Lincoln stories

Lincoln - Sec 2

222 The Northern,
Wichita, Kansas, December 30, 1919.

Miss Ida M. Tarbell,
152 East 19th Street,
New York City.

My dear Miss Tarbell:

Your letter came several days ago, and the manuscript yesterday. I can't find words to thank you adequately for your kindness in this matter so must ask you to take that for granted. You are entirely right in your suggestion that the work of doing it gives the highest satisfaction. Indeed, I don't know what would have become of me if I hadn't done this or something of a similar nature and now that I have got the habit, I think I shall keep on trying.

I shall try a few other publishers and if I fail completely, I think that I shall adopt the suggestion of my daughter and will have it typed on heavy bond paper, well bound, and present it with my compliments to the library of the little college here with which it was my privilege to be connected at its beginning and during the trying days following. Then, about the year 3600, some antiquary will dig up this priceless gem, by a colleague of Shakespeare and Irving, and spring it on the world as an example of the fine fancy and pure diction which obtained in the beginning of the Kansas nation, and perhaps it will settle the much mooted question as to the location of the great Battle of Armageddon, the crucial conflict between the allied Incas and Aztecs against the Hudson Bay Fur Company, which the Nipponic historians claimed was fought at Manila in the Philippine Islands, the Teutonese historians pointing to this as a triumphant vindication of their contention that Manila was located on the Mississippi!

Recently I have been doing some little bits and send you herewith a copy of "My Theory". I have never been a very great admirer of Mr. Whittier. Outside of "Snowbound", his poems, for the most part, seem to me lacking in vigor of expression and correctness of view, and full of sentimentalism. One day I came across "Maud Muller", which has been a pet aversion of mine for many years, and rashly said to my sister, "Watch me make a boob of Mr. Whittier." Being committed to it, I had to go to it, and this is the result, which you may tear up when you read it.

I am sorry I have no more stories of Mr. Lincoln to tell you, though it is possible that I may have. Only yesterday my sister told me that one of our neighbors in "The Northern" is a granddaughter of Mr. Lincoln's cousin. She was born Lincoln and is a very brilliant and attractive woman, about thirty-five years

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old, and I am going to sound her for anything that she may know of her distinguished relative and if I find anything, I will send it to you.

I remember one morning more than forty years ago, in the little town of Tallula, where I was then living,--the old Clary's Grove, you know--as I was waiting for my mail in the post office, I heard someone remark that Mentor Graham was in town. I went to my office and built a fire. When it got going, the door opened and a very old man came in and asked if he might warm himself at my fire. Of course he was welcome. As he sat there, it suddenly occurred to me that it might be Mentor Graham. He was. I tried to draw him out about Mr. Lincoln but either he was reticent or had no reminiscences to mention. He only said: "Abe was a good boy," and after sitting there for awhile, rose, thanked me and went out. He died soon after.

But I believe, Miss Tarbell, that I ought to tell you a story that I heard three years ago--a very remarkable story--of Mr. Lincoln's parentage. I remember very well when I first heard of his alleged illegitimacy. I could go within a foot of the spot where I was standing, a ten-year-old boy, when a grown man sneered at Mr. Lincoln because of that. It was a man who had come to Jacksonville, a refugee from Missouri, and whom my father had befriended and who, therefore, hated my father, and he poured that into my ears. And I remember that you later found the marriage license of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks and so settled forever the question of their marriage. But this strange story came to me three years ago, just after the election of 1916, and I think I ought to tell you as one deeply interested in everything that concerns the history of Abraham Lincoln and as the one biographer who, I think, more than any other has given a correct and sympathetic appreciation of his character. I read your book last winter with the greatest pleasure and that is the conclusion that I came to.

I was sitting in the office of a little hotel at Columbus, Kansas, waiting for the rain to stop so that I might call on my customers, and got into conversation with a cattleman much older than myself but still vigorous in body and mind. We talked of the election. I forget the gentleman's name but he told me that he had been a lifelong Democrat. He had fought in the Union Army and had generally supported the Democratic ticket. He had voted for Mr. Wilson for the first term but in the second election he could not vote for him on account of his vacillating policy in Mexico and his apparent lack of grasp of the situation with reference to the World War then raging. Neither could he vote for Mr. Hughes for he disapproved entirely of his resignation from the Supreme Court to run for President. So, you see, he was a man of strong convictions and independent judgment. His whole conversation showed it.

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Somehow the name of Mr. Lincoln came into the conversation. He had seen Mr. Lincoln and he spoke of him with an admiration and devotion amounting almost to reverence. I told him the story of the Confederate regiment which met as American citizens rather than Confederate soldiers and passed formal resolutions deploring his death. Then he told me this remarkable tale.

