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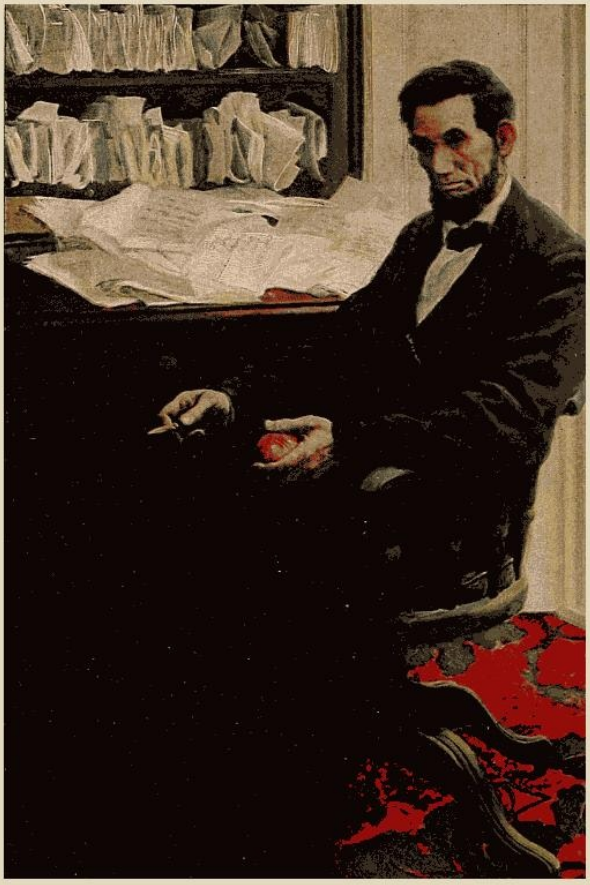
Lincoln
and the Sleeping Sentinel



LINCOLN

AND

THE SLEEPING SENTINEL

THE TRUE STORY

TOLD BY

L. E. CHITTENDEN

REGISTER OF THE TREASURY, 1861-65
AND AUTHOR OF
"RECOLLECTIONS OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN AND HIS ADMINISTRATION"

WITH PORTRAITS

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Illustrations

LINCOLN.—From a painting by Howard Pyle — *Frontispiece*

LINCOLN IN 1857.—From a photograph in the collection of Charles Carleton Coffin — *Facing p.* 20

LINCOLN AND HIS SON THOMAS, KNOWN AS "TAD."—From a photograph by Brady — *Facing p.* 28

LINCOLN.—From the statue by Augustus St. Gaudens, at Lincoln Park, Chicago — *Facing p.* 36

LINCOLN IN 1865.—From a photograph by Rice — *Facing p.* 46

Introduction

ITHOUT any attempt at biographical details or an appreciation, a few chief facts in Abraham Lincoln's great career may be helpfully recalled to the minds of readers. His ancestors were Quakers in Berks County, Pennsylvania. His parents, born in Virginia, were influenced by the current of migration across the Alleghanies, and were carried first to Kentucky and afterward to Indiana.

It was in Hardin County, Kentucky, that Abraham Lincoln was born, February 12, 1809, the child of these humble settlers. Compared with the opportunities of the present-day boy, his chances seemed desperate indeed. His attendance at a regular school covered hardly more than a year. Nearly all the education which, among other gifts, enriched him with such a mastery of the English tongue he acquired painfully by himself. It was a question of necessities, of aiding to wrest a livelihood from a new country that confronted the boy, and so we find him at work, and at nineteen entering a larger world of practical affairs by helping to guide a flat-boat down the Mississippi to New Orleans. What he had to do was done so faithfully that his employer promoted him to be a clerk, and gave him charge of a store and mill at New Salem, Illinois.

The first public recognition of Lincoln's character came in his election as captain of a company in the war against Black Hawk and his band of rebellious Indians in 1832. This was followed by his appointment as postmaster at New Salem, Illinois, which gave him better opportunities for study—opportunities so well improved that he was admitted to practise as a lawyer in 1836. He began his professional career at Springfield, Illinois. Law and politics were almost inseparable, and as Lincoln rose in his profession, and became noted for the shrewd common-sense and the dry humor of his speeches at public meetings, he gained more and more prominence as a leading member of the old Whig party in Illinois.

