SIX MONTHS AT THE WHITE HOUSE.

I.

I LEAVE to other and abler pens the proper estimate of ABRAHAM LINCOLN as a ruler and statesman, — his work and place in history. Favored during the year 1864 with several months of personal intercourse with him, I shall attempt in these pages to write the story of that association; not for any value which the record will have in itself, but for the glimpses it may afford of the person and character of the man, — every detail of whose life is now invested with enduring interest for the American people.

II.

That Art should aim to embody and express the spirit and best thought of its own age seems self-evident. If it fails to do this, whatever else it may accomplish, it falls short of its highest object. It cannot dwell always among classic forms, nor clothe its conceptions in the imagery of an old and worn-out world. It must move on, if it is to keep pace

with that "increasing purpose which through the ages runs," and its ideals must be wrought out of the strife of a living humanity.

It has been well said by a recent writer: "The record of the human family to the advent of CHRIST, was the preparation of the photographic plate for its image. All subsequent history is the bringing out of the divine ideal of true manhood." Slowly, but surely, through the centuries, is this purpose being accomplished. Human slavery has been the material type or expression of spiritual bondage. On the lowest or physical plane, it has symbolized the captivity and degradation of our higher nature; with the breaking in of new light, and the inspiration of a deeper life, it is inevitably doomed. That man, to attain the full development of the faculties implanted in him, must be in spiritual and physical freedom, is a principle which lies at the foundation of all government; and the enfranchisement of a race to-day thus becomes the assertion and promise of a true and coming Emancipation for all men.

III.

When ABRAHAM LINCOLN, called from the humblest rank in life to preside over the nation during the most momentous period of its history, uttered his Proclamation of Freedom, — shattering forever the chains which bound four millions of human beings in slavery; an act unparalleled for moral

grandeur in the history of mankind, — it was evident to all who sought beneath the surface for the cause of the war that the crisis was past, — that so surely as Heaven is on the side of Right and Justice, the North would triumph in the great struggle which had assumed the form of a direct issue between Freedom and Slavery.

In common with many others, I had from the beginning of the war believed that the government would not be successful in putting down a rebellion based upon slavery as its avowed corner-stone, without striking a death-blow at the institution itself. As the months went on, and disappointment and disaster succeeded one another, this conviction deepened into certainty. When at length, in obedience to what seemed the very voice of GOD, the thunderbolt was launched, and, like the first gun at Concord, "was heard around the world," all the enthusiasm of my nature was kindled. The "beast" Secession, offspring of the "dragon" Slavery, drawing in his train a third part of our national stars, was pierced with the deadly wound which could not be healed. It was the combat between Michael and Satan of Apocalyptic vision, reënacted before the eyes of the nineteenth century.

IV.

To paint a picture which should commemorate this new epoch in the history of Liberty, was a

dream which took form and shape in my mind towards the close of the year 1863, — the year made memorable in its dawn by the issue of the final decree. With little experience to adapt me for the execution of such a work, there had nevertheless come to me at times glowing conceptions of the true purpose and character of Art, and an intense desire to do something expressive of appreciation of the great issues involved in the war. The painters of old had delighted in representations of the birth from the ocean of Venus, the goddess of love. Ninety years ago upon this Western continent had been witnessed — no dream of fable, but a substantial fact — the immaculate conception of Constitutional Liberty; and at length through great travail its consummation had been reached. The long-prayed-for year of jubilee had come; the bonds of the oppressed were loosed; the prison doors were opened. "Behold," said a voice, "how a Man may be exalted to a dignity and glory almost divine, and give freedom to a race. Surely Art should unite with Eloquence and Poetry to celebrate such a theme."

I conceived of that band of men, upon whom the eyes of the world centred as never before upon ministers of state, gathered in council, depressed, perhaps disheartened at the vain efforts of many months to restore the supremacy of the government. I saw, in thought, the head of the nation, bowed down with his weight of care and responsi-

bility, solemnly announcing, as he unfolded the prepared draft of the Proclamation, that the time for the inauguration of this policy had arrived; I endeavored to imagine the conflicting emotions of satisfaction, doubt, and distrust with which such an announcement would be received by men of the varied characteristics of the assembled councillors.