He was driving through North Carolina some years after the Civil War. He and his driver were passing a large plantation. The big house stood well back from the road and in front of the house a man was standing who, in form and feature--for he was close enough to see his features clearly--appeared the perfect picture of Abraham Lincoln. He spoke to his driver of the remarkable resemblance. For awhile the man said nothing but after they had passed, the driver asked him if he were a newspaper man. He was not. And then the driver told him that the people were very sensitive on that subject. Everybody in the neighborhood knew it but everybody kept the story out of the papers.

The father of the man whom he had seen owned the same plantation and was very highly regarded in the community and for a long distance round; had more than a local reputation for his integrity, his public spirit, his kindness to his slaves and generally fine character. But an ugly rumor began to go about and the little Baptist church of the neighborhood, of which this man was a member, took cognizance of the rumor and brought him before the bar. When he was charged with guilt toward a young white girl living on his plantation, he arose in the church and publicly confessed his fault. He said that his wife had forgiven him, he hoped God would forgive him, and he begged the forgiveness of the church, promising to do everything he could to ameliorate the unfortunate girl's condition and make her life more bearable. He built a house for the girl Nancy, a very attractive, bright young woman, and there she lived until her child was born. But that situation had its shortcomings and could not endure, so he gave her a considerable sum of money and she went into the wilderness of Kentucky, where she married Thomas Lincoln.

This is the story. My friend was deeply impressed by it and believed it. He knew perfectly well the mythical character of many stories that gather about the parentage and early life of great men and was not unduly impressed by the rumor itself, but the striking resemblance in form and feature impressed him and still more, I think, the honesty and manliness of the guilty man, in which he saw a quality that was perhaps the most striking feature of Mr. Lincoln's character, and further, the fact that none of Mr. Lincoln's brothers showed any of these qualities in a marked degree. He also expressed a cordial admiration for the young mother, her courage in going alone with her baby into the wilderness--a strong character.

I have never repeated this and perhaps shall never mention it again and if I have offended you in the telling, I humbly beg

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your forgiveness, and to take the taste of it out of your mouth, I believe that I will tell you a little story of the gallantry that obtained in the Civil War, as a striking contrast to the brutal ferocity and fiendish cruelty that was such a marked characteristic of the recent World War.

In my native town there was a young merchant named Philpot. I do not remember him, though I probably knew him as a boy for I knew everybody at the time. "Philly", as he was affectionately called, for he was very popular, came from Alabama, and while the trouble was brewing between the North and South, said boldly that if the South went out, he should go down to his native state to fight for her. He was born there and his people lived there and he would go there and fight for her. So he did.

When Grant's troops were before Donaldson, on the day before the surrender, when everything was quiet along the line, an officer sprang up on the parapet and waved his sword. He called out: "Are there any Illinois men here?"

"We're here!" the Illinois men replied.

"Are there any Jacksonville men here?" he demanded.

"Yes. We're here, Philly," they called. "You're our meat. We're coming for you tomorrow."

He saluted and sprang down. The next day the fort was surrendered and the Jacksonville bunch got Philly. When the guard came for him they refused to give him up and were allowed to keep him for several days. He was their guest. There was nothing too good for old Philly.

And this story, which I got, I think, from D. R. Fitch, whom I saw for the last in Omaha some ten years ago. He was a merchant in Jacksonville and at the beginning of the War was private secretary to Governor Richard Yates the first, also a resident of Jacksonville, as you remember. One evening, he and the Governor were going over a lot of papers having to do with military matters and Fitch said: "Governor, we ought to have a military man in here to help us with this." For everything was at sixes and sevens.

"I know it," said the Governor, "but they are all in the army."

"No," said Fitch. "There is a man here, a Captain Grant, who hasn't got a commission."

The Governor said, "Call him in." So Captain Grant was called in and soon had everything arranged in apple pie order.

One evening when they were going over some matters, the Governor said: "Grant, don't you want a commission?" Grant replied, "Yes."

"All right. I'll give you the 125th Regiment. We haven't any uniforms or guns but they will be here in a few days."

Grant said: "Send them to Quincy. We'll start for Quincy tomorrow morning. The boys have got to learn to march and they

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might as well learn that way as any." And he started from Springfield the following morning and marched his men in civilian clothes to Quincy, where he found the equipment waiting for them. My uncle Charles was in that regiment.

Again thanking you for your kindness and wishing you a happy and prosperous New Year, I am

Very sincerely yours,

Walter Reavis.

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MY THEORY.

I may be what they take me for,
A cynical old bacheler.
Perhaps. But I've a theory
Of the marriage game. It seems to me
That when the parties to the pact
Come to the nuptial altar, backed
By loyal, firm and generous will
To do each several best to fill
The other's cup of happiness,
Without a selfish thought or trace
Of care for what they're due to get,
Their happiness is a safe bet.

