

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

A photograph of an unidentified painting depicting Lincoln in the role of a spiritualist medium.

April 1863 Séance

A *Boston Saturday Evening Gazette* reporter named Melton who was a friend of the medium, Charles E. Shockle, has provided a whimsical account of a spiritualistic séance that took place in the White House in April of 1863:

“Washington, April 23, 1863
 “A few evenings since, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, was induced to give a spiritual soiree in the crimson room at the White House, to test the wonderful alleged supernatural powers of Mr. Charles E. Shockle. It was my good fortune, as a friend of the medium, to be present, the party consisting of the President, Mrs. Lincoln, Mr. Welles, Mr. Stanton, Mr. L— of New York, and Mr. F— of Philadelphia. We took our seats in the circle about eight o’clock, but the President was called away shortly after the manifestations commenced, and the spirits, which had apparently assembled to convince him of their power, gave visible tokens of their displeasure at the President’s absence, by pinching Mr. Stanton’s ears and twitching Mr. Welles’s beard. He soon returned, but it was some time before harmony was restored, for the mishaps to the secretaries caused such bursts of laughter that the influence was very unpropitious. For some half-hour the demonstrations were of a physical character—tables were moved, and the picture of Henry Clay, which hangs on the wall, was swayed more than a foot, and two candelabras, presented by the Dey of Algiers to President Adams, were twice raised nearly to the ceiling.

“It was nearly nine o’clock before Shockle was fully under spiritual influence, and so powerful were the subsequent manifestations, that twice during the evening restoratives were applied, for he was much weakened; and though I took no notes, I shall endeavor to give you as faithful an account as possible of what took place.

“Loud rappings, about nine o’clock, were heard directly beneath the President’s feet, and Mr. Shockle stated that an Indian desired to communicate.

“‘Well, sir,’ said the President, ‘I should be happy to hear what his Indian Majesty has to say. We have recently had a visitation from our red brethren, and it was the only delegation, black, white, or blue, which did not volunteer some advice about the conduct of the war.’

“The medium then called for pencil and paper, and they were laid upon the table in sight of all. A handkerchief was then taken from Mr. Stanton, and the materials were carefully concealed from sight. In less space of time than it has required for me to write this, knocks were heard and the paper was uncovered. To the surprise of all present it read as follows:

“‘Haste makes waste, but delays cause vexations. Give vitality by energy. Use every means to subdue. Proclamations are useless; make a bold front and fight the enemy; leave traitors at home to the care of loyal men. Less note of preparation, less parade and policy talk, and more action. HENRY KNOX.’

“‘That is not Indian talk, Mr. Shockle,’ said the President. ‘Who is Henry Knox?’

“‘I suggested to the medium to ask who General Knox was, and before the words were from my lips the medium spoke in a strange voice: ‘The first Secretary of War.’

“‘Oh! yes, General Knox,’ said the President; who turning to the Secretary, said: ‘Stanton, that message is for you; it is from your predecessor.’

“‘Mr. Stanton made no reply.

“‘I should like to ask General Knox,’ said the President, ‘if it is within the scope of his ability, to tell us when this rebellion will be put down.’

“In the same manner as before, this message was received:

“‘Washington, Lafayette, Franklin, Wilberforce, Napoleon, and myself have held frequent consultations on this point. There is something which our spiritual eyes cannot detect which appears well formed. Evil has come at times by removal of men from high positions, and there are those in retirement whose abilities should be made useful to hasten the end. Napoleon says, concentrate your forces upon one point; Lafayette thinks that

the rebellion will die of exhaustion; Franklin sees the end approaching, as the South must give up for want of mechanical ability to compete against Northern mechanics. Wilberforce sees hope only in a negro army.—Knox.

"Well," exclaimed the President, 'opinions differ among the saints as well as among the sinners. They don't seem to understand running the machines among the celestials much better than we do. Their talk and advice sound very much like the talk of my cabinet—don't you think so, Mr. Welles?'