The next steps were natural ones—repeated elections to the Legislature of Illinois, and then a nomination for Congress, which led to his election in 1847. At Washington he made his mark particularly as an opponent of slavery. Then followed, in 1858, his selection as a candidate for the United States Senate against Stephen A. Douglas, which involved a series of historic debates over the slavery question. The popular voice was for Lincoln, but the Legislature elected Douglas. From this contest Lincoln emerged with a standing which finally brought to him the Republican nomination for the presidency over William H. Seward in the stormy days of 1860.

Lincoln's great career as the sixteenth President of the United States, from 1861 to 1865, is not to be entered upon in this outline of facts. His superhuman part in preserving the Union, his Proclamation of Emancipation in 1863, his second election in 1864, and his assassination at the close of the Civil War are among our great historical landmarks. It was on April 15, 1865, that death placed him beside Washington in the Pantheon of American history.

These bare facts of President Lincoln's life are set down here as an outline record to accompany the true story of "Lincoln and the Sleeping Sentinel," which is now published in a separate book for the first time. Brief as this summary is, it is diffuse in comparison with the autobiography written by Lincoln in 1857, which reads:

"Born, February 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky.

"Education defective.

"Profession a lawyer.

"Have been a captain of volunteers in the Black Hawk War.

"Postmaster at a very small office; four times a member of the Illinois Legislature, and was a member of the lower House of Congress."

Had Lincoln finished his autobiography in 1865 he would have written with the same modest reticence.

For four years, while Register of the Treasury, L. E. Chittenden was in close personal and official relations with President Lincoln. In his *Recollections* he has emphasized certain qualities which find so beautiful an expression in this story.

"Lincoln's heart was as tender as ever beat in a human breast," Mr. Chittenden has written. "Those who saw him standing by the coffins of young Ellsworth and the eloquent Baker knew how he loved his friends—how he sorrowed over their loss. In his companionship with his boys, and particularly with the younger, there was a most touching picture of parental affection; in his emotion when he lost them, a grief too sacred to be further exposed. 'He could not deny a pardon or a respite to a soldier condemned to die for a crime which did not involve depravity if he were to try,' said an old army officer. He shrank from the confirmation of a sentence of death in such a case as if it were a murder by his hand. 'They say that I destroy all discipline and am cruel to the army when I will not let them shoot a soldier now and then,' he said. 'But I cannot see it. If God wanted me to see it he would let me know it, and until he does I shall go on pardoning and being cruel to the end.' An old friend called by appointment, and found him with a pile of records of courts-martial before him for approval. 'Go away, Swett!' he exclaimed, with intense impatience. 'To-morrow is butchering day, and I will not be interrupted until I have found excuses for saving the lives of these poor fellows!' Many pages might be filled with authentic illustrations of his tenderness and mercy, for they were prominent in his official life. Three times I assisted in procuring their exercise, each to the saving of a soldier, and each time he shared our own delight over our success, though he knew not how his face shone when he felt that he had spared a human life."

The main fact of the story published in this book has been told with varying details in many versions. It is related here as it has been set down by one who bore an active part. Mr. Chittenden's *Recollections of President Lincoln and His Administration* has taken rank as one of the most valuable of the volumes of personal reminiscence of Abraham Lincoln in the war period. Mr. Chittenden's narrative of "The Sleeping Sentinel" represents the truth of history.

Lincoln and the Sleeping Sentinel

I

HE truth is always and everywhere attractive. The child loves, and never outgrows its love, for a real true story. The story of this young soldier, as it was presented to me, so touchingly reveals some of the kindlier qualities of the President's character that it seldom fails to charm those to whom it is related. I shall give its facts as I understood them, and I think I can guarantee their general accuracy.

