

THE RELIGION
OF
ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

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CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN

GENERAL CHARLES H^o T. COLLIS

AND

COLONEL ROBERT G. INGERSOLL.

WITH APPENDIX, CONTAINING INTERESTING ANECDOTES BY

MAJOR-GENERAL DANIEL E. SICKLES.

AND

HON. OLIVER S. MUNSELL

G. W. DILLINGHAM COMPANY
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

1900

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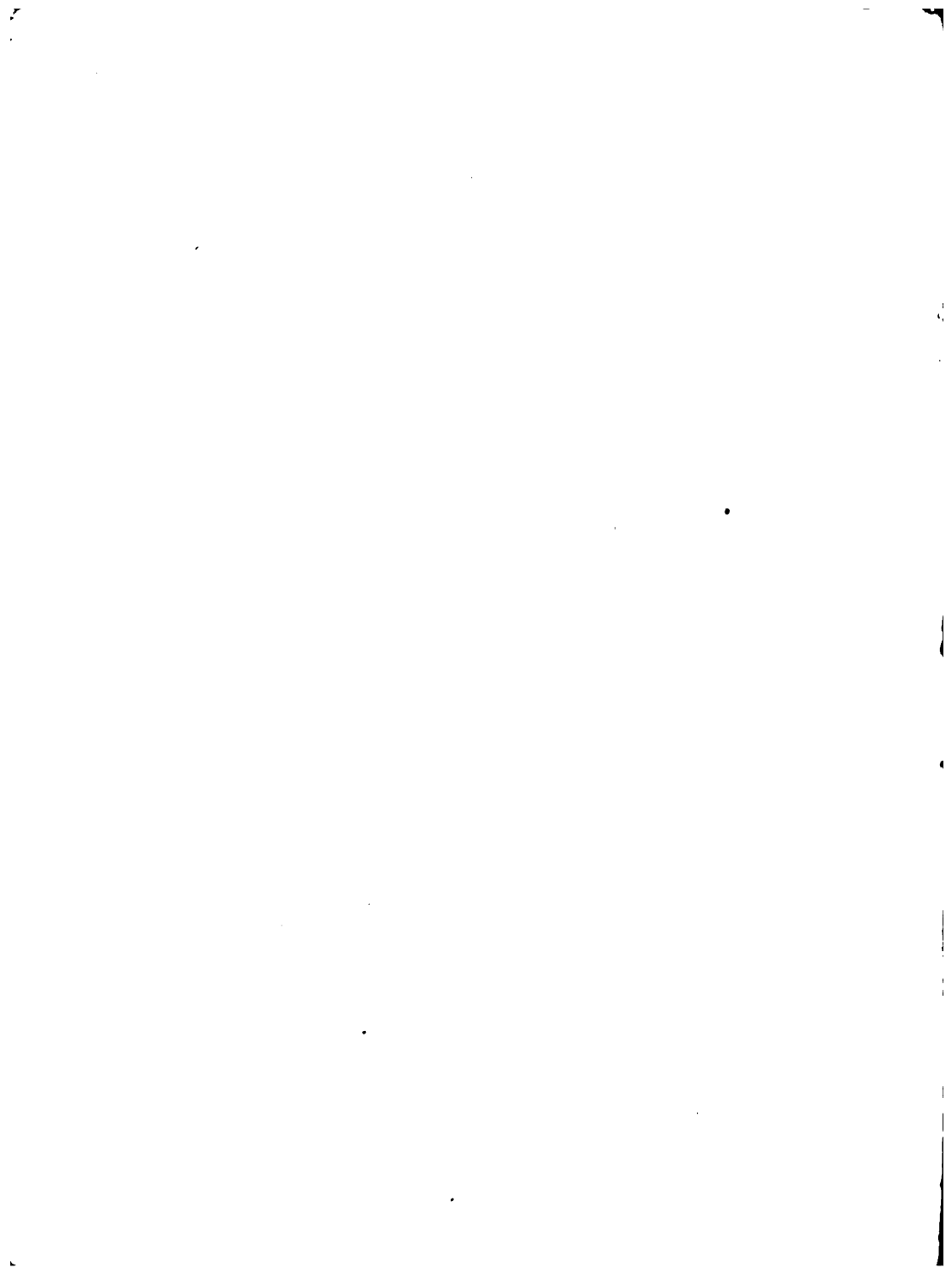
APOLOGY.

