HONEST ABE

"A Study in Integrity Based on the Early Life of Abraham Lincoln"

Honest Abe

"A Study in Integrity Based on the Early Life of Abraham Lincoln"

[Illustrated]

By

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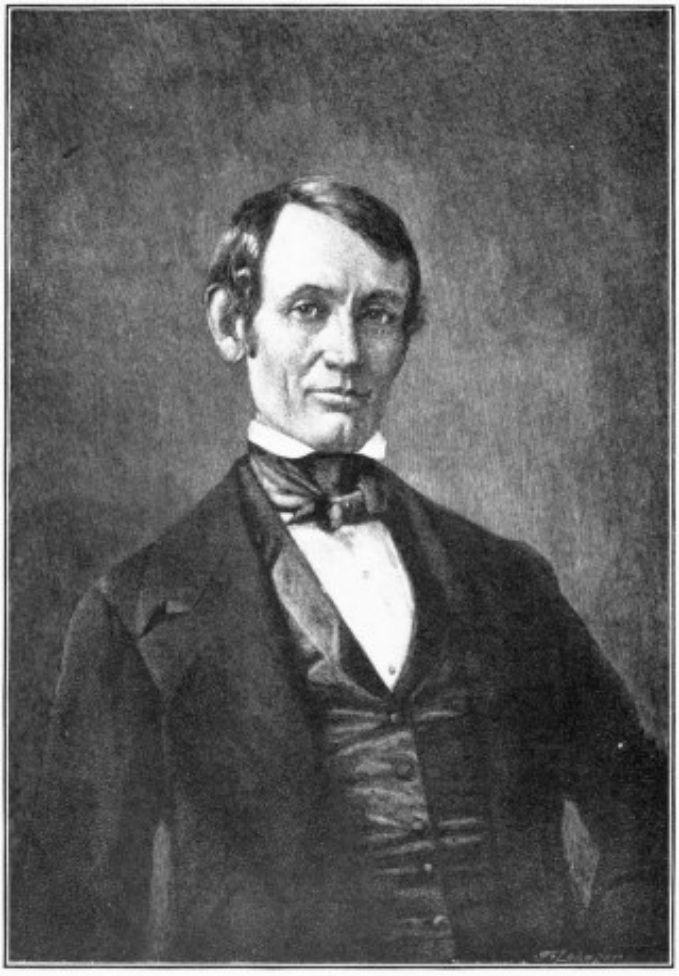
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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

From a woodcut by T. Johnson after a daguerreotype owned by Mr. Robert T. Lincoln

"HONEST ABE"

A STUDY IN INTEGRITY
BASED ON THE EARLY LIFE OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

BY
ALONZO ROTHSCHILD
AUTHOR OF "LINCOLN, MASTER OF MEN"



BOSTON AND NEW YORK, 1917

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Published September 1917

IN MEMORY
OF
"DEAREST"
KATHERINE ROTHSCHILD
TO WHOM THE AUTHOR
OWES NOT LESS THAN
LINCOLN OWED HIS
"ANGEL MOTHER"
THIS BOOK IS
AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED

CHAPTER I

PINCHING TIMES



HE who seeks to understand the character and achievement of Abraham Lincoln must begin with a study of the man's honesty. At the base of his nature, in the tap-root and very fiber of his being, pulsed a fidelity to truth, whether of thought or of deed, peculiar to itself. So thoroughgoing was this characteristic that it seems to have begun in him where in other men it generally leaves off. Politicians without number have yielded a work-a-day obedience to the rules of honor, but there is record of no other public leader in recent times

who, among the vicissitudes of a trying career, has endeavored to balance actions and principles with such painstaking nicety. To trace these efforts from Lincoln's early years is to pass with him, pace for pace, over part of the road that led to distinction. As we go we shall have to take account of happenings, little as well as big; for every man is the sum of all his parts, and in no other way may we hope to comprehend how the esteem that began with a few rustic neighbors grew until it filled the heart of a nation.

To what extent, if any, Lincoln inherited his uprightness of mind from remote ancestors will probably never be known. The bare lines of the genealogical chart afford no clues to the characters of the men and women whose names appear there. If any of the threads spun out of their several lives met and twined in the broad strand of blue that enriched his, there is no way of identifying the spinners. Less obscure, though perhaps of only passing interest, is what may be gleaned under this head about two of Lincoln's nearer relations. His father's brothers, Mordecai and Josiah, appear to have enjoyed general respect on account of their probity. "They were excellent men," said one who claimed to know them intimately, "plain, moderately educated, candid in their manners and intercourse, and looked upon as honorable as any men I have ever heard of."[i-1] Their younger brother Thomas, however, cannot be so readily portrayed. He has, like his illustrious son, been, in turn, depreciated and idealized to such a degree that the inquirer, who would reach safe conclusions in respect to him, must tread warily through a maze of contradictions.

Rejecting the praise as well as the blame of hearsay historians, and following the testimony of those only who knew the man, we learn from one that he was "honest"; from another

that he "was regarded as a very honest man"; and still another found him "always truthful—conscientious."[i-2] To these tributes must be added what one who was doubly connected with Thomas Lincoln had to say about him:—

"I'm just tired of hearing Grandfather Lincoln abused," said Mrs. Dowling, the daughter of Dennis Hanks and Matilda Johnson, speaking to an attentive listener, not many years ago. "Everybody runs him down."