On a dark September morning in 1861, when I reached my office I found waiting there a party of soldiers, none of whom I personally knew. They were greatly excited, all speaking at the same time, and consequently unintelligible. One of them wore the bars of a captain. I said to them pleasantly: "Boys, I cannot understand you. Pray, let your captain say what you want and what I can do for you." They complied, and the captain put me in possession of the following facts:

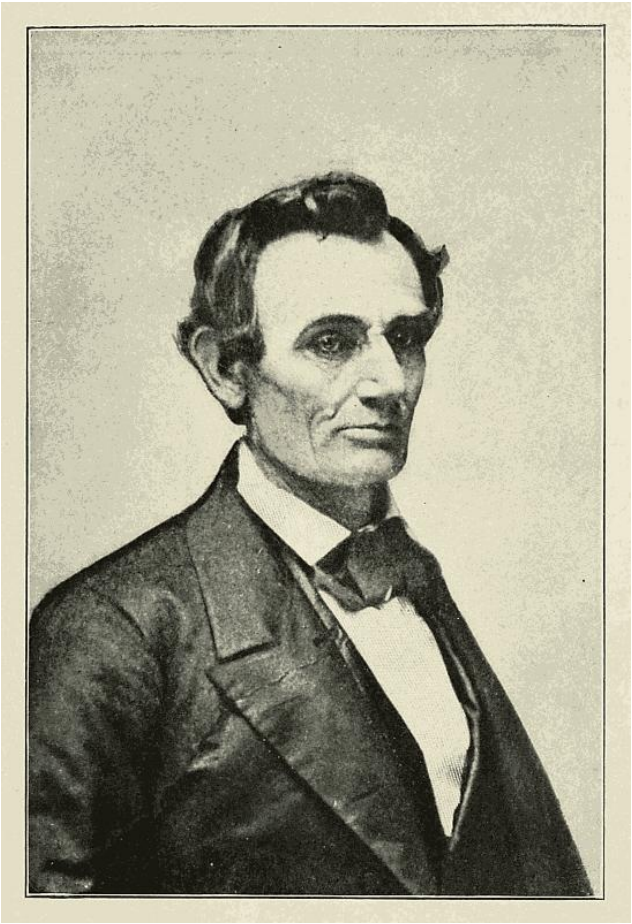
They belonged to the Third Vermont Regiment, raised, with the exception of one company, on the eastern slope of the Green Mountains, and mustered into service while the battle of Bull Run was progressing. They were immediately sent to Washington, and since their arrival, during the last days of July, had been stationed at the Chain Bridge, some three miles above Georgetown. Company K, to which most of them belonged, was largely made up of farmer boys, many of them still in their minority.

The sterile flanks of the mountains of Vermont have, to some extent, been abandoned for the more fertile regions of the West, and are now open to immigration from the more barren soils of Scandinavia and the Alps. Fifty years ago these Vermont mountains reared men who have since left their impress upon the enterprise of the world. The hard conditions of life in these mountains then required the most unbroken regularity in the continuous struggle for existence. To rise and retire with the sun, working through all the hours of daylight, sleeping through all the hours of night, was the universal rule. Such industry, practised from childhood, united to a thrift and economy no longer known in the republic, enabled the Vermonter to pay his taxes and train up his family in obedience to the laws of God and his country. Nowhere under the sun were charity, benevolence, mutual help, and similar virtues more finely developed or universally practised than among these hard-handed, kind-hearted mountaineers.

The story which I extracted from the "boys" was, in substance, this: William Scott, one of these mountain boys, just of age, had enlisted in Company K. Accustomed to his regular sound and healthy sleep, not yet inured to the life of the camp, he had volunteered to take the place of a sick comrade who had been detailed for picket duty, and had passed the night as a sentinel on guard. The next day he was himself detailed for the same duty, and undertook its performance. But he found it impossible to keep awake for two nights in succession, and had been found by the relief sound asleep on his post. For this offence he had been tried by a court-martial, found guilty, and sentenced to be shot within twenty-four hours after his trial, and on the second morning after his offence was committed.

Scott's comrades had set about saving him in a characteristic way. They had called a meeting, appointed a committee, with power to use all the resources of the regiment in his behalf. Strangers in Washington, the committee had resolved to call on me for advice, because I was a Vermonter, and they had already marched from the camp to my office since daylight that morning.