"REDPATCH," GETTYSBURG, PA.

I am constrained to put into book form a correspondence which I had with my friend Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll some years ago, because I am constantly asked for copies of it, and also because it affords me the opportunity (thanks to Major General Sickles and Mr. Munsell) of adding some evidence confirming my estimate of Mr. Lincoln's religious views, which I had culled not only from the record, but from an intimate acquaintance with him in Washington, in the army hospitals, and at the front during the days immediately preceding General Lee's surrender and Mr. Lincoln's untimely taking off.

CHARLES H. T. COLLIS.

P. 10999



CORRESPONDENCE.

NEW YORK, 1055 FIFTH AVENUE,
February 12, 1893.

Dear Colonel Ingersoll:

I have just returned home from listening to your most entertaining lecture upon the life of Abraham Lincoln.

I thank you sincerely for all that was good in it, and that entitles me to be frank in condemning what I consider was bad. You say that Lincoln's religion was the religion of Voltaire and Tom Paine. I know not where you get your authority for this, but if the statement be true Lincoln himself was untrue, for no man invoked "the gracious favor of Almighty God" in every effort of his life with more apparent fervor than did he, and this God was not the Deists' God, but the God whom he worshiped under the forms of the Christian Church, of which he was a member.

I do not write this in defense of his religion or as objecting to yours, but I think it were better for the truth of history that you should blame him for what he was than commend him for what he was not.

Sincerely yours,

CHARLES H. T. COLLIS.

NEW YORK, 400 FIFTH AVENUE,
February 15, 1893.

General Charles H. T. Collis:

My dear Sir:

I have just received your letter, in which you criticise a statement made by me to the effect that Lincoln's religion was the religion of Voltaire and Thomas Paine, and you add: "I know not where you get your authority for this, but if the statement be true, Lincoln himself was untrue, for no man ever invoked the gracious favor of Almighty God in every effort of his life with more apparent fervor than did he."

You seem to be laboring under the impression that Voltaire was not a believer in God, and that he could not have invoked the gracious favor of Almighty God. The truth is that Voltaire was not only a believer in God, but even in special Providence. I know that the clergy have always denounced Voltaire as an atheist, but this can be accounted for in two ways: First, by the ignorance of the clergy, and, secondly, by their contempt of truth. Thomas Paine was also a believer in God, and wrote his creed as follows: "I believe in one God, and no more, and hope for immortality." The ministers have also denounced Paine as an atheist.

You will, therefore, see that your first statement is without the slightest foundation in fact. Lin-

coln could be perfectly true to himself if he agreed with the religious sentiments of Voltaire and Paine, and yet invoke the gracious favor of Almighty God.

You also say, "This God (meaning the God whose favor Lincoln invoked) was not the Deists' God."

The Deists believe in an infinite being, who created and preserves the universe. The Christians believe no more.

Deists and Christians believe in the same God, but they differ as to what this God has done, and as to what this God will do.

You further say that "Lincoln worshiped his God under the forms of the Christian Church, of which he was a member."

Again you are mistaken. Lincoln was never a member of any church. Mrs. Lincoln stated a few years ago that Mr. Lincoln was not a Christian.

Hundreds of his acquaintances have said the same thing. Not only so, but many of them have testified that he was a free thinker; that he denied the inspiration of the Scriptures, and that he always insisted that Christ was not the Son of God, and that the dogma of the Atonement was, and is, an absurdity.

I will very gladly pay you \$1000 for your trouble to show that one statement in your letter is correct—even one. And now, to quote you: "Do you not think it were better for the truth of history that you should state the facts about Lincoln, and that you

should commend him for what he was rather than for what was not?"

Yours truly,
R. G. INGERSOLL.

1055 FIFTH AVENUE,
February 21, 1893.

Dear Colonel Ingersoll:

I trust that you and I can assert our respective views of Abraham Lincoln's religion without requiring the stimulus of a \$1000 prize.

You have publicly made the broad statement that his religion was that of Voltaire and Thomas Paine. This you do not deny. Upon that, and that alone, I take issue with you, and I want to discuss it without wandering outside the record.

