

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 ja sack, through a pat ton-cotch, on a pair of b addle s ags, stuffed full of ben ger g red, when the animal steer ed at a sc ump, and the liv ing ste ather broke, and threwed him in the fo ner of the ken ce and broke his fish ing fo le. He said he would not have bo und e d it much, but he fe ll ri gh t in a gr ea t to w cu rd, in fact, he said it gave him a ri gh t sm ar t s uck of fi tn es — he had the m ole n c or bu s pretty bad. He said, ab out br ay de pe he came to himself, ran home, seized up a st u ck of w oo d and split the ax e to make a fi gh t, rushed into the house, and found the do or su ck st ea r, and his w if e standing open. But thank goodne she is getting right h a t and fi er t y a g a i n.