The captain took all the blame from Scott upon himself. Scott's mother opposed his enlistment on the ground of his inexperience, and had only consented on the captain's promise to look after him as if he were his own son. This he had wholly failed to do. He must have been asleep or stupid himself, he said, when he paid no attention to the boy's statement that he had fallen asleep during the day, and feared he could not keep awake the second night on picket. Instead of sending some one, or going himself in Scott's place, as he should, he had let him go to his death. He alone was guilty—"if any one ought to be shot, I am the fellow, and everybody at home would have the right to say so. There must be some way to save him, Judge!" (They all called me Judge.) "He is as good a boy as there is in the army, and he ain't to blame. You will help us, now, won't you?" he said, almost with tears.



LINCOLN IN 1857

From a photograph in the collection of Charles Carleton Coffin

The other members of the committee had a definite if not a practicable plan. They insisted that Scott had not been tried, and gave this account of the proceeding. He was asked what he had to say to the charge, and said he would tell them just how it all happened. He had never been up all night that he remembered. He was “all beat out” by the night before, and knew he should have a hard fight to keep awake; he thought of hiring one of the boys to go in his place, but they might think he was afraid to do his duty, and he decided to “chance it.” Twice he went to sleep and woke himself while he was marching, and then—he could not tell anything about it—all he knew was that he was sound asleep when the guard came. It was very wrong, he knew. He wanted to be a good soldier and do all his duty. What else did he enlist for? They could shoot him, and perhaps they ought to, but he could not have tried harder; and if he was in the same place again he could no more help going to sleep than he could fly.

One must have been made of sterner stuff than I was not to be touched by the earnest manner with which these men offered to devote even their farms to the aid of their comrade. The captain and the others had no need of words to express their emotions. I saw that the situation was surrounded by difficulties of which they knew nothing. They had subscribed a sum of money to pay counsel, and offered to pledge their credit to any amount necessary to secure him a fair trial.

“Put up your money,” I said. “It will be long after this when one of my name takes money for helping a Vermont soldier. I know facts which touch this case of which you know nothing. I fear that nothing effectual can be done for your comrade. The courts and lawyers can do nothing. I fear that we can do no more; but we can try.”

I must digress here to say that the Chain Bridge across the Potomac was one of the positions upon which the safety of Washington depended. The Confederates had fortified the approach to it on the Virginia side, and the Federals on the hills of Maryland opposite. Here, for months, the opposing forces had confronted each other. There had been no fighting; the men, and even the officers, had gradually contracted an intimacy, and, having nothing better to do, had swapped stories and other property until they had come to live upon the footing of good neighbors rather than mortal enemies. This relation was equally inconsistent with the safety of Washington and the stern discipline of war. Its discovery had excited alarm, and immediate measures were taken to break it up. General W. F. Smith, better known as “Baldy” Smith, had been appointed colonel of the Third Vermont Regiment, placed in command of the post, and undertook to correct the irregularity.

General Smith, a Vermonter by birth, a West-Pointer by education, was a soldier from spur to crown. Possibly he had natural sympathies, but they were so subordinated to the demands of his profession that they might as well not have existed. He regarded a soldier as so much valuable material, to be used with economy, like powder and lead, to the best advantage. The soldier was not worth much to him until his individuality was suppressed and converted into the unit of an army. He must be taught obedience; discipline must never be relaxed. In the demoralization which existed at the Chain Bridge, in his opinion, the occasional execution of a soldier would tend to enforce discipline, and in the end promote economy of life. He had issued orders declaring the penalty of death for military offences, among others that of a sentinel sleeping upon his post. His orders were made to be obeyed. Scott was, apparently, their first victim. It went without saying that any appeal in his behalf to General Smith would lead to nothing but loss of time.

II

THE more I reflected upon what I was to do, the more hopeless the case appeared. Thought was useless. I must act upon impulse or I should not act at all. “Come,” I said, “there is only one man on earth who can save your comrade. Fortunately, he is the best man on the continent. We will go to President Lincoln.”

I went swiftly out of the Treasury over to the White House, and up the stairway to the little office where the President was writing. The boys followed in a procession. I did not give the thought time to get any hold on me that I, an officer of the government, was committing an impropriety in thus rushing a matter upon the President’s attention. The President was the first to speak.

“What is this?” he asked. “An expedition to kidnap somebody, or to get another brigadier appointed, or for a furlough to go home to vote? I cannot do it, gentlemen. Brigadiers are thicker than drum-majors, and I couldn’t get a furlough for myself if I asked it from the War Department.”