I do not care whether you select Voltaire's Voltaire, or Ingersoll's Voltaire, or Carlyle's, or Voltaire as mankind has accepted him. Lincoln's religion bore no resemblance to either. Voltaire called himself a "master Deist." Your Voltaire led a crusade against superstition and religious persecution. Carlyle's fought the Christian Church. The world generally regards him as a mocker and a scoffer.

I am not "laboring under the impression that Voltaire was not a believer in God;" you will agree with me, I presume, that he was a Deist. I say that Mr. Lincoln was not a Deist. That is the issue, as I understand it.

Had you said if Mr. Lincoln lived in the time of Louis XV. he would have been a disciple of Voltaire, I would have respected your opinion, though I could not subscribe to it; but what Mr. Lincoln really was is a substantial fact, easily established, and not dependent upon mere conjecture and speculation. You proselyte him because you say "Mrs. Lincoln stated he was not a Christian;" because "hundreds of his acquaintances have said the same thing;" because "many of them have testified he was a free thinker and denied the inspiration of the Scriptures," etc. As a lawyer you accepted such secondary evidence as this, when Mr. Lincoln's own testimony to the contrary was in existence and abundant.

If I find that Mr. Lincoln professed Christianity, worshiped at a Christian Church, admitted his belief in the Divinity of Christ, and boldly asserted the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures, I am compelled to deny that "his religion was the religion of Voltaire and Tom Paine," or to confess that he was an impostor. There is no middle course.

That Mr. Lincoln regularly attended a Christian Church in Washington is a historical fact. Though not a "member," as we technically understand it, he was a constant attendant of Dr. Gurley's Presbyterian Church, near the corner of Fourteenth Street and New York Avenue. Dr. Gurley was his pastor, and was present at his deathbed. He also frequently attended Dr. Sutherland's church.

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That he was a Christian at heart as well as in form, and believed in the efficacy of the prayers and support of Christian denominations let extracts from his addresses verify.

Leaving his home at Springfield with a full—a sorrowful—appreciation of the awful responsibility devolving upon him, surrounded by a Christian community with whom he had lived a quarter of a century, he thus addressed them: "I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell."

To the Presbyterians he said: "It has been my happiness to receive testimonies of a similar nature from, I believe, all denominations of Christians. This to me is most gratifying, because from the beginning I saw that the issues of the great struggle depended on the Divine interposition and favor. Relying as I do upon the Almighty power, and encouraged as I am by these resolutions which you have just read, with support which I receive from Christian men, I shall not hesitate to use all means

W. H. U.

to secure the termination of the rebellion, and will hope for success."

To the Methodists he said: "Nobly sustained as the government has been by all the churches, I would utter nothing which might in the least appear invidious against any, yet, without this, it may fairly be said that the Methodist Episcopal Church, not less devoted than the best, is, by its greatest numbers, the most important of all. It is no fault of others that the Methodist Church sends more soldiers to the field, more nurses to the hospitals, and more prayers to heaven, than any other. God bless the Methodist Church, bless all the churches, and blessed be God, who in this our great trial giveth us the churches."

To Mrs. Gurney, the wife of an eminent Quaker preacher, he wrote: "I am much indebted to the Christian people of the country for their constant prayers and consolation, and to no one of them more than yourself."

When requested to preside at a meeting of the "Christian Commission" held in Washington on February 22, 1863, he replied: "The birthday of Washington and the Christian Sabbath coinciding this year, and suggesting together the highest interests of this life and of that to come, is most propitious for the meeting proposed."

He even went so far as to differ with those Christians who believe Sunday to have been instituted for the "ease of creation": Lincoln believed it was also "the Lord's day."

On November 16, 1862, he promulgated the following military order: "The President, Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, desires and enjoins the orderly observance of the Sabbath by the officers and men in the military and naval service. The importance for man and beast of the prescribed weekly rest, the sacred rights of Christian soldiers and sailors, a becoming deference to the best sentiment of a Christian people, and a due regard for the Divine will, demand that Sunday labor in the army and navy be reduced to the measure of strict necessity. The discipline and character of the national forces should not suffer, nor the cause they defend be imperiled, by the profanation of the day or name of the Most High."

