A Lost Lincoln Letter

AN EPISODE IN THE HISTORY OF THE FIRST IOWA CAVALRY

BY BURDETT GRAHAM

"They were a fine set of fellows," said the old gentleman meditatively.

We were sunk in deep chairs before the fire in the library of his Washington house, his home for many years past.

"The boys who enlisted in the First Iowa Cavalry, I mean, mostly big, husky, clean-living farm-boys, from those magnificent prairie farms. Many of them brought their own horses, and they were fine specimens, too. Of course, there was an occasional black sheep taken in to fill the ranks. Such exceptions usually would be from the river-towns where a certain amount of human drift was bound to settle, riff-raff from up and down the Mississippi. However, naming no names, they were brave soldiers.

"Our regiment was 'way up near the top — some claimed *the* top—when it came to the number of engagements we took part in. Mean, bush-whacking fighting it was, too, down in southwest Missouri, our front.

"And no digs at Missouri either! 'You'll have to show me' a finer country and finer people. I liked them well enough to go back, when 'the late unpleasantness' was over and settle down to practice law, didn't I?"

"And they liked you well enough to send you to congress a few years later!"

"O, well! Short of material may be right then," he shrugged.

"That's not just a joke," he went on, thoughtfully. "You see, the old ruling class in the South has been hopelessly weakened, lost its power, at least, for the time. More than one member of the Confederate senate had gotten his training in the United States senate before the war."

"Yes," I assented eagerly. "My other grand-mother, my Southern grandmother told me that the wife of the senior senator from their state said that for months before the war broke out, she used to hear him night after night, pacing back and forth, back and forth, in his library next their bedroom, trying to make up his mind where his loyalty lay, with his section—finally, his own state didn't secede—or with the Union. Then he left secretly one night, and was next heard of in Texas."

The old gentleman nodded sadly.

"And died a brokenhearted man. Just as well that he didn't survive to see—and hear—some of the new leaders of his party. Not all, mind you! An aristocracy can be outworn. However, that isn't what I started out to tell you about. My mind is very easily sidetracked these days.

"To disgress again: see this corncob I'm smoking? Sent me the other day by an old constituent, a good Democrat then and now.

"And so, what has all this to do with my old regiment? Just this: One bitterly cold winter night, after eight hours in the saddle, we were looking, my troop and I, for a likely place to camp. When we were just about to give up and bed ourselves with our horses for warmth in the sparse woods, we saw a log schoolhouse a little off the road. It promised shelter, at least, and the woods behind it the best we could hope for for our horses. The door was fastened only by a crude latch and we were soon inside. A squad took charge of the horses and blanketed and hitched them in the lee of the house. Everybody's spirits came up with a bound. We made a fire on the hearth; there was a good-natured scramble for the best berths near the fire.

"The tussle grew a little too much of a roughhouse after a few minutes, however, and one of these ex-roustabouts I was telling you about started a general free fight. I was loath to push discipline too far, so I suggested as mildly as possible that everybody was pretty well played out and they'd better stop fooling and get

some sleep. I was pretty close to this tough and he turned on me, quick as a flash and drew his sword.

"Well, I guess you know what that act constitutes—drawing a weapon against your officer in time of war. I put him under arrest, sent him up to the nearest military prison. There was a court martial. Verdict, death.

"Things were very quiet after that. The regiment moved on. A few days later, I received a letter which had been pursuing me.

"It was a personal letter from President Lincoln, dealing with the trial and sentence to death of Private Blank. It expressed in tones of deep sincerity the president's regret over the incident, 'a brave soldier, overcome by a sudden uncontrollable flash of anger, while under great stress of fatigue'—something like that.

"I put in a good many hours of hard thought that night before I attempted an answer. Then I thought—

" 'Well, Mr. President, I'll do the best I can for you, but you're too sound a lawyer to know that your argument hasn't a leg to stand on. Jury-stuff; that's all that is; the best of its kind, because it comes from the depths of your big heart.'

"I sent the letter by fast courier, but—would you believe it?—I didn't hear the outcome for years, for almost immediately I received orders to report at HQR at St. Louis, where I served as Assistant Provost Martial till the end of the war. And believe me, I was busy, for that town was HQR of sedition, too.

"I applied more than once for return to active duty with my regiment, but the reply continued to be that 'Captain X. was too useful in his present post for any change to be considered.' "

"And Lincoln's letter? That priceless possession! Where is it now? In safe-deposit, I hope!"

"It was—for years. Then—of all the damn fool acts I was ever guilty of!

"Some fellow in upstate New York was writing a book on Lincoln and had gotten wind of this letter. Might he borrow it? All assurances of responsibility were given and I sent it on. That was the last I ever saw of

it. I was informed, after repeated inquiries, that my original correspondent had died, leaving his papers in some confusion, and that when the estate was settled, such matters would be taken care of. Being myself a lawyer was of no avail; so, as Uncle Remus so aptly remarks: " 'Dat's all de furder de story goes.' "

There was a long silence as we sat gazing into the fire, hearing the wind coming in gusts against the window-panes. Then—

"A night much like this," he muttered. "Poor devil!"

A Story of American Opportunity

HUGH ROY CULLEN, by Ed Kilman and Theon Wright. New York City: Prentis-Hall, 1954. 376 pp.

A biography of one of the most unusual men of our time,—a living example of some of the great axioms of our nation. From very modest circumstances he rose, by means of hard work, faith and courage, to become the "king of the Texas wildcatters," one of this country's wealthiest men, and one of the greatest philanthropists of all time. To the Cullen Foundation, which distributes funds for philanthropic purposes, he has given oil properties worth $160,000,000, but he says he is a "selfish man."

The life story of Hugh Roy Cullen is an important book about which the American people should hear. It sounds a note of optimism in these days of pessimism. It clearly subtantiates the fact that opportunity in America is still alive, that the individual is important, and that faith is a vital ingredient in successful living.

This most individualistic of men in still going strong at 73, and emerges from this most interesting biography as the most fabulous of all Texas oil titans and one of the greatest philanthropists of our time. From a life of unceasing toil he progressed through a typical small-town boyhood to a position of unaccountable wealth. The tale recounts his unwavering faith in the future of America and describes his unceasing efforts that eventually led to world-wide renown. Hugh Roy Cullen did more than use his head—he opened his heart.