There was hope in the tone in which he spoke. I went straight to my point. “Mr. President,” I said, “these men want nothing for themselves. They are Green Mountain boys of the Third Vermont, who have come to stay as long as you need good soldiers. They don’t want promotion until they earn it. But they do want something that you alone can give them—the life of a comrade.”

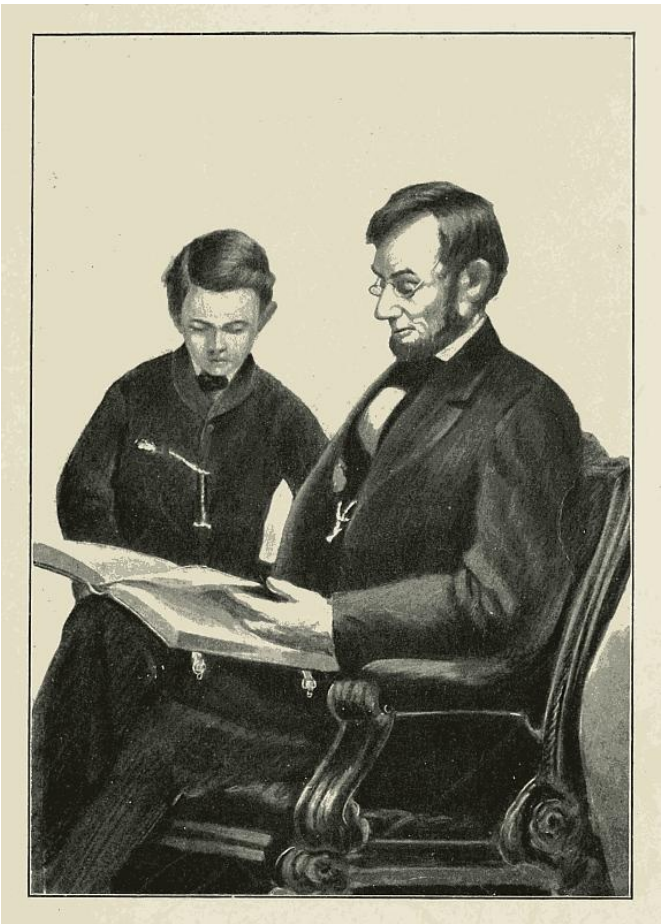
“What has he done?” asked the President. “You Vermonters are not a bad lot, generally. Has he committed murder or mutiny, or what other felony?”

“Tell him,” I whispered to the captain.

“I cannot! I cannot! I should stammer like a fool! You can do it better!”

“Captain,” I said, pushing him forward, “Scott’s life depends on you. You must tell the President the story. I only know it from hearsay.”

He commenced like the man by the Sea of Galilee, who had an impediment in his speech; but very soon the string of his tongue was loosened, and he spoke plain. He began to word-paint a picture with the hand of a master. As the words burst from his lips they stirred my own blood. He gave a graphic account of the whole story, and ended by saying: “He is as brave a boy as there is in your army, sir. Scott is no coward. Our mountains breed no cowards. They are the homes of thirty thousand men who voted for Abraham Lincoln. They will not be able to see that the best thing to be done with William Scott will be to shoot him like a traitor and bury him like a dog! Oh, Mr. Lincoln, can you?”



LINCOLN AND HIS SON THOMAS, KNOWN AS “TAD”

From a photograph by Brady

“No, I can’t!” exclaimed the President. It was one of the moments when his countenance became such a remarkable study. It had become very earnest as the captain rose with his subject; then it took on that melancholy expression which, later in his life, became so infinitely touching. I thought I could detect a mist in the deep cavities of his eyes. Then, in a flash, there was a total change. He smiled, and finally broke into a hearty laugh, as he asked me:

“Do your Green Mountain boys fight as well as they talk? If they do, I don’t wonder at the legends about Ethan Allen.” Then his face softened as he said: “But what can I do? What do you expect me to do? As you know, I have not much influence with the departments?”