If on September 4, 1864, you had served him with notice that thirty years later you would claim him as a Voltarian because he disbelieved in the inspiration of the Bible and the divinity of Christ, he could not more emphatically have repudiated the honor than he did when he then said to the colored men of Baltimore who presented him with a Bible: "In regard to the Great Book, I have only to say that it is the best gift which God has given to man. All the good from the Saviour of the world is communicated in this book." What an exquisite epitome of the inspiration of the Scriptures and the Atonement! And six months later, in his second inaugural address, do you remember how he borrowed the words of the Son to illustrate the justice of the

Father: "Woe unto the world because of offenses," etc.

You must not proclaim Lincoln's honesty in one sentence and ask us in another to believe that his real faith soared no higher than that of the man who wrote: "Nobody thinks of giving an immortal soul to a flea; why should you give one to an elephant or a monkey, or my champagne valet, or a village steward, who has a trifle more instinct than my valet?" Nor must you expect us to couple the man who, in guileless love, exclaims: "God bless the churches," with him whose shibboleth of malignant hate was "*Ecrasez l'infame.*"

Let me say to you, in all kindness, that if your cause is imperiled for lack of recruits, you neither strengthen your own nor weaken that of Christianity by resorting to conscriptions of this character, for you can no more easily make Lincoln a Deist than I can make Voltaire a Christian. Mankind will estimate the life of Abraham Lincoln for what it was, and not for what you or I would have it.

Sincerely yours,
CHARLES H. T. COLLIS.

400 FIFTH AVENUE.
February 23, 1893.

My Dear Collis:

You are getting away from the issue.

You wrote me that Lincoln belonged to a church.

Do you still insist that he did? Do you admit that you were wrong?

You insisted that Lincoln was a Christian. Have you any evidence to show that he was a believer in any orthodox creed?

Did he believe in the divinity of Christ, in the Atonement, in the inspiration of the Bible? You must stick to your original charges.

All that you say about Voltaire is as far from the facts as what you said about Lincoln—"but no matter."

I again call for the evidence of your two statements.

First, that Lincoln was a Christian, and, second, that he was a member of a church. Stick to your charges. Do not wander.

Yours truly,
R. G. INGERSOLL.

1055 FIFTH AVENUE.
February 24, 1893.

Dear Col. Ingersoll:

Your note of yesterday, just received, is a great disappointment. I had expected something in the way of defense of your statement in regard to Mr. Lincoln's religion, instead of which you avail yourself of an opening for escape because I said he was a "member" of a church. This is a crawl. You were the man who delivered the lecture on the life

of Abraham Lincoln, not I. You were the man who asserted that his religion was the religion of Tom Paine and Voltaire, not I. And this charge neither you nor any man, now or to come, can substantiate by a scintilla of evidence.

You might as well say that citizen John Burns, who fought for his home at Gettysburg, did not espouse the Union cause because he was not mustered into the service of the United States, as to tell me that Lincoln was not a Christian because was not a "member" of a church. From Springfield, Illinois, to Ford's Theater, in Washington, give me ten words he ever uttered upon which you can base the flimsy charge you have made. I defy you.

The divinity of Christ! Did he go for four years to Dr. Gurley's Presbyterian Church for appearances?

The Atonement! What did he mean by the expression "The Saviour of the world?"

The inspiration of the Bible! Was he fooling the negroes of Baltimore when he called the Great Book "God's best gift to man?"

Abraham Lincoln holds too big a place in the history of the world to be affected by your accusations or helped by my defense; yet ephemeral as is what you say of him, you have no right to take a liberty with his character simply because his illustrious example would be useful to you in making converts. The memory of the dead may be

libeled just as grossly as the reputation of the living.

You cannot make mankind believe that Abraham Lincoln was a hypocrite, and unless you do, your assertion that "his religion was the religion of Voltaire and Tom Paine" is of no importance.

Very truly yours,
CHARLES H. T. COLLIS.

APPENDIX.

No. 23 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK,
September 29, 1900.

General Charles H. T. Collis, Red Patch, Gettysburg, Pa.

Dear General:

Enclosed herewith I send you a memorandum of the conversation with President Lincoln, when he visited me on the Sunday after the Battle of Gettysburg, at my headquarters, in Washington.

* * * * *

I am glad you have given the religious views of Lincoln so much time and research. The convictions of a man so wise, pure and great, must have great weight in these days of prevailing unbelief.

Very sincerely yours,
D. E. SICKLES.