For several weeks the design of the picture was slowly maturing, during which time, however, no line was drawn upon paper or canvas. Late one evening, absorbed in thought upon the subject, I took up an unframed photograph lying carelessly in my room, and upon the blank side of this, roughly and hastily sketched, was embodied the central idea of the composition as it had shaped itself in my mind.

To one disposed to look for coincidences in daily life, and regard its events as no mere succession of accidents, there must often come those which wear a deep significance. In seeking a point of unity or action for the picture, I was impressed with the conviction that important modifications followed the reading of the Proclamation at the suggestion of the Secretary of State, and I determined upon such an incident as the moment of time to be represented. I was subsequently surprised and gratified when Mr. Lincoln himself, reciting the history of the Proclamation to me, dwelt particularly upon the fact that not only was the time of its issue decided by Secretary Seward's advice, but that one

of the most important words in the document was added through his strenuous representations.

The central thought of the picture once decided upon and embodied, the rest naturally followed; one after another the seven figures surrounding the President dropped into their places. Those supposed to have held the purpose of the Proclamation as their long conviction, were placed prominently in the foreground in attitudes which indicated their support of the measure; the others were represented in varying moods of discussion or silent deliberation.

A few evenings after the completion of the design I went to see a friend who I knew was intimate with the Hon. Schuyler Colfax and Hon. Owen Lovejoy, through whom I hoped to obtain Mr. Lincoln's assent to my plan. I revealed to him my purpose, and asked his assistance in carrying it into effect. During the following week he went to Washington, and in company with Mr. Colfax called upon the President, and laid before him my project. He kindly listened to the details, and then said: "In short, if I understand you, you wish me to consent to sit to this artist for the picture?" My friends acknowledged this to be the object of their errand. Mr. Lincoln at once, with his accustomed kindness, promised his coöperation.

The last day of the year the Hon. Mr. Lovejoy, whom I had never met, but who had become warmly interested in the execution of the work, being in New York, called at my studio with the wife of my

friend, who had been my earnest advocate. At the close of the interview he remarked, in his quaint way, taking me by the hand, "In the words of Scripture, my good friend, I can say now I believe, not on account of the saying of the woman, but because I have seen for myself."

V.

Impracticable as my scheme had at first seemed, the way was thus opened for its execution. When fairly committed to the purpose, however, the want of means and the magnitude of the undertaking almost disheartened me. My original plan embraced a canvas sufficiently large for a life-size group of the President and entire Cabinet; to paint such a picture would consume many months, perhaps years. Enthusiasm alone would never accomplish the work. The few friends to whom I should have felt at liberty to apply for help were not wealthy. Who outside of these could be persuaded that a work of the character and proportions contemplated, undertaken by an artist of no experience in historical studies, would not end in utter failure?

I had left my home at the usual hour one morning, pondering the difficulty which, like Bunyan's lions, seemed now to block the way. As one alternative after another presented itself to my mind and was rejected, the prospect appeared less and less hopeful. I at length found myself in Broadway at

the foot of the stairs leading up to my studio. A gentleman at this moment attracted my attention, standing with his back towards me, looking at some pictures exposed in the window of the shop below. Detecting, as I thought, something familiar in his air and manner, I waited until he turned his face, and then found I was not mistaken; it was an old acquaintance who five years before lived near me in Brooklyn, engaged in a similar struggle for a livelihood with myself, though his profession was law instead of art.

We had both changed our residences and had not met for years. After a cordial greeting, he accepted my invitation to ascend to the studio. I had heard that he had been successful in some business ventures, but the matter made but little impression upon me, and had been forgotten. Suddenly there seemed to come into my mind the words: "This man has been sent to you." Full of the singular impression, I laid before him my conception. He heard me through, and then asked if I was sure of President Lincoln's consent and coöperation. I informed him of the pledge which had been given me. "Then," said he, "you shall paint the picture. Take plenty of time, — make it the great work of your life, — and draw upon me for whatever funds you will require to the end." *

* To Mr. SAMUEL SINCLAIR, of the *New York Tribune*, for the introduction to Mr. Lincoln, and to FREDERICK A. LANE, Esq., of New York, for the generous aid thus extended, I shall ever be indebted for the accomplishment of my work.

