

LINCOLN'S PARABLE

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MR. WILLIAM H. CROOK'S article in the September HARPER'S MAGAZINE on "Lincoln's Last Day" leads me to think anew of an interesting incident which happened on the last day of the great President's life, and was related to me twenty years ago by my friend General John A. J. Cresswell, of Maryland. General Cresswell was a graduate of Dickinson College, a hard student, a fine lawyer, a splendid orator, a member of the House of Representatives, and then of the Senate from Maryland, and Postmaster-General in Grant's cabinet. Withal, he remained throughout the war a strong Union man, though with warm Southern sympathies. A recent newspaper item from Mrs. Hays, the daughter of Jefferson Davis, in which she tells of the admonition which her father gave her because of her childish glee over the death of Mr. Lincoln, seems to make it well to repeat this story. I will do so, as nearly as possible, just as it came to me. For reasons which shall be obvious I recollect it very clearly.

"I had a good friend, a collegemate," said General Cresswell, "who got into the Confederate army, was captured and held by the government as a prisoner of war. Utterly discouraged, he wrote me a pitiful letter urging me to find some way of getting him out. It was at a time when there were very few who did not know that the Confederacy was doomed. He said he knew that it was, that he was in a bad scrape, and if there was any way of getting out of it he would take the oath of allegiance, go to his friends, find something to do, and remain a good and faithful Union man forevermore. There are not many men who will not do what they can for a collegemate; so I started at once to do what I could for mine. I made an affidavit setting forth what I knew of him, emphasizing his goodness of heart and soundness of character, and repeating what he had said in his letter to me; and early on the morning of April 14, 1865, went from Baltimore over to Washington to see the President. I got to the White House before nine o'clock, not with the expectation of seeing Mr. Lincoln so early, but with the hope that I might get a place at the head of the line and be the first to see him. To my surprise I was told that he would see me at once.

"I found him alone. As I entered the door he got up quickly and strode across the room towards me, saying as he came: 'Hello, Cresswell! The war is over!' He grasped my hand with the enthusiasm of a schoolboy, and repeated the exclamation, 'The war is over!' adding, 'Look at that telegram from Sherman.' The message assured the President of the culmination in the Carolinas. Indeed, it was glorious news. Many times, with a spirit that was delightful to see, Mr. Lincoln exclaimed, 'The war is over!' Then he would stop, grow serious, and add: 'But it has been an awful war, Cresswell, it has been an awful war! But it's over!'

"When he could leave the theme that was first in his mind and heart, he exclaimed: 'But what are you after? You fellows don't come to see me unless you want something. It must be something big, or you wouldn't be so early.' I told him my errand and handed him my affidavit. He said: 'That's not so hard. You did right to put it in writing. I don't care to read the statement. I know you know how to make affidavits. But it makes me think of an Illinois story, and I'm going to tell it to you.'

"This was his story: He said, 'Years ago a lot of young folks, boys and girls, out in Illinois, got up a Maying party. They took their dinners and went down to a place where they had to cross the Sangamon river on an old scow. They got over all right and had a good picnic. When it was time to go back they were hilarious at finding that the scow had got untied and floated down the stream. After a while the thing looked more serious, for there was no boat and they couldn't throw out a pontoon. Then the girls thought they were scared. Pretty soon a young man, a little brighter than the rest, proposed that each fellow take off his shoes and stockings and pick up the girl he liked best and carry her over. It was a great scheme, and it worked all right until all had got over but a little, short, young man and a very tall, dignified old maid. Then there was trouble for one young man in dead earnest.

"'Now, do you see,' he said, 'you fellows will get one man after another out of the business until Jefferson Davis and I will be the only ones left on the island, and I'm afraid he'll refuse to let me carry him over, and I'm afraid there are some people who will make trouble about my doing it if he consents.'

"I laughed at the story and the application, and that led the President to say: 'It's no laughing matter; it's more than likely to happen. There are worse men than Jefferson Davis, and I wish I could see some way by which he and the people would let us get him over. However, we will keep going on and getting them out of it, one at a time.'

"Then," said General Cresswell, "he took my affidavit and wrote a brief word upon it, something like, 'Do this. A. L.,' and gave it to me. I carried it over to the War Office and, after the usual fuss got the order issued. Then I went out into Maryland to attend to some business through the day, and got back into the city late at night to find everything in an uproar over the assassination."