GENERAL SICKLES'S MEMORABLE INTERVIEW WITH MR.
LINCOLN.

After my wound at Gettysburg on Thursday, July 2, 1863, I was taken to Washington, arriving at the Capital on the following Sunday, soon after day-break. Soldiers carried me on the same stretcher on which I had been placed after the amputation of my leg. I was accompanied by Dr. Sim, my surgeon, and by my aides-de-camp, Major Tremain and Captain Moore. Arriving at the house where lodgings had been taken for me, we found that the landlady

had not yet arisen; but after waiting a while the good woman appeared. Seeing a handkerchief over my face and my outstretched and motionless form on what seemed to her a sort of bier at her door, she exclaimed:

"He is dead!"

"Oh no," I replied, removing the handkerchief, "only dozing a little."

Soon after reaching my apartment, President Lincoln came to see me.

After touching expressions of sympathy we talked about the battle. Lieutenant-Colonel J. F. Rusling, Chief Quartermaster of the Third Army Corps, joined us. When we had answered many inquiries made by the President, I said:

"Mr. Lincoln, we heard at Gettysburg that here at the Capital you were all so anxious about the result of the battle that the Government officials packed up and got ready to leave at short notice with the official archives."

"Yes," he said, "some precautions were prudently taken, but, for my part, I was sure of our success at Gettysburg."

"Why," I asked, "were you so confident?" "The Army of the Potomac has suffered many reverses."

There was a pause. The President seemed in deep meditation. His pale face was lighted up by an expression I had not observed before. Turning to me he said:

"When Lee crossed the Potomac and entered Pennsylvania followed by our Army, I felt that the crisis had come. I knew that defeat in a great battle on Northern soil involved the loss of Washington, to be followed, perhaps, by the intervention of England and France in favor of the Southern Confederacy. I went to my room and got

down on my knees in prayer. Never before had I prayed with so much earnestness. I wish I could repeat my prayer. I felt that I must put all my trust in Almighty God. He gave our people the best country ever given to man. He alone could save it from destruction. I had tried my best to do my duty, and found myself unequal to the task. The burden was more than I could bear. God had often been our Protector in other days. I prayed that He would not let the nation perish. I asked Him to help us and give us victory now."

"I felt that my prayer was answered. I knew that God was on our side. I had no misgivings about the result at Gettysburg."

"How do you feel about Vicksburg, Mr. President?" I asked.

"Grant will pull through all right. I am sure of it," said Mr. Lincoln. "I have been despondent, but am so no longer, God is with us."

Rising from his seat to leave me, Mr. Lincoln took my hand and said with tenderness:

"Sickles, I am told, as you have been told, perhaps, that your condition is serious. I am in a prophetic mood today. You will get well."

THE STORY OF MR. MUNSELL.

General Charles H. T. Collis:

Dear Sir:

Pardon a total stranger to you for intruding on your time, but I write to thank you for your earnest vindication of Abraham Lincoln from the attacks of Mr. Ingersoll, and

to add a word of personal testimony in regard to his religious faith. To do this satisfactorily or with any real significance, it is necessary that I should enter into a little detail of my personal relations to Mr. Lincoln.

My father, Leander Munsell of Paris, Ill., was a very early and honored friend of Mr. Lincoln's, and his house was, as far back as 1840, at times Mr. Lincoln's home. In that year he visited Paris and stayed some days at my father's house. I was then a boy of 15 years of age. My father said to Mr. Lincoln, "My son Oliver here will be your attendant while in my house, and will take pleasure in serving you." Mr. Lincoln turned to me, holding out both hands, and said: "If you are my boy you must learn to shake hands with me as my boys always do, double-handed. During his stay, and often in subsequent years, Mr. Lincoln honored me with his attentions and confidence, and, I need hardly add, won my most fervent boyish admiration and love, a love which warms the heart of the gray-headed old man who pens these lines. Nor did Mr. Lincoln himself ever forget this covenant. Years after I chanced to meet him, under circumstances which seemed to render it improper for me to intrude upon him. He came to me at once when his eye rested upon me, with both hands outstretched, as in my boyhood's days. And again in my last interview with him in his private room in the White House, when I was shown into his presence he came forward with both hands outstretched, as of old, to greet me.