VI.

On the evening of February 4th, 1864, I went to Washington. Shortly after noon of the following day, I rang the bell at Mr. Lovejoy's residence on Fifteenth Street. To my sorrow, I found him very ill; but it was hoped by his friends that he was then improving. Though very feeble, he insisted upon seeing me, and calling for writing materials, sat up in bed to indite a note introducing me to the President. This, handed to me open, I read. One expression I have not forgotten, it was so like Mr. Lincoln himself, as I afterward came to know him. "I am gaining very slowly. — It is hard work drawing the sled up-hill." And this suggests the similarity there was between these men. Lovejoy had much more of the agitator, the reformer, in his nature, but both drew the inspiration of their lives from the same source, and it was founded in sterling honesty. Their modes of thought and illustration were remarkably alike. It is not strange that they should have been bosom friends. The President called repeatedly to see him during his illness; and it was on one of these occasions that he said to him, "This war is eating my life out; I have a strong impression that I shall not live to see the end." Mr. Lovejoy's health subsequently improved, and for a change he went to Brooklyn, N. Y., where, it will be remembered,

he had a relapse, and died, universally mourned as one of the truest and most faithful of our statesmen. Mr. Lincoln did not hear from him directly after he left Washington. Through a friend I learned by letter that he was lying at the point of death. This intelligence I communicated to the President the same evening, in the vestibule of the White House, — meeting him on his way to the War Department. He was deeply affected by it. His only words were, "Lovejoy was the best friend I had in Congress."

To return from this pardonable digression, — I took the note of introduction at once to the White House; but no opportunity was afforded me of presenting it during the day. The following morning passed with the same result, and I then resolved to avail myself of Mrs. Lincoln's Saturday afternoon reception — at which, I was told, the President would be present — to make myself known to him. Two o'clock found me one of the throng pressing toward the centre of attraction, the "blue" room. From the threshold of the "crimson" parlor as I passed, I had a glimpse of the gaunt figure of Mr. Lincoln in the distance, haggard-looking, dressed in black, relieved only by the prescribed white gloves; standing, it seemed to me, solitary and alone, though surrounded by the crowd, bending low now and then in the process of hand-shaking, and responding half abstractedly to the

well-meant greetings of the miscellaneous assemblage. Never shall I forget the electric thrill which went through my whole being at this instant. I seemed to see lines radiating from every part of the globe, converging to a focus at the point where that plain, awkward-looking man stood, and to hear in spirit a million prayers, "as the sound of many waters," ascending in his behalf. Mingled with supplication I could discern a clear symphony of triumph and blessing, swelling with an ever-increasing volume. It was the voice of those who had been bondmen and bondwomen, and the grand diapason swept up from the coming ages.

It was soon my privilege, in the regular succession, to take that honored hand. Accompanying the act, my name and profession were announced to him in a low tone by one of the assistant private secretaries, who stood by his side. Retaining my hand, he looked at me inquiringly for an instant, and said, "Oh yes; I know; this is the painter." Then straightening himself to his full height, with a twinkle of the eye, he added, playfully, "Do you think, Mr. C——, that you can make a handsome picture of *me?*" emphasizing strongly the last word. Somewhat confused at this point-blank shot, uttered in a tone so loud as to attract the attention of those in immediate proximity, I made a random reply, and took the occasion to ask if I could see him in his study at the close of

the reception. To this he responded in the peculiar vernacular of the West, "I reckon," resuming meanwhile the mechanical and traditional exercise of the hand which no President has ever yet been able to avoid, and which, severe as is the ordeal, is likely to attach to the position, so long as the Republic endures.

VII.

The appointed hour found me at the well-remembered door of the official chamber, — that door watched daily, with so many conflicting emotions of hope and fear, by the anxious throng regularly gathered there. The President had preceded me, and was already deep in Acts of Congress, with which the writing-desk was strewed, awaiting his signature. He received me pleasantly, giving me a seat near his own arm-chair; and after having read Mr. Lovejoy's note, he took off his spectacles, and said, "Well, Mr. C——, we will turn you in loose here, and try to give you a good chance to work out your idea." Then, without paying much attention to the enthusiastic expression of my ambitious desire and purpose, he proceeded to give me a detailed account of the history and issue of the great proclamation.

