

Mr. Lincoln Writes a Short Short Story



The manuscript that faces this page is one of the more remarkable documents in all the topless piles of Lincolniana. It has been kept in deliberate oblivion for a hundred years, withheld from the public gaze by a succession of righteous owners. It appears here publicly for the first time.

It will be read in some quarters with disbelief, amazement, and—in the case of those who tend to forget that even our American immortals were, after all, mortal—with shock.

It was written by Abraham Lincoln when he was still practising law in Springfield. One of Lincoln's friends there was an old fellow named Arnold Robinson, the crier of the U. S. Circuit Court. Robinson was a teller of old stories, a singer of old songs; Lincoln was a most responsive listener. Robinson had been entertaining his friend with an impromptu concert one day, when Lincoln said to him, "Arny, I've got something here you ought to have." He handed Robinson this piece of paper.

It will be quickly recognized as a tale written in Spoonerisms, that little trick of transposing word beginnings that was a highly popular form of humor in frontier days.

The piece of paper has had a quiet history. Arnold Robinson left it to his wife. Mrs. Robinson sold it to a collector who willed it to a Midwest historical society. The society traded it for a first-edition Mormon Bible and a Lincoln photo. One patriotic collector set out to buy it with the avowed purpose of destroying it. He was outbid by a collector whose one desire was to preserve it. The document is now in the possession of Nathaniel E. Stein, president of the Manuscript Society.

The world has long known that Lincoln liked an occasional back-room story. Here is the only record—in his handwriting—of that earthy side of the Great Emancipator.

He said he was riding bas ackwards on a jass ack, through a patton cotch, on a pair of baddle sags, stuffed full of benjer greed, when the animal steered at a scump, and the livrup steather broke, and throwed him in the forner of the kence and broke his fishung fole. He said he would not have minded it much, but he fell right in a great tow curd; in fact, he said it gave him a right smart suck of fitness—he had the molew corbus pretty bad. He said, at out bray make he came to himself, ran home, seized up a stick of wood and split the axe to make a light, run hear into the house, and found the door suck stew, and his wife standing open. But thank goodness she is getting right hat and forty again.