

"Dear Companion"

Civil War Letters of a Story County Farmer

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BORN ON the last day of 1835 in Carrol County, Indiana, Thomas A. Ball had become a farmer in Nevada, Iowa by the time of the Civil War. He had married Serilda Ballard in Story County on March 4, 1856. Nearly eight years later, after he left her and their children to join the 32nd Iowa Infantry Regiment, he began a series of thirty-four letters to her which he ended when he mustered out in April 1866. The letters are not remarkable documents of military history, for the action Ball saw was neither exceptional nor particularly heroic. He remained a private throughout his service, and in his letters home he was far more liable to express affection and concern for his family than he was to philosophize about the moral or political questions behind the campaigns in which he participated. In other words, he was a typical Civil War foot soldier. His letters, addressed to his "Dear Companion," reveal more about the feelings of a man caught by forces beyond his control, and about the ramifications of a farmer's military service for his family, than they do about the war itself.

The first surviving letter from Thomas Ball sets the pattern of his letters to Serilda. He mailed it from Vicksburg, Mississippi on February 10, 1864. At this early stage his primary intent seemed to be to reassure Serilda about his safety. He was "as well and as fat and hardy as you ever saw me. . . . This morning we had a good breakfast we had coffee and tea, warm lite bread, beef and pork and rice sugar and Beans. . . . we have enough left for dinner and we draw again before that. . . . Now Serilda be content with your lot for I am getting along fine." He asked that they all "remember me in your petitions at a

throne of grace And I will continue to do the same for you."¹

Before long, however, Thomas's concerns for his family's well-being vied for prominence in his letters with these reassurances about himself. Institutional protections for soldiers' families were few in the Civil War; left to their own devices they might only apply to friends and relatives for aid. Thomas worried constantly about his wife and their small sons, Andy and George. "I want you to write me an other letter," he instructed Serilda from Vicksburg on February 25, "and tell me how you are getting along whether you got the money that I sent home from camp McClellan. . . . I am afraid you are sufering for wood and Bread." Sometimes Ball did not receive his pay or could not collect it if he was ill. He always worried that the money might disappear in transit. Even when the pay arrived on schedule, it was never enough. On March 2 he warned Serilda that she "must do the best you can with what you have to do with I am afraid you will be out of money before I can draw any more." He took odd jobs to supplement the family income. On January 17, 1865, he reported from Eastport, Mississippi that he would "make what I can washing and send it home here is fifty cents that I made yesturday."

Ball worried about a solitary woman's ability to provide for herself and her children in rural Iowa. He inquired about the fences, crops, meat, wood, corn, and clothing. He bristled when he thought someone might take advantage of his family in his absence. On January 17, 1865 he expressed his distrust of a neighbor who wanted to take the family cow in compensation for a debt. "Now I will tell you what I would do as that is the only cow you have and [the neighbor] is at home and I am in the army if I was you I would keep the cow . . . and tell [him] that he can have the next money that I send home," Thomas advised. "You cant do without a cow," he continued, "and if I was [the neighbor] I would not take the last cow that

1. In quotations from the Ball letters, the editors have modernized or corrected a few incidences of punctuation or word usage to avoid confusion. Most spelling, however, remains as it was to preserve the character of Ball's writing. The letters are in the possession of Lawrence Danks and Edith Tanner of Edgemont, South Dakota, the great-grandchildren of Thomas and Serilda Ball. They recognized the historical interest of the letters, and made them available to David Danbom through the agency of Lawrence Danks's stepdaughter, Yvonne Hamilton of Fargo, North Dakota.

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a woman and children has if I was at home and her man in the army." He remained convinced that the presence of a trustworthy man would make all the difference for Serilda; his anxieties diminished considerably when his brother returned to Iowa from the army. On September 21, 1865 he wrote to Serilda, who was staying with his brother, James Ball, that "to move out on your place to stay this winter is a dark picture to me. . . . I understand James and his plan like a Book and that is he wants you to stay with him and I am not afraid to trust him with the whole affairs of my interest at home."