"Well, I don't know—I will think the matter over, and see what conclusion to arrive at."

"Heavy raps were heard, and the alphabet was called for, when 'That's what's the matter,' was spelt out.

"There was a shout of laughter, and Mr. Welles stroked his beard.

"That means, Mr. Welles," said the President, 'that you are apt to be long-winded, and think the nearest way home is the longest way round. Short cuts in war times. I wish the spirits could tell us how to catch the Alabama.'

"The lights, which had been partially lowered, almost instantaneously became so dim that I could not see sufficiently to distinguish the features of anyone in the room, and on the large mirror over the mantelpiece there appeared the most beautiful though supernatural picture ever beheld. It represented a sea view, the Alabama with all steam up flying from the pursuit of another large steamer. Two merchantmen in the distance were seen, partially destroyed by fire. The picture changed and the Alabama was seen at anchor under the shadow of an English fort—from which an English flag was waving. The Alabama was floating idly, not a soul on board, and no signs of life visible about her. The picture vanished, and in letters of purple appeared: 'The English people demand this of England's aristocracy.'

"So England is to seize the Alabama finally?" said the President. 'It may be possible; but, Mr. Welles, don't let one gunboat or monitor less be built.'

"The spirits called for the alphabet, and again 'That's what's the matter,' was spelt out.

"I see, I see," said the President. 'Mother England

thinks that what's sauce for the goose may be sauce for the gander. It may be tit, tat, toe, hereafter. But it is not very complimentary to our navy, anyhow.'

"We've done our best, Mr. President," said Mr. Welles. 'I'm maturing a plan which, when perfected, I think, if it works well, will be a perfect trap for the Alabama.'

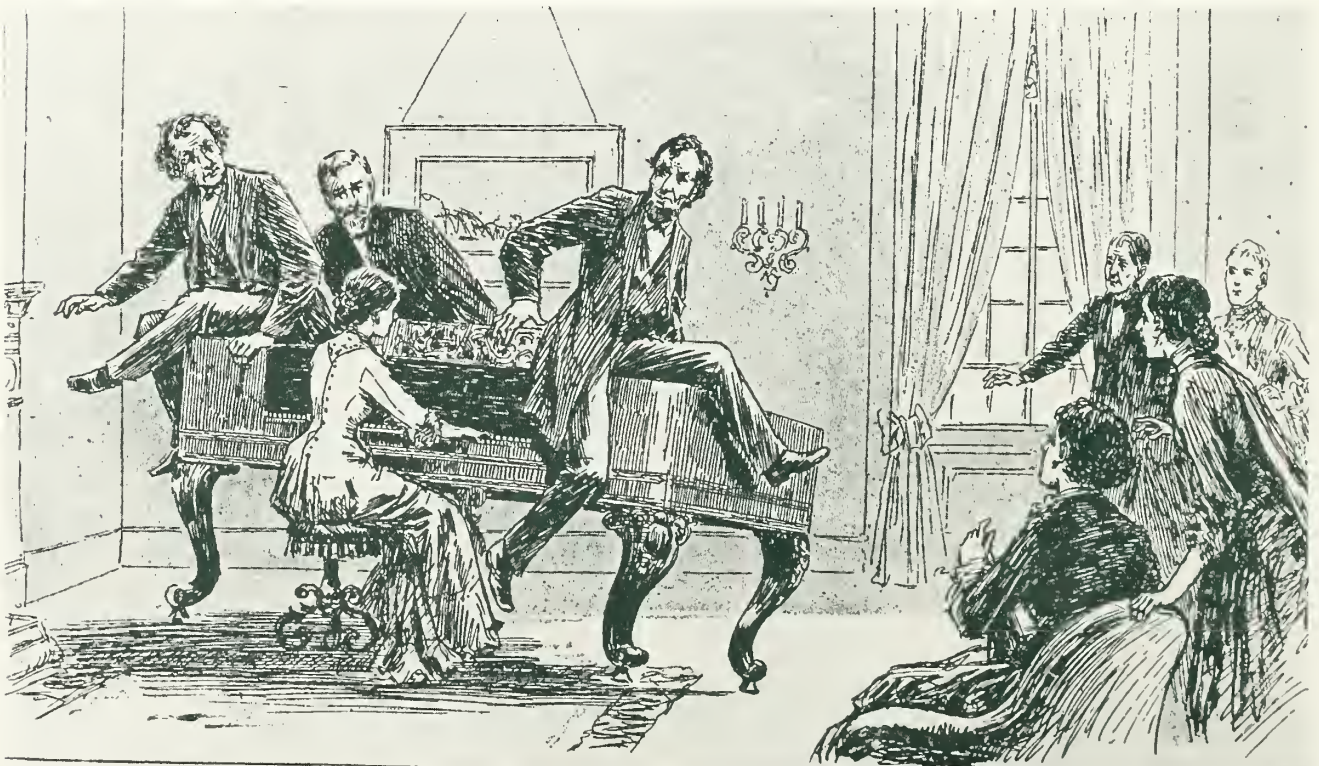
"Well, Mr. Shockle," remarked the President, 'I have seen strange things and heard rather odd remarks; but nothing which convinces me, except the pictures, that there is any thing very heavenly about this. I should like, if possible, to hear what Judge Douglas says about this war.'