Then, going on to free her mind woman-fashion, she continued:—

"Uncle Abe got his honesty, and his clear notions of living, and his kind heart from his father. Maybe the Hanks family was smarter, but some of them couldn't hold a candle to Grandfather Lincoln when it came to morals. I've heard Grandfather Lincoln say, many a time, that he was kind and loving, and kept his word, and always paid his way, and never turned a dog from his door."[i-3]

These qualities, so admirable in Thomas, were not lacking, it should be mentioned, in that particular member of "the Hanks family," his cousin Nancy, with whom he mated.[i-4] She is said to have brought to the rude Kentucky cabin, in which they began their married life, a sweetness of spirit and a firmness of character that nicely supplemented his rugged integrity. Yet here again traditions are more plentiful than facts, and the repute of the little family, in those early days, so far as it affords a point of departure for the study of Abraham Lincoln's straightforwardness, rests, in a manner, on the word of one neighbor,—a man of standing, however,—according to whom "they were poor," but "they were true."[i-5]

The poverty of the frontier, it has been said, is no poverty; but the Lincolns were poor almost to a proverb. Their condition appears to have been extreme, even for the primitive Kentucky settlement at Elizabethtown where they made their first home. The young husband was a carpenter by trade, but his new neighbors, with the self-reliance of pioneers, managed to do for themselves most of the work wherewith he had hoped to support his family. Its needs grew with the birth of a little daughter, but not its resources, which he presently sought to eke out by farming. The hut in Elizabethtown was abandoned for another hut and a piece of tillable land that Thomas had bought,—presumably on credit,—about fourteen miles away, near the Big South Fork of Nolin Creek.[i-6] There, in the following winter, was born the boy who became known to fame as Abraham Lincoln. He must have felt at an early age the tooth of the "stinted living" in those "pinching times," to which, during later life, he once sadly referred; for his father did not prosper with the hoe, any more than he had with the hammer. After a few unfruitful years on Nolin Creek, Thomas relinquished the place for a better farm, in the Knob Creek region, about fifteen miles distant, acquired like its predecessor on easy terms. Yet the fortunes of the family did not mend. Its luckless head "was always lookin'," as Cousin Dennis said, "fur the land o' Canaan." To his pioneer's vision the There ever seemed fairer than the Here. So removal followed removal,—now in Kentucky, then into Indiana, and again into Illinois,—until, to borrow one of Abraham's little stories, the chickens, if there were any, might have lain on their backs and crossed their legs to be tied, whenever they saw the wagon sheets brought out.[i-7]

Thomas Lincoln's futile shifts need not be set forth at length here,[i-8] but certain aspects of his inability to get on in the world have a peculiar significance. He responded with ready good nature to calls upon his time or his hospitality; and though he appears to have understood many things, he never learned how to turn his dealings with the little world around him to his own account. The few business ventures, in which he is said to have engaged, reveal how woefully he was lacking in what has been called "money sense." A typical instance, related by his son many years after the event, may have suggested to the narrator that there were at least two members of the Lincoln family who had each a blind side in the direction of the almighty dollar. Here is the story substantially as Abraham related it:—

"Father often told me of the trick that was played upon him by a 'pair of sharpers.' It was the year before we moved from Kentucky to Indiana that father concluded to take a load of pork down to New Orleans. He had a considerable amount of his own, and he bargained with the relations and neighbors for their pork, so that altogether he had quite a load. He took the pork to the Ohio River on a clumsily constructed flat-boat of his own make. Almost as soon as he pushed out into the river a couple of sleek fellows bargained with him for his cargo, and promised to meet him in New Orleans where they arranged to pay him the price agreed upon. He eagerly accepted the offer, transferred the cargo to the strangers, and drifted down the river, his head filled with visions of wealth and delight. He thought that he was going to accomplish what he had set out to do, without labor or inconvenience. Father waited about New Orleans for several days, but failed to meet his whilom friends. At last it dawned upon him that he had

been sold, and all that he could do was to come back home and face the music."[i-9]

Consoling himself after such mishaps with the indolent philosophy of "Luck is ag'in' me," and "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth," Thomas would return to his sporadic farming, or to what he liked better—his rod and his gun. For there is a tradition that this unthrifty fellow—honest and well-meaning though he was—had a distaste for manual labor. When work had to be done he did it, after a fashion, nor did he spare the boy who was growing up at his side; but further than that he apparently did not go. Indeed, it may be doubted whether the father ever found, along their limited horizon, the path which might have led either him or his son to business success. They certainly did not enter upon it. Yet if Thomas Lincoln failed to teach Abraham how to put money in their purse, let it be remembered, to his lasting credit, that he did show him how an empty sack might—despite a time-honored adage to the contrary—stand upright.

