

LINCOLN LORE

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THE PRINCESS MEETS THE PRESIDENT

There is an amusing incident, often repeated, about Abraham Lincoln's contact with royalty, in which he advised his visitor of noble birth that the exalted position he occupied would not be held against him. The episode has usually been classified among those Lincoln stories which are of questionable authenticity, but this one has a dependable source at least, according to a Princess who was well known to the President.

Princess Salm-Salm on several occasions had audiences with President Lincoln, and in her reminiscences makes this note with reference to her husband's, Prince Felix, interview with the President. She states that when the German prince was presented to Lincoln he referred to his hereditary background, causing Mr. Lincoln to reply, "That you are a Prince shall be no impediment to your success with us."

It is the reaction of the Princess towards Abraham Lincoln, rather than the President's impression of the Prince, which appeals to us most and which serves as the real theme of this monograph.

The introductory word of the Princess' memoirs are significant. She states in the preface written at Bonn-on-the-Rhine in 1877, "World stirring events have taken place since 1868—The French period has come to a close, and the German era has commenced. The old German Empire has risen, like the phoenix from its ashes, in richer glory than ever before, and from its radiant throne a fresh and wholesome current is sweeping over our globe."

Princess Agnes zu Salm-Salm was in America during the entire period of the Civil War, and her husband, Prince Felix, served with the Union forces. While in camp with her husband at Aquia Creek, she first met President and Mrs. Lincoln who paid the camp a visit. The description of the President by the Princess is one of the finest contributions made to our understanding of Lincoln's personal appearance:

"President Lincoln's features are well known. People said that his face was ugly. He certainly had neither the figure nor features of the Apollo of Belvedere; but he never appeared ugly to me, for his face, beaming with boundless kindness and benevolence towards mankind, had the stamp of intellectual beauty. I could not look into it without feeling kindly towards him, and without tears starting to my eyes, for over the whole face was spread a melancholy tinge, which some will have noticed in many persons who are fated to die a violent death.

"A German author, I think it is L. Tieck, says somewhere that one loves a person only the better on discovering in him or her something funny or ridiculous, and this remark struck me as very correct. We may worship or revere a perfect person; but real warm human affection we feel towards such as do not overawe us, but stand nearer to us by some imperfection or peculiar weakness

provoking a smile. President Lincoln's appearance was peculiar. There was in his face, besides kindness and melancholy, a sly humour flickering around the corners of his big mouth and his rather small and somewhat tired-looking eyes.

"He was tall and thin, with enormously long loose arms and big hands, and long legs ending with feet such as I never saw before; one of his shoes might have served Commodore Nutt as a boat. The manner in which he dressed made him appear even taller and thinner than he was, for the clothes he wore seemed to be transmitted to him by some still taller elder brother. In summer, when he wore a suit made of some light black stuff, he looked like a German village schoolmaster. He had very large ears standing off a little, and when he was in a good humour I always expected him to flap with them like a good-natured elephant.

"Notwithstanding his peculiar figure, he did not appear ridiculous; he had of the humorous just as much about him as the people like to see in public characters they love."

The Princess, during her Washington residence, had the privilege of meeting Mr. Lincoln in his home and was deeply impressed with the lack of ceremony on significant social occasions. She observes:

"Though standing at the head of 40,000,000 of people, and having during their reign more power than any European king, neither Lincoln, nor Johnson, nor Grant behaved with half the conceit that we notice in a Prussian 'Regierungsrath.' The title of the President is 'your Excellency'; but it is only used by foreigners. Americans call him Mr. President, or simply by his name. There were before the White House no sentinels, not even a porter; everybody could enter the residence of the nation. There were one or two officials in citizens' dress in the house to answer questions; but no crowd of gorgeously liveried footmen was to be seen, and even at great public receptions everything went off as simply as possible, only such arrangements being made as were necessary for preventing confusion.—Notwithstanding this absence of ceremony, the President is respected as much as any king."

As a concluding episode in this series of meetings between the Princess and the President, an account of a New Year's Day reception is presented by the Princess:

"All visitors entered a certain door, and passed—as they came—in a single file to the President, to whom a marshal called out the names. The President shook hands with everyone, saying, at least, 'How do you do?' if not having occasion for a few words more. The file passed out through a window on a kind of bridge constructed of simple board. This hand-shaking was a most fatiguing exercise, for it had to be repeated several thousand times, and President Lincoln's shoulder was always swollen after it, so that he could scarcely use his arm for a few days."