

LINCOLN LORE

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THE NASBY PAPERS

There was no tendency which Lincoln had inherited and cultivated which brought him more relaxation and at the same time more embarrassment during the Presidential years than his sense of humor. Serving as a momentary escape from the throes of remorse, because of the war, it also supplied his political enemies with sufficient source material with which to make him a despised man among many sober and pious people of his own party.

His "funny bones" were an endowment from Thomas Lincoln, and often in beginning a story he would remark, "As my old father used to say." The story in fable form first appealed to Lincoln out of the covers of Aesop and Lincoln undoubtedly became as much interested in "the application" which appeared with each story as with the fable itself. Throughout his life he felt a piece of humor was not worth repeating unless there was a timely application which could be made.

David Ross Locke, one of Lincoln's favorite humorists, was a western newspaper man, and editor of papers at Plymouth, Mansfield, Bucyrus and Findlay, Ohio successively. In the Findlay "Jeffersonian" he published his first humorous article in 1860, over a signature of "Rev. Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby." It was a letter purporting to come from an ignorant and penniless Kentucky Democrat who had little in common with either the abolitionist or the prohibitionist. When Locke became proprietor of the *Toledo Blade* he continued the Nasby Letters in this paper and in 1864 published the pamphlet which Carpenter mentions in the following reminiscence found in his book, *Six Months in the White House*:

"Among the callers in the course of an evening which I well remember, was a party composed of two senators, a representative, an ex-lieutenant-governor of a western State, and several private citizens. They had business of great importance, involving the necessity of the President's examination of voluminous documents. He was at this time, from an unusual pressure of office-seekers, in addition to his other cares, literally worn out. Pushing everything aside, he said to one of the party: 'Have you seen the 'Nasby Papers?' 'No, I have not,' was the answer; 'who is Nasby?' 'There is a chap out in Ohio,' returned the President, 'who has been writing a series of letters in the newspapers over the signature of 'Petroleum V. Nasby.' Some one sent me a pamphlet collection of them the other day. I am going to write to 'Petroleum' to come down here, and I intend to tell him if he will communicate his talent to me, I will 'swap' places with him.' Thereupon he arose, went to a drawer in his desk, and, taking out the 'Letters,' sat down and read one to the company, finding in their enjoyment of it the temporary excitement and relief which another man would have found in a glass of wine. The instant he ceased, the book was thrown aside, his countenance relapsed into its habitual serious expression, and the business before him was entered upon with the utmost earnestness."

It seems quite likely that the group was calling on Lincoln with reference to the draft which was giving him considerable trouble at this time and he may have read the article in which Nasby "Shows Why He Should Not Be Drafted."

"August 6, 1862.

"I see in the papers last nite, that the Government hez institooted a draft, and that in a few weeks, sum hundreders uv thousands uv peeseable citizens will be

dragged to the tented feeld. I know not wat uthers may do, but ez fer me, I can't go. Upon a rigid eggaminashen uv my fizzlekle man, I find it wood be wus ner madnis fer me 2 undertake a campane, to-wit:

"1. I'm bald-headid, and hev bin obliged to ware a wig these 22 yeres.

"2. I hev dandruff in wat scanty hair still hangs around my venerable temples.

"3. I hev a chronic katarr.

"4. I hev lost, sence Stanton's order to draft, the use uv wun eye entirely, and hev cronic inflammashen in the other.

"5. My teeth is all unsound, my palit aint eggactly rite, and I hev hed bronkeetis 31 yeres last Joon. At present I hev a koff, the paroxisms uv wich is friteful 2 behold.

"6. I'm holler-chestid, am short-winded, and hev alluz hed panes in my back and side.

"7. I am afflictid with kronic diarrrear and kostivniss. The money I hev paid fer Jayneses karminnytiv balsam and pills wood astonish almost ennybody.

"8. I am rupcherd in 9 places, and am entirely enveloped with trusses.

"9. I hev verrykose vanes, hev a white swellin on wun leg and a fever sore on the uther—also wun leg is shorter than tother, though I handle it so expert that noboddy never noticed it.

"10. I hev korns and bunyons on both feet, wich wood prevent me from marchin.

"I dont suppose that my political opinions, wich are ferninst and prossekooshn uv this unconstooshnel war, wood hev any wate with a draftin oficer, but the above reasons why I cant go, will, I maik no doubt, be sufficient.

"Petroleum V. Nasby."

Locke, who had delighted Lincoln by his humor, was himself inspired by the pathos of the melancholy man who liked the Nasby papers.

Possibly as a sequel to the Nasby humor we might contribute what Locke claimed was a historical incident. The excerpt is made from his paper, the *Toledo Weekly Blade*, for July 23, 1868, under the caption "Lincoln's Visit to the Five Points Sunday School." Locke reviewed the story as he heard it in Illinois and said he did not doubt its authenticity. The episode occurred after Lincoln returned from New York and was reminiscent.

After telling about the Sunday School visit Locke's informant said. "Just here Mr. Lincoln put his hand in his pocket and remarked that he never heard anything that touched him as had the songs which those children sang. With that he drew forth a little book, remarking that they had given him one of the books from which they sang . . . And he began to read a piece, with all the earnestness of his great, earnest soul. In the middle of the second verse his friend Jim felt a choking in his throat and a tickling in his nose. At the beginning of the third verse he saw that the stranger from the East was weeping and his own tears fell fast. Turning toward Lincoln, who was reading straight on, he saw the great blinding tears in his eyes, so that he could not possibly see the page. He was repeating that little song from memory!"