Noteworthy as was the father's influence on the boy's character, that of the mother appears to have been of deeper consequence. Lincoln's earliest recollections of her, as he recalled in later years, pictured his sister and himself seated at her feet eagerly listening to the books that she read or the tales that she told. The poor lady succumbed early to the hardships of the Indiana backwoods; and the few facts that are known concerning her brief life set forth but a meager story.[i-10] If "the world knows nothing of its greatest men," may this not be so, in a measure, because it knows nothing of their mothers? The deficiency, as far as Nancy Hanks is concerned, was supplied, for all time, in perhaps the most pithy yet comprehensive tribute that a distinguished son ever ut-

tered to the memory of a parent. Looking down over his career from the last eminence, and tracing it all back again to the frail, sweet-faced woman whose life had flickered out before his wondering gaze, in the cabin home of his boyhood, Lincoln once said, with moist eyes: "All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother."[i-11]

When she passed on, the lad, it is true, was not quite eleven years old; nevertheless her teachings, during that first plastic period, had evidently left their sterling impress in his nature.

Nor did the home influence for right living stop there. After an interval of about a year, Thomas sought another mate. Leaving the little ones to manage the household on Little Pigeon Creek as best they might, he retraced his steps to Elizabethtown and offered himself in marriage to Mrs. Sarah Bush Johnston. She is said to have refused him, in their younger days, for Daniel Johnston, who, by a coincidence, had left her a widow with as many children as waited for her visitor at home.[i-12] On this occasion the lady listened more favorably to his proposal, yet she pointed out an obstacle, saying: "Tommy Lincoln, I have no objection to marrying you, but I cannot do it right off, for I owe several little debts which must first be paid." To which he replied: "Give me a list of your debts."

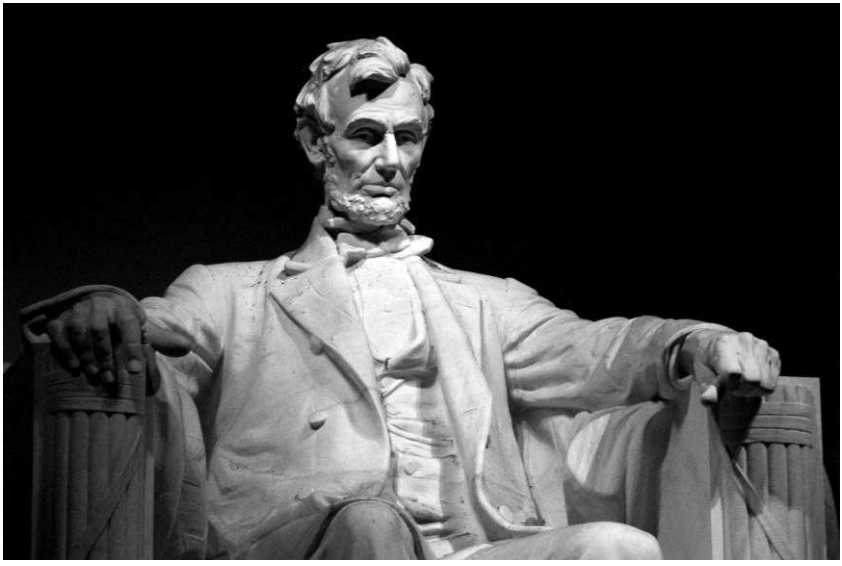
They amounted to about twelve dollars—not so mean a sum in those days of small things as present standards might indicate. At any rate, within a few hours our suitor had paid them, and had married the fair debtor. The settlement of these little accounts was, in a way, the central incident of their short courtship.[i-13] It puts one in mind of the good repute enjoyed by the Lincolns, from the beginning, in Elizabethtown. If the neighbor, who declared Thomas and his first wife to

have been poor but true, had seen him and his second wife set out for home in a four-horse wagon loaded with her wealth of household belongings,—to say nothing of the three blooming Johnston children,—there might have been some hesitation about repeating the word "poor"; but in the face of those receipted bills, there would probably have been no desire to modify the word "true."[i-14]

Sally Bush was a worthy successor to Nancy Hanks. A woman of strong personality and high ideals, this stepmother—to use a designation that she ennobled—is credited by not a few writers with exerting the larger influence in the moulding of Abraham Lincoln's character. They have gone so far, some of them, as to assert that Lincoln himself, recognizing this to be so, had her in mind and not her predecessor, when he uttered that grateful acknowledgment to his "angel mother."[i-15] This view is hardly sustained by the language of the tribute, or by the facts; yet Abraham apparently missed no opportunity for expressing in deeds, as well as in words, what—to use his own phrases—he owed the "noble woman" who had been "a good and kind mother"[i-16] to an orphaned boy.

Perhaps, after all, the controversy concerning the two women, if controversy it may be called, is fairly disposed of by what Mr. Lincoln told one of his acquaintances, Governor William Pickering, who some years later thus restated their conversation. "Once when Lincoln referred to the fact that he owed much to his mother, I asked, 'Which mother, Mr. Lincoln, your own or your stepmother?' To which Mr. Lincoln replied,—'Don't ask me that question, for I mean both, as it was mother all my life, except that desolate period between the time mother died and father brought mother into the home again. Both were as one mother. Hence I simply say, mother.' "[i-17]

With one or the other of these conscientious women at his side, Abraham Lincoln reached maturity. Almost every good man has had a good mother. Here was one who had two. It is not surprising, therefore, that his sense of right and wrong, after a few minor lapses, became developed to uncommon acuteness at an early age, nor should it be accounted a miracle that from the unsightly stumpage of a frontier clearing, emerged this blossom which grew, with time, into the finest flower of nineteenth-century honor.