It is of an incident of this hour spent with Mr. Lincoln, an hour not of business of any kind, but of friendship solely, that I wish to write. I was at that time, 1863, and

had been for some years before and was for many years after, President of the Illinois Wesleyan University at Bloomington. At my father's request President Lincoln had that year appointed me a member of the Board of Visitors to the Military Academy at West Point, and where, in consequence, as I learned afterward, of a personal letter from Mr. Lincoln to Col. Bowman, superintendent of the academy, I was, greatly to my own surprise, elected President of the Board of Visitors. At the close of my duties at West Point, some three weeks before the battle of Gettysburg and the surrender of Vicksburg, by order of the Board of Visitors, I went on to Washington to lay some matters pertaining to the Military Academy before the proper authorities in the War Department.

While in Washington, by note I asked the privilege of a personal interview with Mr. Lincoln. I asked for only five minutes, as I had no business with him of any kind and so wrote to him. He explicitly, in his reply, accorded me an hour.

Of the details of that, to me, memorable visit—it was my last interview with him—it is not my purpose to speak; much of it was too personal to permit me to record it here. It suffices to indicate its general character. Mr. Lincoln met me with a frankness, an unreserve, and a degree of personal confidence I had no right to expect at his hands. He voluntarily discussed with me affairs of the State and of the army which I would not have dared to introduce. As illustrations he gave me frankly and fully his opinion of Gen. McClellan, who had but recently been relieved of the command of the Army of the Potomac, and of Gen. Grant, who was then besieging Vicksburg. Emboldened by



this flattering and wholly unexpected show of confidence, toward the close of my hour's interview with him I said to him :

"Mr. Lincoln, I have a burning desire to ask you a question, which, perhaps, I ought not to ask, and which you ought not to answer ; but I am no newspaper correspondent, and your reply, if you see fit to make one, shall be sacred so long as there is reason that it should be."

Mr. Lincoln replied: "Mr. Munsell, it shall be right for you to ask me any question you you please, provided it be distinctly understood between us—first, that perhaps I cannot answer it, and, second, that perhaps I must not, save by silence. With these reservations you may speak freely."

I then said: "Mr. Lincoln, in our dear old Illinois of which we have just been talking we are anxious, very anxious, in regard to the issue of this terrible war. We have our opinions, our hopes, and our fears ; and sometimes the suspense is terrible. The thought has come to me, as I have talked with you, that you see the whole field as no other man sees, or can see it : and it has awakened in me an intense desire to ask you, seeing as you thus do see it, will our country come through safe and live?"

Mr. Lincoln in the outset of our interview had seemed more worn and depressed than I had ever seen him under any circumstances. He was, as he had said to me, alone in the White House that evening. Mrs. Lincoln and little Tad being in New York, and he felt unusually lonely. In the course of our conversation he had become more bright and cheerful ; but no sooner had he heard my question than his face again clouded with the heavy lines of anxious thought, and the shadows again fell around him.

Not

He paused a moment before he made any reply, and when he did essay to speak he made two ineffectual efforts before he could command his voice, and with trembling lips and tears trickling down his furrowed cheeks, said:

“Mr. Munsell, I do not doubt—I never have doubted for a moment—that our country would finally come through safe and undivided. But do not misunderstand me; I do not know how it can be. I do not rely on the patriotism of our people, though no people have rallied round their king as ours have rallied around me. I do not trust in the bravery and devotion of the boys in blue; God bless them though! God never gave a prince or conqueror such an army as He has given to me. Nor yet do I rely on the loyalty and skill of our Generals; though I believe we have the best Generals in the world, at the head of our armies. But the God of our fathers, who raised up this country to be the refuge and the asylum of the oppressed and downtrodden of all nations, will not let it perish now. I may not live to see it, and (he added after a moment's pause) I do not expect to live to see it, but God will bring us through safe.”

When he finished there was silence that could be felt. I do not often weep at human words, but then my eyes were wet with tears and I felt humbled in the presence of Mr. Lincoln's sublime faith in “the God of our fathers,” not of Voltaire and Paine, which shamed my own doubts and fears; and from that hour my faith in the ultimate triumph of our country never again faltered, and I bade Mr. Lincoln, as it proved, a final farewell, thanking God, as I had never before thanked Him, for such a leader in our country's deadly hour of peril.

