

LINCOLN LORE

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A GIRL FROM MISSOURI VISITS LINCOLN

The stories of Lincoln's humanity are unequaled among the biographical sketches of American statesmen. Occasionally a narrative of unusual interest emerges from obscurity and contributes still further to the martyred President's immortal fame. The reminiscences of Mrs. Byers-Jennings, recalling a visit to Washington, appeared in a Minnesota newspaper over forty years ago. The story is worthy of wide circulation among Lincoln admirers, as it bears all the imprints of authenticity.

In the fall of 1864 Mrs. Byers, then a very young woman, went to Washington from her home in Fairmount, Missouri on behalf of Daniel Hayden, of Scotland County. Hayden had been captured at Helena, Arkansas in the summer of 1863 and was in prison at Alton, Illinois.

On her way to Washington Mrs. Byers met on the train, Col. Thomas Turner of Freeport, Illinois, an old friend of her father, and Col. Turner's companion, Col. Hancock of Chicago, who were on their way to Washington with complimentary resolutions from the Union League Club which was commending Mr. Lincoln on his nomination for a second term.

Mrs. Byers arrived in Washington on October 4, but found that "at the White House" people sat waiting, day in and day out for an audience with the President. On October 7, at three p.m. she gained access to the President's office. She said:

"Mr. Lincoln was all alone, sitting beside a very plain table, resting his elbow on the table, and his head upon his hand. . . .

"When I entered he raised his tired eyes, oh so tired, and with a worn look I can never, never forget. As I advanced, and before he spoke, I said: 'Mr. Lincoln, you must pardon this intrusion, but I just could not wait any longer to see you.' The saintly man then reached out his friendly hand and said: 'No intrusion at all, not the least. Sit down, my child, sit down, and let me know what I can do for you.' I suggested that probably he was too tired. He replied: 'I am tired, but I am waiting to say good-bye to two friends from Chicago, who are going on the train at 7.'

"I briefly explained to him the case before me, saying that Hayden had been in prison fifteen months; that he was a Union man, forced from his home by the rebels, etc.; that his wife had died since he had been in prison, leaving five little children with his very aged mother, who had lately lost her eyesight. I had, besides, a large envelope filled with letters of recommendation from different officers of the department of Missouri; also a petition drawn up by myself, signed by the Union neighbors of Mr. Hayden; appended to it a certificate of their loyalty, signed by the county clerk, Wallace Perrott, who had affixed the seal of the county court. To all of the above, Senator John B. Henderson had added an endorsement for myself, in strong, impressive language.

"When I offered my papers to the president, he didn't touch them, but said, without raising a hand: 'Now, suppose you read them over for me. Your eyes are younger than mine. Besides, as I told you, I am very, very tired.' By accident, the petition was the first thing I took up. When I came to John B. Henderson's name he reached

out and said quickly: 'Let me see that.' As he glanced over it to the bottom, he laid the paper down, slapped his hand upon the table and exclaimed: 'Plague on me, if that ain't John Henderson's signature. Well, I'll release this man just because John Henderson asks me to do it. I know he wouldn't ask me if it wasn't right, nor send any one here that would do anything detrimental to our government. Come in tomorrow at 8 o'clock—M'nd, at 8 precisely. Bring that petition with John Henderson's name on it and I'll fix you so you can get this man out of prison.' He then seemed interested and asked me several questions about men and matters in Northeast Missouri."

Mrs. Byers recalled that just at this time Col. Turner and Col. Hancock entered and soon Lincoln had the promise of all three of them to return for dinner the following day with the parting, "No formality at dinner tomorrow, not a bit".

Mrs. Byers continues: "I walked briskly to the White House the next morning and stood at the head of the stairs, waiting for my watch to say the moment, not in the least guessing how I was to get permission to enter. Standing at the end of the corridor nearest the door I had passed through the day before, I heard some one say: 'This way, Mrs. Byers.' Looking up I saw, to my great astonishment, at the farther end of the corridor, the President motioning for me to come. I walked up to where he stood as quickly as possible. He grasped my hand warmly, led me in and introduced me to William H. Seward and Mr. Nicolay. He sat down by his desk, reached out for the petition, wrote across the back, 'Release this man on order No. — A. Lincoln.' As he handed it straight back to me he remarked with looks full of inexpressible sympathy and goodness: 'Mrs. Byers, that will get your man out. And tell his poor old mother I wish to heaven it was in my power to give her back her eyesight so she might see her son when he gets home to her.'

"That afternoon we went together from Willard's hotel to dine with President Lincoln, and of all informal affairs I have ever attended, it certainly took the lead. I was seated at the right of the President, Col. Turner on his left: Mrs. Lincoln, the two boys and Col. Hancock occupied the rest of the table. When a dish of anything was brought, he reached out for it, handled the spoon like an ordinary farmer, saying to all in his reach: 'Will you have some of this?' dishing it into our plates liberally, and so it was throughout the whole dinner, as he said, truly informal. Mrs. Lincoln was very sweet and gracious."

Mrs. Byers-Jennings remembered what a great contrast there was in the appearance of Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln, but was more impressed by the unusual courtesy which the President had shown her. She concluded the story of her visit to the White House with this meditation about the President:

"So many, many wonderful weighty matters upon his heart, mind and hands, and yet to remember that I, an ordinary woman on an ordinary mission, had been promised admission at 8 o'clock on the morning of the 8th of October, and that this small matter had not been forgotten. Stranger than all, that he had not forgotten the poor, blind mother."