Lincoln was brought up on the breast of things. The rugged actualities of life in a new country, rather than the literature about life, entered into his training; and when we name those colleges to which the world's great lights have severally owed their education, this man must be credited to the most venerable, though perhaps least honored, among them all,—the academy of hard knocks. Let us not infer, however, that the back settlements in which he spent his youth were wholly beyond the field of letters. Attending "A B C schools by littles," as

the autobiography expresses it, and learning betimes how to read, the lad lost no opportunity to borrow or acquire the few books within his reach. Under the stimulation of first one mother, then the other, every volume that he could lay hold of for fifty miles around was eagerly studied. What this shifting library comprised will doubtless never be fully known. It is said to have included—besides certain elementary school-books[i-18]—the Bible, Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress," Æsop's "Fables," the "Arabian Nights," Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe," Weems's "Life of Washington," Ramsay's "Life of Washington," a history of the United States, Weems's "Life of Marion," the "Speeches of Henry Clay," with which was probably incorporated a "Memoir" of the statesman, the "Life of Benjamin Franklin," Riley's "Narrative of the Loss of the Brig Commerce," a few of Cooper's "Leather Stocking Tales," and the Revised Laws of Indiana, with which were bound, besides other documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.[i-19] Some of these works, if not all of them, left an ethical glow in the boy's heart. Thoughtfully absorbing the light that streamed from their pages, he caught glimpses here and there of a kinship that linked the everyday doings in his commonplace world with the ideals in his books.

A mishap to one of the borrowed volumes put these budding ideas of rectitude to the test. While in Abraham's keeping, a "Life of Washington"[i-20] that belonged to a neighbor, Josiah Crawford by name, was badly soaked one night during a rainstorm, which beat through the chinks of the Little Pigeon Creek cabin. Carrying the damaged book back to its owner, the boy acknowledged himself answerable for its condition;—but how was he to pay the seventy-five cents which Crawford demanded in settlement? Money was as scarce as literature

at that time with young Lincoln, so he agreed to work out the claim in the farmer's corn-field. "You see," said Abraham, relating the incident to a friend, "I am tall and long-armed, and I went to work in earnest. At the end of the two days there was not a corn-blade left on a stalk in the field. I wanted to pay full damage for all the wetting the book got, and I made a clean sweep."[i-21] This ample submission to the laws of mine and thine was not, however, so graceful as it might have been. Our "long-armed" boy appears to have been still far removed from sainthood in those days; and, after the manner of boys, he nursed a grudge against Crawford for his unneighborly, though perhaps rightful, treatment of the accident. Having satisfied that thrifty person's demands with the Scriptural "good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over," Abraham—so tradition has it—lampooned the man whenever occasion offered,—now in humorous prose, now in doggerel rhymes,—until Josiah's "blue nose," as well as certain other unlovely features, became the laughing-stock of the neighborhood. Indeed, the gibes ran their merry course—if we may believe one veracious chronicler—all the way to "the Wabash and the Ohio."[i-22]

This unseemly persecution of Crawford, on the heels of an honorable settlement with him, narrowly saved the youthful Lincoln from occupying a place in the world's gallery of premature worthies beside the copper-plate little Washington portrayed by Parson Weems. Nevertheless, that myth-maker's model boy, who could not tell a lie, had left a deep impression in the mind of this real boy. To Abe's uncritical faculties the biography rang true in every detail. For its reverend author, with all his faults, had the literary merit of apparent sincerity; and his string of "curious anecdotes," as the title-page

called them, had not yet been worn threadbare, to the verge of the ridiculous, by derisive repetition. Weems's Washington, boy and man, became Lincoln's hero—a cherished ideal which he never consented to modify, even after he had outgrown the story of the cherry tree and that truthful little hatchet-swinger.

Emulating the great Virginian, Abe carried himself, now consciously, now unconsciously, as this paragon of his fancy might have done, even to the point of leaving a hatchet, or more accurately speaking, an axe anecdote for later generations to admire. During those toilsome Indiana days,—so runs our tale,—the youth was engaged in clearing a piece of woodland some distance from the house. Leaving home early, he made it a practice to carry some luncheon and stay away until nightfall. The picnic element in the expedition appealed to the taste of his frolicsome stepsister, Matilda, whose frequent appeals for permission to accompany him met with her mother's peremptory refusals. Eluding maternal vigilance one morning, the girl slyly followed Lincoln as he strode through the forest, humming a tune, with his axe on his shoulder. At a favorable moment she darted forward and, exerting cat-like agility, leaped squarely upon him. Grasping a shoulder with each hand, she braced her knee in the middle of his back, and brought the young woodsman dexterously to the ground. Lincoln, taken by surprise, went down like a log, carrying his assailant with him. As they fell the axe cut the girl's ankle, making a painful wound that bled freely. After an improvised bandage had stanched the blood, Abe, mindful of Mrs. Lincoln's oft-repeated orders, looked down at the sobbing culprit and asked:—

" 'Tilda, what are you going to tell mother about getting hurt?"

"Tell her I did it with the axe," she answered. "That will be the truth, won't it?"

To which he responded:—

"Yes, that's the truth, but it's not all the truth. Tell the whole truth, 'Tilda, and trust your good mother for the rest."[i-23]

Whether 'Tilda did tell "the whole truth," and whether Sally Bush gathered her or Abraham or both of them to her heart, after the manner of Augustine Washington in the Reverend Mr. Weems's tale, is not definitely known. Nevertheless, when the Plutarch that is to be runs his parallel between these two greatest of Americans, the legendary hatchet and the historic axe may become symbolic of how closely both these heroes did actually hew to the line, in their early fondness for the verities.