Ball's anxieties increased sharply when he was wounded. His first action was during the Red River campaign of 1864, when the 32nd Iowa Regiment participated in the capture of Fort De Russy in Louisiana. He received a wound which troubled him for years. He described it as "a sore on my legg caused by a musket ball that a rebble shot out of a gun," and he tended to make light of it at first. He described the battle on March 14, and recalled that they had "marched about 30 miles that day and then had to take the fort by storm for supper the fight lasted about one hour there was six killed and 28 wounded on our side and about as many on the side of the rebbs." Thomas "was shot about fifty yards from the breastworks" and "was about the last one that was hurt [because] as soon as they saw that we was bound to come over they raised the white flag." When Thomas heard of the surrender, he "forgot about my sore and raised and fired my gun to salute." His wound, "a gash . . . about the size of a silver dollar rite in the calf of the right leg," was sufficiently serious to require his evacuation to an army hospital in New Orleans. His removal from the regiment may have been a blessing in disguise, for it allowed him to avoid the Battle of Pleasant Hill on April 9, 1864, in which his regiment sustained very heavy casualties.

In spite of the infection, diarrhea, and fever which his wound precipitated, Ball's primary concern seems to have been "Dear Companion." He reassured her that he was "in as good a hospital as there is in the world and have plenty of everything that I need and more than I can use of the best provisions. . . . My case is not a bad one." From the hospital, "about one hundred yeards from the river there is one of the nicest

groves round it that you ever saw and it is as green now [on April 13, 1864] as the woods ever gett in Iowa," he told Serilda. The weather was good and he enjoyed himself "very well considering I have as good and clean clothes to wear as Lincoln needes and as good a bed as anybody." After a furlough at home and some months of recovery, Ball returned to his regiment in August 1864, but he never completely recovered from his wound, and whenever his discomfort increased, so did his concern for his family.

By September, Ball was with the 32nd in Missouri, where the regiment was attempting to counter Sterling Price's invasion, and there Ball recorded one of the grizzly vignettes typical of the vicious border warfare which plagued that state. His unit had taken a spy prisoner, "and he kill[ed] one of our men Serilda with a pocket knife and wounded four more then our men run three bayonetts through him and shot him one and then hung him on a lim and then dug a hole and rolled him like a hog and covered him about eighteen inches deep then some of the bad boys drove sticks through him."

In 1865, Ball had few wartime horrors to describe, but as his discomfort and loneliness increased, so did his concern for home and family. On February 1 he wrote that on guard duty he had to "stand on one leg for two hours at a time today I have to be still for I am lame in both legs this kind of duty I think I can do but with great pain but to march in ranks I cannot." He worried that a lame husband would be of little use to Serilda on the farm. "I think my leg will never get entirley stout again and I have been more exposed to cold and rain lately than common and my leg seems to get worse than it was," he fretted. He suggested a means by which he might supplement his own labor: "Now Serrilda I want you to give me your opinion about haveing about three or four darkies brought to your house when I come home to work for us." They could take in "three boys about twelve years old, one to help you about the house and garden and cook for the other two that plows and so on as I never expect to be able to follow the plow on account of my leg." He wanted Serilda to tell him "how the negro question or negro labour system is going in that country, ther is a great many of the boys taking darkies home with them to work for them." Ball's notion of returning

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home with black children must have been a fleeting one, born of his anxieties about his ability to provide for his family, because he never mentioned the plan again in his letters.

Injury and anxiety seemed to influence Thomas in another direction as well. He became more enthusiastically religious and attended camp meetings. When first wounded he had "one friend that I rely on daily and I trust my life in his hands and find him very near in time of trouble I still think as I told you when I left home it depends much how we live whether I get home or not." Later he frequented the chapels of the United States Christian Commission, a volunteer missionary agency for the troops, and on April 6, 1865 he reported from Fort Blakely, Alabama that they had "camp meetings here twice a day I attend them when I can and enjoy them very well I find that the Lord is good and is a help in time of need I am trying . . . in my weak way to live religious." On May 22, 1865 he described a "protracted" camp meeting in Montgomery, Alabama as "one of the best that I ever saw . . . at eight o'clock it commenced and lasted all day and part of the night I saw 37 men Baptised yesturday and then they had Sacrament in the evening and there was over five hundred men took the Lords supper. Now the fact is there is much religion in the army here."

