

A Prairie Editor Comments

On the Thursday evening following Lincoln's assassination, George D. Perkins sat down in his plain sanctum to finish his editorial columns for the weekly issue of the *Gazette*. The week had been an unusually busy one for the soldier-editor, scarcely recovered from a severe fever, the effects of which had incapacitated him for two years. During the fateful days of April, 1865, President Lincoln had been foremost in his thoughts. As, little by little, news dribbled in by telegraph and by exchange newspapers from the East during the week following the tragedy in Washington, the Perkins brothers had daily issued one-page extras. These had duly recorded John Wilkes Booth's dramatic cry of "*Sic semper tyrannis*", had presented the scene at Lincoln's deathbed, and had related details of the pursuit of the assassin.

With unusual care the Perkins brothers planned the make-up of the Lincoln memorial issue of the *Gazette* on April 21, 1865. On the two inner pages, bands of black divided the eight columns of each page. After a careful perusal of all available exchange papers, a two-column report on the

"Particulars of the Assassination of President Lincoln" had been prepared. George D. had also written a detailed report of the local Lincoln commemorative service. Although he failed to mention the fact, he, as much as any one else, deserved credit for the success of the necessarily hurried arrangements.

George D. Perkins knew at first hand the hardships of war — ague, short rations, exhaustion, and the imminency of death. As a citizen, he had admired and honored Lincoln. As an editor, he had supported the President's desire for a strong Union, and now he shared the belief that the death of Lincoln was bound to prove a major calamity for the nation so recently freed from the menace of civil war. And so, reflecting upon the tragedy, he tried to describe the universal grief and anger that the people felt. "No words of mourning can express the unutterable woe of the heart; no words of execration can pronounce the maledictions which rise up against those on whom his pure blood rests. The hellish demon of American Slavery", declared Editor Perkins, "has added the exalted Lincoln to its long catalogue of victims".

As he thought of the awful responsibility and untiring labor of the President, his words of tribute glowed with inspiration and the reverent editorial ended with a prayer. "Standing at the head

of this great Nation in these troublous times, steadily bearing forward the rightful cause of the Republic, he won the admiration of the world and the love of his countrymen. He took to his great heart the widow, the orphan, the humblest of the land, and in stooping from the great and absorbing affairs of state to wipe away the tear of the afflicted, comfort the sorrowful-hearted, and encourage with his genial, trustful words the sorely tried, he became indeed the great father of his people. Alas! that he is dead. He, so nobly good and great in all the attributes of exalted statesmanship and exemplary Christian manhood, 'one of us, yet above us,' has passed away in the very noontide of his refulgent glory! In an hour of popular joy and exultation the great bereavement came, silencing all lips and clouding all hearts. O God of Thy people, the sick heart turns to Thee! He who ever led to Thy great throne, leads yet again, saying: *'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether!'* "

All week three words had found deep lodgment in the mind of George D. Perkins — Lincoln, Justice, Mercy. Sometimes these words seemed ironical but most of the time they invoked profound sadness. During fragmentary moments of leisure he had pondered over the relationship of mercy and justice to the national tragedy. What

could justice mean to a bereft nation? What could mercy mean to rebels and to murderers? Where should justice end and mercy begin?

Sadly he recalled that Abraham Lincoln had persistently advocated a policy of clemency and that he had never harbored "bitterness toward the wicked insurgents"; yet he grimly realized that this magnanimous head of the nation was the martyr of the very subjects of his mercy. Perhaps the death of Lincoln was a timely act of Providence, indicating that clemency was a futile policy. "Already there were many advocates of general amnesty," wrote Perkins, "leaving even the chiefs of the Great Rebellion, dyed red in the blood of thousands of patriots, to escape entirely the condign punishment they so richly merit at the hands of an outraged people. The horrible crime which has startled the Nation, and turned all hearts from joy to mourning, has aroused the righteous indignation of the people, and they cry out as with one voice, 'Let not Mercy overreach Justice.'" Perkins was inclined to endorse the words of President Johnson, "Mercy to individuals is not always mercy to the State." Apparently, he concluded, "We were permitted ample trial of the clemency policy. The rebels but requited kindness with barbarity, pardon with murder."

During the second week after the assassination,

the editor had time to orient his thinking. Still bitter against the conspirators, he attributed the cause of their crime to the leaders of the rebellion. It was "the legitimate result of what the Slave power has taught and practiced for the last thirty years" — the use of "any means to dispatch an opponent". The murder of the President was but the culmination of personal assaults, lynchings, bloody strife in Kansas, and civil war. "For their attempt to dismember the Union; for their thousand deeds of horrid crime, which culminated in the murder of Abraham Lincoln; by the memory of our patriot-dead; by the thought of unnumbered widows and orphans they have made, we demand that a swift and terrible retribution be visited upon the guilty heads of the leaders of the great rebellion." Toward the misguided common people of the South, however, Editor Perkins advocated a "lenient and magnanimous policy". Perhaps in this way he hoped to reconcile justice with mercy.

The columns of the *Cedar Falls Gazette* usually contained a poem or two, often by well-known contemporary writers. Following the death of Lincoln many dirges and poetic eulogies of the President were printed. A representative poem, "The Lost Chief", composed by a minor poet, Charles D. Halpine, contained two stanzas worthy

of insertion, not for their poetic skill but as indicative of Editor Perkins's attitude toward his lost chief. Perhaps he felt the line, "His blood is freedom's eucharist," to be a restatement of his own belief, expressed in one of the *Gazette's* extras, that in some mysterious way the cause of freedom would triumph through the martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln.

He filled the nation's eye and heart,
An honored, loved, familiar name;
So much a brother that his fame
Seemed of our lives a common part.

A martyr to the cause of man,
His blood is freedom's eucharist,
And in the world's great hero-list
His name shall lead the van!

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