But when there's lurking in the mind,
E'en though it may be ill-defined,
A sense of th' duty th' other owes,
There's trouble ahead. Now, I suppose
That that's a preachment, but it's true,
And here's another one for you.
If you would side-step sore heartache,
Be ready to give, not eager to take.
To old and young this rule applies;
To rich and poor it never lies.
And as Life's mystery unfolds,
I think you'll find my theory holds.

But, Lord, what hopes does marriage quench
In lady fair and ebon wench;
In merchant prince and stumbling clod--
What hopes lie buried 'neath its sod
Whene'er the parties to the pact
Have generous devotion lacked.
How oft we think our friends mismated,
And when they find their hopes unsated,
When he goes this way, she goes that,
Or they stage the play of dog and cat,
We say, as we bemoan their fate,
Each should have had another mate;
Convince ourselves with little pother,
Each might have been happy with another.

If Pretty Maud had married the Judge
And escaped the fate of household drudge,
She might have been happy throughout life's span,
Her husband a fond, contented man.
We sigh with pseudo sentiment
That Fate their paths apart has bent,
And draw from bathos' noisome fen
That mawkish phrase: "It might have been."

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But what of th' others? What of th' lad
That married Maud? He was not bad.
What would you expect of husband young
Who found that his wife's affections clung
To a rich old man she'd met one day
While in the meadow raking hay?
If Maud had quit mooning and courted him,
'Twould have been far better for both of them.
And what of the widow of ample dower,
When she found that her husband's quest of power
Had root in regrets o'er a fair young face?
Some reason there, eh, for pleasure's chase?
She took from life the best she could,
Refusing o'er mendless wrongs to brood.
The only alternative was divorce.
No doubt she thought it might be worse.
And there's a reflection in which you'll find
A hint for use in life's hard grind.
When things go wrong and joys are dead,
The future dark, and hope is fled--
When seems no light in the universe,
Buck up and bear it! It might be worse.

Now, list to the tale of the Sandman's joke:
The other day beneath this oak
I fell asleep and found that Maud
Had married the Judge. On the avenue broad
They lived within shund of the ocean's roar,
In a mansion great, with servants galore.
There were butlers, coachmen, maids and cooks;
Pictures, tap'stries, rugs and books;
The ceilings were dreams and the mirror-like floors
Adorned with weaves of Persians and Moors.
The furniture, massive, fine and old,
Of family, taste and travel told.
Treasures from centuries long come down,
The pride of all the cultured town.

But Maud didn't like the fine old things.
Divans, chairs, couches fit for kings.
And soon they were to the attic sent,
Replaced by pieces which merely meant
That Maud had money. A rustic scene
Was deftly shunted behind a screen,
Quite out of sight--done by Minot.
'Twas too suggestive and had to go.
And soon "The Gleaners", priceless, rare,
Hung from the wall of the servants' stair.
Flatly the Judge refused to send
Away the gift of a dying friend.

To th' meeting house old, up on the hill,
Maud had gone with her folks, who went there still.
But married now, from lofty perch,
The most High Churchist of High Church,

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(Reverently, she said: "The Chu'ch"
To her "position" owed that touch.)
She looked on a denomination
As fit but for denunciation.

Her guests were frequently entertained
In fashion odd, and often feigned
A cough behind their kerchiefs white,
For it was hard to be polite
When Maud her phrases French brought forth,
Unconscious of repressed mirth.
And at her table when the beef
With gravies rich was served, a sheaf
Of menu phrases from her lips
Came as from one who nectar sips.
And while her husband made no fuss,
He winced at Maud's "roast beef au jus."

In th' library of volumes rare
She moved with manner debonair;
Spoke of the "works" as if she knew
Their contents and their authors too.
"Principia" in the Latin writ
For learned folk and keen of wit,
"Primpitia, in its native tongue,"
She called. The town with laughter rung.

Alas! Alack! pish! tush! Oh, fie! x
And all the other words that swell
The chorus of contempt supreme
For an old man dreaming Love's young dream.
The people sighed and shook the head,
And one of the neighbors sagely said:
"If th' Judge had married another one,
A widow with something of her own,
Accustomed to his circumstance,
Adapted to the elegance
Of his fine home, he might have been
A happy man." All said:"Amen!"

"And if Maud had married a sturdy lad
Of habits good, a farmer bred,
She might have been useful and justly proud,
The mother of a joyous brood
Of children fine." And here the oak
An acorn dropped and I awoke.

x The fastidious reader may, if he desire, substitute "cry" for "swell." The other kind will not need any suggestion.

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