"It had got to be," said he, "midsummer, 1862. Things had gone on from bad to worse, until I felt that we had reached the end of our rope on the

plan of operations we had been pursuing; that we had about played our last card, and must change our tactics, or lose the game! I now determined upon the adoption of the emancipation policy; and, without consultation with, or the knowledge of the Cabinet, I prepared the original draft of the proclamation, and, after much anxious thought, called a Cabinet meeting upon the subject. This was the last of July, or the first part of the month of August, 1862." (The exact date he did not remember.) "This Cabinet meeting took place, I think, upon a Saturday. All were present, excepting Mr. Blair, the Postmaster-General, who was absent at the opening of the discussion, but came in subsequently. I said to the Cabinet that I had resolved upon this step, and had not called them together to ask their advice, but to lay the subject-matter of a proclamation before them; suggestions as to which would be in order, after they had heard it read. Mr. Lovejoy," said he, "was in error when he informed you that it excited no comment, excepting on the part of Secretary Seward. Various suggestions were offered. Secretary Chase wished the language stronger in reference to the arming of the blacks. Mr. Blair, after he came in, deprecated the policy, on the ground that it would cost the Administration the fall elections. Nothing, however, was offered that I had not already fully anticipated and settled in my own mind, until Secretary Seward spoke. He said in substance: 'Mr. President, I

approve of the proclamation, but I question the expediency of its issue at this juncture. The depression of the public mind, consequent upon our repeated reverses, is so great that I fear the effect of so important a step. It may be viewed as the last measure of an exhausted government, a cry for help; the government stretching forth its hands to Ethiopia, instead of Ethiopia stretching forth her hands to the government.' His idea," said the President, "was that it would be considered our last *shriek*, on the retreat." (This was his *precise* expression.) "'Now,' continued Mr. Seward, 'while I approve the measure, I suggest, sir, that you postpone its issue, until you can give it to the country supported by military success, instead of issuing it, as would be the case now, upon the greatest disasters of the war!'" Mr. Lincoln continued: "The wisdom of the view of the Secretary of State struck me with very great force. It was an aspect of the case that, in all my thought upon the subject, I had entirely overlooked. The result was that I put the draft of the proclamation aside, as you do your sketch for a picture, waiting for a victory. From time to time I added or changed a line, touching it up here and there, anxiously watching the progress of events. Well, the next news we had was of Pope's disaster, at Bull Run. Things looked darker than ever. Finally, came the week of the battle of Antietam. I determined to wait no longer. The news came, I think, on Wednesday,

that the advantage was on our side. I was then staying at the Soldiers' Home, (three miles out of Washington.) Here I finished writing the second draft of the preliminary proclamation; came up on Saturday; called the Cabinet together to hear it, and it was published the following Monday."

At the final meeting of September 20th, another interesting incident occurred in connection with Secretary Seward. The President had written the important part of the proclamation in these words: —

"That, on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever FREE; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will *recognize* the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom." "When I finished reading this paragraph," resumed Mr. Lincoln, "Mr. Seward stopped me, and said, 'I think, Mr. President, that you should insert after the word "*recognize*," in that sentence, the words "*and maintain.*"' I replied that I had already fully considered the import of that expression in this connection, but I had not introduced it, because it was not my way

to promise what I was not entirely *sure* that I could perform, and I was not prepared to say that I thought we were exactly able to 'maintain' this."

"But," said he, "Seward insisted that we ought to take this ground; and the words finally went in!"

"It is a somewhat remarkable fact," he subsequently remarked, "that there were just one hundred days between the dates of the two proclamations issued upon the 22d of September and the 1st of January. I had not made the calculation at the time."

Having concluded this interesting statement, the President then proceeded to show me the various positions occupied by himself and the different members of the Cabinet, on the occasion of the first meeting. "As nearly as I remember," said he, "I sat near the head of the table; the Secretary of the Treasury and the Secretary of War were here, at my right hand; the others were grouped at the left."