But if further youthful similarities shall be sought by that hypothetical biographer, he will not linger over the next episode in this chronicle of Lincoln's moral growth. Abe had passed his nineteenth birthday when "the great man" of the Little Pigeon Creek neighborhood, old James Gentry, picked him out for a signal mark of confidence. That gentleman's son, Allen, was to make a trading voyage in a Mississippi flat-boat laden with goods, and Lincoln was hired to share the adventure. They planned to do business along the river all the way, if necessary, to the Gulf. Drifting down the Ohio and thence on the broad waters of the Mississippi as far as New Orleans, the young men made a prosperous, though not entirely uneventful journey. Only one incident of the expedition concerns us here. At certain landings they were paid for their merchan-

dise—as they discovered too late—in counterfeit money. Gentry, lamenting over the matter, feared his father's anger; whereupon Lincoln consoled him with the suggestion that their employer would not care how much bad money they took in, if they brought the correct amount of good money home. "Never mind, Allen," he continued; "it will accidentally slip out of our fingers before we get to New Orleans, and then old Jim can't quarrel at us."[i-24] This prophecy did, in fact, come true. The counterfeits, we are told, "all went off like hot cakes"; but to what extent the prophet helped to bring about so sweeping a fulfillment is nowhere recorded. When he and his associates, however, on their return, rendered an account of their stewardship in currency that was not hopelessly discredited, old Mr. Gentry is said to have pronounced on Lincoln what corresponded with the Scriptural commendation,—"Well done, good and faithful servant."

In this approval the candid historian cannot concur, yet he hesitates to condemn. The demoralized condition of our currency throughout the Mississippi Valley for over half a century, the bewildering variety of counterfeit bills, to say nothing of wildcat notes, in circulation, and the scarcity of good money, left people small choice but to accept at varying discounts—unless too obviously spurious—what they were offered, and pass it along again with as little loss as possible.[i-25] One aspect of the trouble was later humorously set forth by Lincoln himself, in his story of the steamboat captain who, running short of fuel on the river, steered to a woodpile alongshore.

"Is that your wood?" he inquired of a man near by.

"Yes," was the answer.

"Do you want to sell it?"

"Certainly."

"Will you accept wildcat currency?"

"Certainly."

"How will you take it?"

"Cord for cord."[i-26]

The passing of depreciated or fraudulent currency, in the ordinary course of business, was evidently not regarded, during those days of loose financiering, with the severity of more recent times.[i-27] Indeed, after Lincoln had become a lawyer, though the clients that offered themselves were accepted or rejected with scrupulous discrimination, he on one occasion employed his wit and ability to secure the acquittal of a man charged, under suspicious circumstances, with passing counterfeit money. "There was a pretty clear case against the accused," said Adlai E. Stevenson, who attended the trial, "but when the chief witness for the people took the stand, he stated that his name was J. Parker Green, and Lincoln reverted to this the moment he rose to cross-examine:—Why J. Parker Green?—What did the J. stand for?—John?—Well, why didn't the witness call himself John P. Green?—That was his name, wasn't it?—Well, what was the reason he did not wish to be known by his right name?—Did J. Parker Green have anything to conceal; and if not, why did J. Parker Green part his name in that way?—and so on. Of course the whole examination was farcical," Mr. Stevenson continued, "but there was something irresistibly funny in the varying tones and inflections of Mr. Lincoln's voice as he rang the changes upon the man's name; and at the recess the very boys in the street took it up as a slogan, and shouted, 'J. Parker Green!' all over the town. Moreover, there was something in Lincoln's way of intoning his

questions which made me suspicious of the witness, and to this day I have never been able to rid my mind of the absurd impression that there was something not quite right about J. Parker Green. It was all nonsense, of course; but the jury must have been affected as I was, for Green was discredited, and the defendant went free."[i-28] Perhaps, too, some of the twelve good men and true, like the highly respected counsel for the defense, could have severally recalled times when the exigencies of trade had wafted into their hands worthless bank-bills that, somehow, did not remain there.

Be that as it may, much water, in the language of the old byword, was to flow down the Mississippi River before this clever attorney evolved from the gawky young bow-hand on Gentry's flat-boat. Another trading voyage to New Orleans in the spring of 1831, shortly after he had begun life on his own account, appears to have been as successful as the first one. The crew comprised Lincoln, his stepbrother John D. Johnston, and his cousin John Hanks, who accompanied them, however, but part way, leaving the responsibility of the undertaking largely on Abraham's shoulders. Their employer, Denton Offutt, a breezy speculator,—free-handed, optimistic, and given to superlatives,—conceived a warm admiration for Abe. The young fellow certainly conducted himself well. His manly qualities, his muscular powers, his unfailing good humor, his resourcefulness on certain trying occasions, his fidelity to the trust reposed in him, above all, his integrity, made so strong an impression on Offutt that at the termination of the voyage he established a general store at New Salem,[i-29] and placed Lincoln in charge of it with the assertion that this model clerk had not his equal in the United States.

