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The Native Grace of Abraham Lincoln

How President Lincoln, Endeared to the Hearts of Thousands by His
Great-Hearted Kindness, Won the Loyal Devotion of
Another American Heart

AN INTERESTING EXPERIENCE OF THE LATE COLONEL
BENJAMIN SILLIMAN CHURCH TOLD BY HIMSELF



HE Twelfth New York regiment, 1,100 strong, was among the first that reached Washington in 1861, on the breaking out of hostilities. The regimental organization included an engineer company commanded by Benjamin Silliman Church, and quarters were assigned in Franklin Square, where Captain Church was ordered to erect huts and board barracks in the form of a regulation military camp. It was christened Camp Anderson and proved a shelter to many other regiments during the war.

One bright morning in May, 1861, before the first advance over Long Bridge into Virginia, young Captain Church was in his hut absorbed in an attempt to fathom an abstract treatise on the art of war.

The shanty fronted the sidewalk on the corner of K and Fourteenth streets. A sentinel entered presenting a card—Mr. Abraham Lincoln—with the request that Captain Church speak with him. Hastily slipping on his accoutrements, he hurried out and found the President sitting alone in his carriage, an open landeau, with his sombre horses and colored coachman. With a kindly smile and outstretched hand the President greeted him. "Captain," he said, "two of your relatives who are on General Scott's staff, General Schuyler Hamilton and General Henry Van Renselaer, tell me you are one of the engineers on the New York Works, and that you probably know something about a particular kind of pump called the Worthington Pump. It has been doing service at the White House. But latterly it has refused to work. It has turned rebel. With no water for the plumbing, I fear sickness in the household. None of the plumbers in Washington seem to understand the mechanism. But since you are from New York, I am venturing to hope you may have the requisite knowledge and will be able to put us in the way of all needed information. Will you come and give us the benefit of your judgment?"

The Captain replied that he would follow him at once to the White House and do his utmost to relieve the situation. "No, no," said the President, "jump into the carriage and we will drive right over."

On the way he enquired earnestly concerning the regiment, and the New York State military organization, and said that he had seen many of the evening parades of the regiment and considered it as efficient in drill as the regulars.

The genial pleasantry of Mr. Lincoln speedily relieved all the natural embarrassment of the young officer, and before the end of the short drive he was wholly at ease and on a most friendly equality.

They drew up to the rear of the Executive Mansion, entered the basement and went to the pump room. The captain at a glance recognized it as one of an early and abandoned type of the Worthington Pump, known as the "Relief Reciprocating Pump."

Its mechanism was of the simplest form, but mysterious in action to those unacquainted with the principles on which it operated. The lugs on the valve-rod thrown by an arm on the piston-rod required nice

adjustment. Examination showed that the threads of the binding screws of the lugs were worn, allowing them to slip out of place. The Captain remarked that with two monkey wrenches and some thin strips of lead he could himself put it in working order. The tools were brought and Mr. Lincoln said, "Take off your coat, Captain," as he proceeded to remove his own; and, wrenches in hand, the President of the United States and the young officer fell to work tinkering with valve-rod screws. The steam was put on and off for frequent trials; until adjustment was finally secured. The President readily caught the idea and followed directions with absolute docility. "A little forward on your side, Mr. President. There—there—gently—not too much, now tighten a little more. So—so—I believe we've got it!" Finally the pump was making its strokes with regularity.

The President watched it with critical interest for a time. Becoming satisfied that it was really going, he grew exuberant, waving the monkey wrench over his head, just as a boy would rejoice who had made a good stroke at marbles. Putting his hands on the Captain's shoulders, he exclaimed: "Well, he have done what no two men in Washington could do; now we have earned a recess! Come with me and we will have a little luncheon all by ourselves!" The Captain urged that his reward was in being of some slight service to the President and that he must not consume more of his valuable time. "No! no!" was the reply—and a playful finger was held up in warning. "You must obey the Commander-in-Chief without question until relieved from duty. Come along!"

A pleasant luncheon was served in his private room, and gradually the kindly sympathetic talk on the part of Mr. Lincoln had elicited from the Captain every incident of his life, and, it seemed to him in recalling the interview, not only concerning himself, but his family and relatives. What appeared to impress Mr. Lincoln most was to discover that his young guest was the grandson of Professor Benjamin Silliman of Yale College. He knew all about the importance of the Professor's work—the first great influence in the country in popularizing science through interesting the masses by his constant lecture tours all over the United States. There was a pause. Lincoln looked at the young man and said slowly, "So you are the grandson of Professor Benjamin Silliman—Uncle Ben, they called him." "Yes," replied the Captain delightedly, they did." The tender thoughtful tone

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of Mr. Lincoln in uttering these few words forever won the loyal devotion of the young man, who adored his grandfather, with whom he had lived in New Haven since his tenth year to the beginning of his collegiate course.

The luncheon concluded, the Captain, feeling that he must not longer detain the President, turned to make his adieux and bow himself out, but without success. Mr. Lincoln said, "Remain a little longer"—and asked another question. Finally an orderly announced the carriage. The President took his hat and they went out together. On reaching the front entrance, the Captain, believing that the President was going on some special business elsewhere, again endeavored to take leave, but Mr. Lincoln said: "Stop! stop! Get into the carriage! I must take you back to your quarters. Not a word, not a word!" They drove back to Camp Anderson on Franklin Square, and with a warm shake of the hand and renewed thanks, he was gone.

NOTE BY MRS. BENJAMIN SILLIMAN CHURCH

Such delicate courtesy profoundly impressed the young soldier, and every detail of the incident remained fresh in his heart and memory through a long life. Although many times during intervening years requested to write the experience for publication, Colonel Church did so only shortly before he died. In recurring to the event he more than ever felt that it threw most interesting light on the quality of Lincoln's mind. The President of the United States and Commander-in-Chief of the army, with rare fineness of perception, apprehended that he was asking a personal favor of a military officer, and his judgment resulted in perfect breeding. He requested the service, shared in what was to be done, entertained him and personally escorted him back to his quarters. It would have occurred to few men elevated to similar position of power, at such time of overwhelming national responsibility. While due regard to subtle distinctions and sense of fitness must always constitute the high standards of human intercourse, with Lincoln there had been no educational influence as to social or military ethics. It was naught but the judgment of fine feeling and a large intelligence that always grasped with sense of proportion the entire bearing of a situation and therefore adjusted them in perfect harmony.