At this point, I exhibited to him a pencil sketch of the composition as I had conceived it, with no knowledge of the facts or details. The leading idea of this I found, as I have stated on a previous page, to be entirely consistent with the account I had just heard. I saw, however, that I should have to reverse the picture, placing the President at the other end of the table, to make it accord with his description. I had resolved to discard all

appliances and tricks of picture-making, and endeavor, as faithfully as possible, to represent the scene as it actually transpired; room, furniture, accessories, all were to be painted from the actualities. It was a scene second only in historical importance and interest to that of the Declaration of Independence; and I felt assured, that, if honestly and earnestly painted, it need borrow no interest from imaginary curtain or column, gorgeous furniture or allegorical statue. Assenting heartily to what is called the "realistic" school of art, when applied to the illustration of historic events, I felt in this case, that I had no more right to depart from the facts, than has the historian in his record.

When friends said to me, as they frequently did, "Your picture will be bald and barren," my reply was, "If I cannot make the portraiture of the scene itself sufficiently attractive without the false glitter of tapestry hangings, velvet table-cloths, and marble columns, then I shall at least have the satisfaction of having failed in the cause of truth." I reasoned in this way: The most important document submitted to a cabinet during our existence as a nation is under discussion. A spectator permitted to look in upon that scene would give little thought and small heed to the mere accessories and adjuncts of the occasion. His mind would centre upon the immortal document, — its anxious author, conscious of his solemn responsibility, announcing

his matured and inflexible purpose to his assembled councillors. He would listen with unparalleled eagerness to the momentous sentences uttered for the first time in the ears of men, and to the discussion upon them, impatient of mere formalities and technicalities. Should a thought be sprung of important bearing, or an overlooked contingency be brought forward, how intently would its effect be watched. What varying emotions, consequent upon peculiarities of temperament and character, would be expressed in the countenances of the different individuals composing the group. How each in turn would be scanned. Above all, the issues involved: — the salvation of the Republic — the freedom of a Race. "Surely," I said, "such a scene may be painted, and abiding if not absorbing interest secured, without the aid of conventional trappings. The republican simplicity of the room and furniture, with its thronging associations, will more than counterbalance the lack of splendor, and the artistic mania for effect. I will depend solely for my success upon the interest of the subject, and its truthfulness of representation." And this purpose I carried with me to the end.

VIII.

The first sketch of the composition, as it was afterward placed upon the canvas, was matured, I believe, the same afternoon, or the following Mon-

day after the interview recorded above, upon the back of a visiting card; my pockets affording evidence of the employment of all loose material at hand in leisure moments, in the study of the work. The final arrangement of the figures was the result of much thought and many combinations, though the original conception as to the moment of time and incident of action was preserved throughout. The general arrangement of the group, as described by the President, was fortunately entirely consistent with my purpose, which was to give that prominence to the different individuals which belonged to them respectively in the Administration. There was a curious mingling of fact and allegory in my mind, as I assigned to each his place on the canvas. There were two elements in the Cabinet, the radical and the conservative. Mr. Lincoln was placed at the head of the official table, between two groups, nearest that representing the radical, but the uniting point of both. The chief powers of a government are War and Finance: the ministers of these were at his right, — the Secretary of War, symbolizing the great struggle, in the immediate foreground; the Secretary of the Treasury, actively supporting the new policy, standing by the President's side. The Army being the right hand, the Navy may very properly be styled the left hand of the government. The place for the Secretary of the Navy seemed, therefore, very naturally to be on Mr. Lin-

coln's left, at the rear of the table. To the Secretary of State, as the great expounder of the principles of the Republican party, the profound and sagacious statesman, would the attention of all at such a time be given. Entitled to precedence in discussion by his position in the Cabinet, he would necessarily form one of the central figures of the group. The four chief officers of the government were thus brought, in accordance with their relations to the Administration, nearest the person of the President, who, with the manuscript proclamation in hand, which he had just read, was represented leaning forward, listening to, and intently considering the views presented by the Secretary of State. The Attorney-General, absorbed in the constitutional questions involved, with folded arms, was placed at the foot of the table opposite the President. The Secretary of the Interior and the Postmaster-General, occupying the less conspicuous positions of the Cabinet, seemed to take their proper places in the background of the picture.

When, at length, the conception as thus described was sketched upon the large canvas, and Mr. Lincoln came in to see it, his gratifying remark, often subsequently repeated, was, "It is as good as it can be made."