Offutt's extravagant praise was, it is perhaps needless to say, not wholly merited. A keener merchant might have hesitated to entrust the management of his business, and of the neighboring mill that was presently merged with the enterprise, to a young man of Lincoln's peculiar make-up. Abe had, it is true, learned something of storekeeping during the old Gentryville days, in the grocery of his friend William Jones; and a small stock of goods purchased there, when the Lincoln family moved from Indiana to Illinois, had been profitably peddled, on the way. Moreover, those trading trips to New Orleans had doubtless contributed somewhat to his commercial training; but no amount of experience could make a successful business man of one so lacking, as was Tom Lincoln's son, in aptitude for hiving the nimble sixpence. How not to do so appears, in a sense, to have concerned him more. Yet the scrupulous care with which he shut Offutt's till against the sixpences that did not belong there would, had it been combined with mercantile ability, probably in the end have made the young clerk's fortune. His honesty became a by-word.

Two typical instances of uprightness in small things especially impressed themselves on the memory of the neighborhood. It is said that once, having sold a woman a bill of goods, he found after her departure that she had paid six and a quarter cents more than the purchases amounted to. When the store was closed at night, so the story goes, he walked several miles into the country to give his customer the fourpenny piece which balanced her over-payment. Here again Lincoln's punctilious honesty recalls that of Washington. It is related that a ferryman on the General's estate, in making change for a moidore, took out one and a half pence too much. Discovering the over-charge when the accounts for the week were

made up, Washington wrapped three halfpence in a piece of paper, and had them delivered to the traveler on his return.[i-30]

The other anecdote concerning Lincoln, that belongs in this group, tells how one night, just before closing time, he hastily weighed, as he thought, half a pound of tea for a belated customer. Looking at the scales on the following morning, he discovered that a weight of four ounces, instead of eight, had been used. To wrap up another quarter of a pound of tea, close the store again, and deliver his parcel at the end of a long walk before breakfast, was the only method of repairing the error that presented itself to this primitive conscience.

The young clerk's ethical creed during those New Salem days seems simple enough. It has been preserved by a friend, who thus restates what he gathered, under this head, in the course of conversation:

"Lincoln said he did not believe in total depravity, and, although it was not popular to believe it, it was easier to do right than wrong; that the first thought was: what was right? and the second: what was wrong? Therefore it was easier to do right than wrong, and easier to take care of, as it would take care of itself. It took an effort to do wrong, and a still greater effort to take care of it. But do right and it would take care of itself. Then you had nothing to do but to go ahead and do right and nothing to trouble you."[i-31]

Out of this philosophy developed—to borrow a cynical phrase—the acute attacks of chronic integrity that attracted particular attention to Lincoln, even in the midst of an honest, plain-dealing community. The rude people around him, for the most part, led upright lives, and they expected others to do

likewise; yet his efforts to treat every man with fairness were so pronounced as to evoke frequent comment among them. Their talk crystallized, at last, in the sobriquet, "Honest Abe." This name, having been generally adopted throughout the New Salem vicinage, fitted Lincoln so nicely that it clung to him, with slight variations, in one form or another, until the end of his career.

Meanwhile Offutt did not prosper. He appears to have had too many irons in the fire, and one of them, as we know, was under the care of a man who had no particular talent for keeping irons, or anything else, at a money-making glow. Neither the honesty nor the popularity of this clerk—for the young fellow had gained the good-will of their customers—sufficed to save the store from the general ruin in which the owner's several ventures became involved. Failure overtook the new business before the end of its first year. As the place is sold out, Offutt disappears from historic view; while Lincoln steps nearer to the lime-light for a brief but bloodless essay at soldiering in the Black Hawk War. Returning to New Salem upon the conclusion of the campaign, he made an unsuccessful canvass, on a National Republican platform, for election to the State Legislature. Then "without means and out of business," as he himself expressed it, but "anxious to remain with his friends," Lincoln looked about him for something to do. Stalwart of frame, with well-knit muscles, he naturally came to the thought of again earning a living by manual labor. The blacksmith's trade, which several of his forbears had creditably followed, was, for a time, seriously considered. It had, in fact, almost been decided on, when two of those new-found friends, the Herndon brothers, familiarly known as "Row" and "Jim," offered their general store for sale. James sold his inter-

est to William F. Berry, the son of a neighboring Presbyterian minister, and Rowan soon after disposed of his share to Lincoln, receiving in lieu of money "Honest Abe's" promise to pay. When "Row" was asked how he came to make such liberal terms with a penniless man whom he had known for so short a time, he answered: "I believed he was thoroughly honest, and that impression was so strong in me I accepted his note in payment of the whole. He had no money, but I would have advanced him still more had he asked for it."[i-32]

Herndon was not the only New Salemite who was willing to transfer his business, after this fashion, for a promissory note. Soon after the transaction, a neighboring storekeeper, Reuben Radford by name, incurred the displeasure of a local gang, "the Clary's Grove boys," to such an extent that they made a riotous night of it in his place. On the following morning, standing discouraged amid the débris of the establishment, Radford sold it to the first comer, William G. Greene, a youth who had been a sort of junior clerk in the Offutt store. As the purchaser could not pay in cash the four hundred dollars agreed upon, he gave his note. Then, growing nervous over the transaction, he turned for comfort to his former associate. Lincoln said: "Cheer up, Billy. It's a good thing. We'll take an inventory."