Thomas turned his concern for religion toward his "Dear Companion," and chided Serilda for laxness of faith and insufficient attention to works as a means of achieving grace. In a letter from New Orleans on March 6, 1865 he told her "there is nothing that would do me more good now than to hear from your own letters that you are trying with all your mind and strength to love thank and work for God Now Serrild you must not think that I say two much on this subject," he continued, "for faith without Works is dead now I know that you have faith that you believe in the religion of Christ but I fear that you are slack concerning works and you need not look to be blessed without doing your duty." Twelve days later, Thomas pursued the state of Serilda's faith further from Dauphin Island, Alabama. He felt "on my way from this low ground of sorrow to that Bright World where sorrow is a stranger." He told his wife to "try to live in discharge of duty and try to raise them sweet little boys in the ways of the Lord."

He asked that if Serilda was not "enjoying religion" as she "ought," she should explain her feelings on the subject. She must have responded satisfactorily, for on May 28, 1865 Thomas wrote from Montgomery, Alabama: "It does me much good to know that, though severed far, By faith we meet arround one common mercy seat and I was glad to hear you say that you, though progressing slow, Still put your trust in the Lord. . . . I will close on this subject though I could set here and write on it all day."

Thomas may have taken to religion so enthusiastically partly from boredom, which seemed to plague his army career. On May 22, 1865 he explained to Serilda that camp duty consisted of "standing one day in ten sweeping the streets in the regt every morning drawing and eating rations." He mused that "camp rumors is changed so often and contradicted so much that if I were to commence to tell one it might be contradicted before I could tell it and it would be forgotten before it would get to you." Ball admitted that "a private knows nothing but what he sees come to pass." On August 20, 1864 he complained from Fort Pickering, Tennessee that "there is nothing going on here at present. The Negroes does all of the Gard duty of the Fort and . . . I hant much to do." Army life typically meant long periods of boredom broken by intense moments of danger.

For Ball, the physical danger ceased when the Confederacy collapsed. He was in Montgomery, Alabama and wrote home celebrating "a peaceful land and free People." When the news of Jefferson Davis's capture arrived in camp, "the camp was illuminated with lighted candles on every tree and bush . . . and then we fixed up a stand and had some of the best speeches from officers in our regiment that I ever heard and then we sung 'the star Spangled Banner' and 'hang Jef Davis on a sour apple tree' and then some of the loudest cheering that I ever heard." Ball was sure that "The prospect is clear that we will soon leave this country to return home." Events frustrated his hopes for an early release, however. He was confined to garrison duty in the South while he watched his friends and neighbors mustered out. During this time his longings for home became most intense.

When Ball did not receive letters as frequently as he thought

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he should, his own letters sometimes took on a waspish tone, tinged with self-pity. "Dear Companion," he wrote to Serilda from Montgomery on June 14, 1865, "you need not stop writing because the war is over for I am as far from home now as I was one month ago and would be just as glad to hear from you now as ever before." His loneliness, however, reflected genuine concern for his family as well as himself. He became more anxious about his growing children, and asked Serilda, on January 17, 1865, to "tell Andy that he must learn his lessons good at school and be a good boy and you must try to learn them what you can at home." He wanted to "tell little George that Pap got that lock of hair and a peace of your dress and that Pap carries it in his side pocket every day and looks at it very often." On April 13, 1864 he reminded Serilda to tell them "that I want to see how much they have learn'd Since I lef," that he would "fetch them som prettys," and to "tell little andy that Pap has carried his little ax in his napsack ever so far."

Thomas Ball did return to Iowa after the Civil War, and later he and Serilda moved to the Dakota frontier. They both died in Fall River County, South Dakota, Serilda on June 14, 1902, and Thomas on April 22, 1924. Thomas Ball's letters are not unusual, nor was Thomas Ball an unusual man. He was merely an Iowa farmer, a private in the army, who left his family, risked his life to do his duty, and returned home. Yet although Thomas was not a hero in the conventional sense of the term, through his experiences we can see the heroism of most common soldiers and the impact that war has on even its more peripheral participants. When Thomas Ball returned home with his wound, his visions of horror, and his revitalized religion, how changed a man he must have been, and how different a woman must have been there awaiting his return.

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