paragraph, "When you receive this, write me a long yarn about something to amuse me." Lincoln's letter to Mrs. Browning was literally nothing more or less than a "long yarn." Literally, a yarn is defined as a "story often implying untruth or exaggeration." For anyone to make more of the letter than this, regardless of the fact that some historical incidents may have served as a background for it, is to lift the entire correspondence from the original setting in which it belongs, and out of which setting no one has a right to interpret it. The letter was written on April Fool's Day, and Lincoln plays upon the idea that he had been made "the biggest fool of all."

To put the complete letter in print would require more than the space available in this entire bulletin, which makes it impossible to release more than the most criticized portions. In the opening paragraph Lincoln writes, "I shall make the history of my life as has elapsed since I saw you the subject of this letter." He states that a married lady of his acquaintance, about to pay a visit to Kentucky, proposed to him that on her return she would bring a sister of hers with her on condition that, "I would engage to become her brother-in-law with all convenient dispatch. I, of course, accepted the proposal."

Lincoln says he had "seen the sister some three years before, thought her intelligent and agreeable," but concluded that "her coming so readily showed that she was a trifle too willing." He then continued with the paragraph that has been so severely criticized:

"In a few days we had an interview; and, although I had seen her before, she did not look as my imagination had pictured her. I knew she was over-size, but she now appeared a fair match for Falstaff. I knew she was called an 'old maid,' and I felt no doubt of the truth of at least half of the appellation; but now, when I beheld her, I could not

for my life avoid thinking of my mother; and this, not from withered features, for her skin was too full of fat to permit of its contracting into wrinkles, but from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind of notion that ran in my head that nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy and reached her present bulk in less than thirty-five or forty years; and, in short, I was not at all pleased with her. But what could I do? I had told her sister I would take her for better or for worse."

Lincoln then drew the following conclusions: "At once I determined to consider her my wife; and, this done, all my powers of discovery were put to work in search of perfections in her which might be fairly set off against her defects. I tried to imagine her handsome, which, but for her unfortunate corpulency, was actually true. Exclusive of this, no woman that I had ever seen has a finer face. I also tried to convince myself that the mind was more to be valued than the person; and in this she was not inferior, as I could discover, to any with whom I had been acquainted." After weighing the question, Lincoln said, "I now spent my time in planning how I might procrastinate the evil day for a time, which I really dreaded as much as, perhaps more, than an Irishman does the halter." He then informed Mrs. Browning that he was out of the scrape and continued, "I want to know if you can guess how I got out of it?" He then proceeded to give the conclusion of the story:

"After I had delayed the matter as long as I thought I could in honor do, I concluded I might as well bring it to a consummation without further delay; and so I mustered my resolution, and made the proposal to her direct; but, shocking to relate, she answered, 'No.' At first I supposed she did it through an affectation of modesty, which I thought but ill became her under the peculiar circumstances of her case; but on my renewal of the charge, I found she repelled it with greater firmness than before. I tried it again and again, but with the same success, or rather with the same want of success.

"I finally was forced to give it up; at which I very unexpectedly found myself mortified almost beyond endurance. I was mortified, it seemed to me, in a hundred different ways. My vanity was deeply wounded by the reflection that I had 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 nobody else would have, had actually rejected me with all my fancied greatness. And, to cap the whole, I then for the first time began to suspect that I was really a little in love with her. But let it all go. I'll try and outlive it. Others have been made fools of by the girls; but this can never with truth 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, and for this reason: I can never be satisfied with any one who would be blockhead enough to have me."

It must be noted that no names or places were mentioned in the correspondence so that no clue whatever was available to Mrs. Browning for the identification of the young lady in the case.

It was only through the exploitation of what was intended to be a personal note, and the publication of personal letters written by Lincoln to Miss Mary Owen that the anonymous character in the letter to Mrs. Browning became identified. To conclude that the letter to Mrs. Browning was written for the purpose of giving an accurate description and character sketch of Mary Owen is far from the point. Any one who reads this letter with an open mind will have no difficulty in discovering whom Abraham Lincoln thought was "the biggest fool of all."