They found that the flotsam and jetsam which had survived the storm, amounted in value to $1200. Whereupon Berry and Lincoln offered Greene a substantial profit on his bargain. This the young man eagerly accepted, with the stipulation that the firm should assume his indebtedness to Radford. There was a little more shuffling of notes, and the goods passed into the hands of Berry and Lincoln.[i-33] They shortly afterwards, in presumably the same manner, absorbed a small business

owned by James Rutledge. Combining these three stocks,—all acquired by a few strokes of the pen,—Lincoln and his partner now had what the junior member later ironically referred to as "*the* store" of New Salem.

Despite its virtual monopoly along certain lines, the new firm was ill-adapted to succeed. Berry soon developed habits of idleness and intemperance that would have been fatal to any business;[i-34] while Lincoln, though ambitious and sober to an exceptional degree, was hardly more effective. His keen interest in books, study, newspapers, politics, funny stories, horse-races, wrestling-matches, feats of strength,—anything, in short, but buying and selling,—left him far from alert to what is commonly called the main chance. When one remembers these pursuits, moreover, to have been the preoccupations of a man who combined rigid integrity with a kindly nature, it is not surprising to learn, as Cousin Dennis relates, that "he purty nigh always got the wust of a trade."[i-35] The rest is soon told. Berry and Lincoln did not thrive. Giving up the struggle after several ineffectual shifts, they sold out, early in 1834, to Alexander and William Trent. The purchasers had no money, but they willingly gave notes, which the sellers as willingly accepted. Before these obligations fell due, however, the Trent brothers had disappeared, their few remaining goods had been seized by creditors, and the business had come to an inglorious close.

Berry's death, soon after, left the surviving member of the firm to face, alone, the consequences of their ill-starred venture. Yet he could not bring himself to join in the censure which was heaped upon the young man's memory. With characteristic consideration for his partner's father, the Reverend John M. Berry, whom he held in affectionate regard, Lin-

coln declared that William's dissipation was a result rather than a cause of their misfortunes; and took on his own shoulders the burden of liabilities bound up in those unpaid notes to Herndon, Radford, Greene, and Rutledge.

How serious the whole affair was may be gathered from this account of it, given by the hapless debtor to a friend[i-36] of later days: "That debt was the greatest obstacle I have ever met in life. I had no way of speculating, and could not earn money except by labor, and to earn by labor eleven hundred dollars, besides my living, seemed the work of a lifetime. There was, however, but one way. I went to the creditors and told them that if they would let me alone, I would give them all I could earn, over my living, as fast as I could earn it."[i-37]

During the next few months no surplus, it is perhaps needless to add, was available for this purpose. In fact, the situation reduced itself to a struggle for bread. Lincoln's earnings from the office of local postmaster, to which he had been appointed before the above "winked out," were of course meager in the extreme; but he contrived to pick up a living by doing odd jobs about the neighborhood. Helping his friends—now Hill, now Ellis—behind their counters, working in the field as a farm laborer, splitting rails, lending a hand at the mill,—briefly, making himself useful on all sides, in his big, good-natured way, he just "kept," to quote the autobiography, "soul and body together."[i-38]

Throughout this trying period, however, Lincoln did not lose sight of his self-respect, or of the respect due to him from others. He began to manifest that sensitive chastity of honor which recoils from doubt as from a blow. So, when a patron of the post-office, upon payment of certain arrears demanded an acknowledgment, "A. Lincoln, P.M.," responded: "I am

somewhat surprised at your request. I will, however, comply with it. The law requires newspaper postage to be paid in advance, and now that I have waited a full year, you choose to wound my feelings by insinuating that unless you get a receipt I will probably make you pay it again."[i-39]

The reputation for honesty, which Lincoln so jealously guarded, had meanwhile opened to him another channel for occasional employment. This opportunity came through John Calhoun, the surveyor of Sangamon County, who, overburdened with business, was looking about for an assistant of intelligence and unquestioned integrity. The latter qualification appears to have been especially important at the time, owing to a mania for speculation in land that had possessed the people of the region to such a degree as almost to put a premium on jobbery. A man beyond the reach of corruption was, therefore, what Calhoun sought when he offered to make Abraham Lincoln one of his deputies. The honor must have been not less flattering to the young National Republican, because it came, as had the postmastership, from a Democratic source, and with the assurance that his acceptance carried with it no obligation of party service, nor restraint upon his freedom of political action. To Lincoln's declaration that he knew nothing whatever about surveying, Calhoun responded with an offer to aid him. Books and material having been procured, six weeks of earnest study ensued. For assistance in learning the theory of the subject, Lincoln turned to his friend, Mentor Graham, the local schoolmaster; for guidance in the practical application of the rules, he depended on the surveyor himself. When the period of preparation had reached its close, the new-fledged deputy is said to have made his pathetic little speech: "Calhoun, I am entirely

unable to repay you for your generosity, at present. All that I have you see on me, except a quarter of a dollar, in my pocket."[i-40]

Such extreme poverty left Lincoln, of course, unable to pay cash for the saddle-horse that his new duties obliged him to buy. He agreed to take care of the bill by installments; he did so, but ran behind when only ten dollars remained unpaid. Whereupon his creditor, a horse-dealer named Thomas Watkins, who is described as "a high-strung man," lost his temper and sued for what was still due. Lincoln did not deny the debt. He hastily raised the required sum and settled the suit.