"I'll try to get his spirit," said Mr. Shockle; 'but it sometimes happens, as it did to-night in the case of the Indian, that though first impressed by one spirit, I yield to another more powerful. If perfect silence is maintained, I will see if we cannot induce General Knox to send for Mr. Douglas.'

"Three raps were given, signifying assent to the proposition. Perfect silence was maintained, and after an interval of perhaps three minutes Mr. Shockle rose quickly from his chair and stood up behind it, resting his left arm on the back, his right thrust into his bosom. In a voice such as no one could mistake who had ever heard Mr. Douglas, he spoke. I shall not pretend to quote the language. It was eloquent and choice. He urged the President to throw aside all advisers who hesitate about the policy to be pursued, and to listen to the wishes of the people, who would sustain him at all points if his aim was, as he believed it was, to restore the Union. He said there were Burrs and Blennerhassetts living, but that they would wither before the popular approval which would follow one or two victories, such as he thought must take place ere long. The turning-point in this war will be the proper use of these victories. If wicked men in the first hours of success think it time to devote their attention to party, the war will be prolonged; but if victory is followed up by energetic action, all will be well.

"I believe that," said the President, 'whether it comes from spirit or human.'

(To be continued in February 1963 issue.)



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A drawing, taken from Dr. Fayette Hall's pamphlet, "The Copperhead or The Secret Political History of Our Civil War Unveiled," 1902, (M 1373), depicting Lincoln seated on the piano at the Laurie's home in Georgetown, while Mrs. Belle Miller exhibited her power as a physical medium.



Lincoln Lore

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LINCOLN'S ATTENDANCE AT SPIRITUALISTIC SÉANCES

Part II

(Continued from the January, 1963 issue)

"Mr. Shockle was much prostrated after this, and at Mrs. Lincoln's request it was thought best to adjourn the séance, which if resumed, I shall give you an account of."

This newspaper story appears in Carl Sandburg's biography, "Abraham Lincoln—The War Years", Volume III, pages 343-345. Sandburg questioned Lincoln's motives in the staging of this White House affair. Why, the author asked, had Lincoln "permitted a metropolitan news-writer to be present, had thrown no air of privacy around the séance, and seemed entirely willing to have a story of it go out to the country?" Sandburg believed that Lincoln was curious about the "psychic-phenomena manipulators, who . . . were preying on many good people over the country". The biographer also pointed out that "there was little or no hostile comment on this procedure". However, Sandburg observed that "any ordinarily acrimonious editorial writer with a satirical touch and an air for trifles could have done much with it".