A still more unpleasant experience followed, for the young surveyor was destined to drain his cup of mortification to its dregs. One of the Berry-Lincoln notes had passed into the hands of a certain Van Bergen, who forthwith brought suit and obtained judgment. Levying on the horse, saddle, and surveying instruments, he offered them for sale in satisfaction of his claim. But Lincoln's loyal friends were not disposed to stand idly by while he was deprived of the means of earning a livelihood. They bought the effects that had been seized, restored them to their former owner, and took the place of the impatient Van Bergen among his creditors.[i-41] The loans, so handsomely made, were in time repaid by Lincoln, principal and interest, as were all the obligations left in the train of his unfortunate business ventures. Disdaining to take advantage of a recently enacted law for the relief of insolvent debtors, he set himself resolutely to the task of seeing to it that no man should lose a penny by reason of any note which contained his signature. Yet the prospect might have appalled a stouter heart. At times, when the seeming hopelessness of the undertaking was borne in upon him, he referred to what was still to be

paid, with whimsical humor, as "the national debt." How long the process of liquidation did, in fact, take is not precisely known. Lincoln's occasional payments on account of these claims would doubtless have made a braver showing had the only other demands upon him been for his own simple wants; but, in addition to such outlays, the frequent aid extended to his parents, and the requirements, after his marriage, of a growing family, all had to come out of earnings that never, at their best, were munificent. Nevertheless, through good times and bad, the load of indebtedness became steadily lighter, until, after seventeen years or more of self-denial, the last note, with its heavy accumulations of interest, was paid.[i-42]

A less scrupulous man than Abraham Lincoln might have appreciably shortened this debt-bound period from the very beginning. As deputy surveyor under John Calhoun, and later, under that officer's successor, Thomas M. Neale, he doubtless had opportunities enough for employing his knowledge of what was going on, together with his still unimpaired credit, in profitable land speculations. But he could not bring himself to mingle the pursuit of private gain with public duties; and he scorned to use, on his own account, information derived from official sources.[i-43] The same conscientious spirit so manifestly entered into the doing of the work itself that he soon gained the confidence of those who employed him. They believed in the young surveyor's accuracy, as well as in his fairness, to such an extent that disputes concerning boundaries or corners were frequently submitted to him for arbitration; and, what is of greater moment, his findings, we are told, were invariably accepted by the conflicting parties as final. A quarrel of this nature, about a corner, took place in the northern part of the county. "After a good deal of disputing," relates one of

the owners, "we agreed to send for Lincoln, and to abide by his decision. He came with compass, flagstaff, and chain. He stopped with me three or four days and surveyed the whole section. When in the neighborhood of the disputed corner by actual survey, he called for his staff and, driving it in the ground at a certain spot said, 'Gentlemen, here is the corner.' We dug down into the ground at the point indicated and lo! there we found about six or eight inches of the original stake sharpened at the end, and beneath which was the usual piece of charcoal placed there by Rector, the surveyor who laid the ground off for the Government many years before." So well had the work been done that in this instance, as in the others, differences were at an end, and all concerned "went away completely satisfied."[i-44]

There is another aspect of Lincoln's early life that should not be overlooked. He was apparently never too busy for the contests of strength and skill from which came some of his first sweet triumphs in leadership. That these were won, for the most part, with ease must have made defeat, when it did on rare occasions occur, peculiarly hard to bear; yet he carried himself, according to all accounts,—whether victor or vanquished,—as a man of honor should. In fact, save for a single untoward act which must be charged to the hobbledehoy exuberance of his youthful Indiana days,[i-45] Lincoln treated whatever happened at these sports with the same extreme candor and nicety of good faith that marked his business dealings. Perhaps the most notable instance is that of a certain wrestling-match which took place during the Black Hawk War. At the risk of telling a twice-told tale, the story is repeated here,—told anew rather than repeated, for the later researches of an Illinois historian have contributed not a few

additional details.[i-46] They reveal Lincoln in the full flower of sportsmanlike honesty.



Having been elected Captain of the Volunteers from Sangamon County, he was ever ready to uphold the credit of his company in the rough pastimes whereby the soldiers sought to relieve the tedium of that peculiar campaign. Proud of their leader's exploits, especially as a wrestler, they boasted that no man in the army could throw him; and he, at the same time, owed much of his ascendancy over their undisciplined natures to the uniform success with which he downed all comers. But Antæus himself met his match at last.

One evening on the march, our phalanx from Sangamon happened upon a choice piece of camping-ground at about the time it was reached by a company from St. Clair County. In the altercations which ensued a disgraceful scuffle seemed imminent, when Lincoln proposed to William Moore, the opposing commander, that they might settle their dispute after the good old-fashioned method of single combat—captain against captain. This suggestion met with a modified approval. As the officer from St. Clair had no skill in wrestling, it was agreed that each company should be represented by its stoutest champion. Accordingly, Lincoln soon stood within a circle of excited men, facing a redoubtable athlete from southern Illinois, in the person of private Lorenzo Dow Thompson. Both combatants had won the confidence of their respective friends, who hastened to back their faith with bets, eagerly offered and as eagerly accepted. Nor were the