“I have not thought the matter out,” I said. “I feel a deep interest in saving young Scott’s life. I think I knew the boy’s father. It is useless to apply to General Smith. An application to the Secretary of War would only be referred to General Smith. The only thing to be done was to apply to you. It seems to me that if you would sign an order suspending Scott’s execution until his friends can have his case examined, I might carry it to the War Department, and so insure the delivery of the order to General Smith to-day through the regular channels of the War Office.”

“No! I do not think that course would be safe. You do not know these officers of the regular army. They are a law unto themselves. They sincerely think that it is good policy occasionally to shoot a soldier. I can see it, where a soldier deserts or commits a crime, but I cannot in such a case as Scott’s. They say that I am always interfering with the discipline of the army and being cruel to the soldiers. Well, I can’t help it, so I shall have to go right on doing wrong. I do not think an honest, brave soldier, conscious of no crime but sleeping when he was weary, ought to be shot or hung. The country has better uses for him.”

“Captain,” continued the President, “your boy shall not be shot—that is, not to-morrow, nor until I know more about his case.” To me he said: “I will have to attend to this matter myself. I have for some time intended to go up to the Chain Bridge. I will do so to-day. I shall then know that there is no mistake in suspending the execution.”

I remarked that he was undertaking a burden which we had no right to impose; that it was asking too much of the President in behalf of a private soldier.

“Scott’s life is as valuable to him as that of any person in the land,” he said. “You remember the remark of a Scotchman about the head of a nobleman who was decapitated. ‘It was a small matter of a head, but it was valuable to him, poor fellow, for it was the only one he had.’”

I saw that remonstrance was vain. I suppressed the rising gratitude of the soldiers, and we took our leave. Two members of “the committee” remained to watch events in the city, while the others returned to carry the news of their success to Scott and to the camp. Later in the day the two members reported that the President had started in the direction of the camp; that their work here was ended, and they proposed to return to their quarters.

III

WITHIN a day or two the newspapers reported that a soldier, sentenced to be shot for sleeping on his post, had been pardoned by the President and returned to his regiment. Other duties pressed me, and it was December before I heard anything further from Scott. Then another elderly soldier of the same company, whose health had failed, and who was arranging for his own discharge, called upon me, and I made inquiry about Scott. The soldier gave an enthusiastic account of him. He was in splendid health, was very athletic, popular with everybody, and had the reputation of being the best all-around soldier in the company, if not in the regiment. His mate was the elderly soldier who had visited me with the party in September, who would be able to tell me all about him. To him I sent a message, asking him to see me when he was next in the city. His name was Ellis or Evans.

Not long afterward he called at my office, and, as his leave permitted, I kept him overnight at my house, and gathered from him the following facts about Scott. He said that, as we supposed, the President went to the camp, had a long conversation with Scott, at the end of which he was sent back to his company a free man. The President had given him a paper, which he preserved very carefully, which was supposed to be his discharge from the sentence. A regular order for his pardon had been read in the presence of the regiment, signed by General McClellan, but every one knew that his life had been saved by the President.

From that day Scott was the most industrious man in the company. He was always at work, generally helping some other soldier. His arms and his dress were neat and cleanly; he took charge of policing the company’s quarters; was never absent at roll-call, unless he was sent away, and always on hand if there was any work to be done. He was very strong, and practised feats of strength until he could pick up a man lying on the ground and carry him away on his shoulders. He was of great use in the hospital, and in all the serious cases sought employment as a nurse, because it trained him in night-work and keeping awake at night. He soon attracted attention. He was offered promotion, which, for some reason, he declined.

It was a long time before he would speak of his interview with Mr. Lincoln. One night, when he had received a long letter from home, Scott opened his heart and told Evans the story.

Scott said: “The President was the kindest man I had ever seen; I knew him at once by a Lincoln medal I had long worn. I was scared at first, for I had never before talked with a great man. But Mr. Lincoln was so easy with me, so gentle, that I soon forgot my fright. He asked me all about the people at home, the neighbors, the farm, and where I went to school, and who my school-mates were. Then he asked me about mother, and how she looked, and I was glad I could take her photograph from my bosom and show it to him. He said how thankful I ought to be that my mother still lived, and how, if he was in my place, he would try to make her a proud mother, and never cause her a sorrow or a tear. I cannot remember it all, but every word was so kind.

LINCOLN

From the statue by Augustus St. Gaudens, at Lincoln Park, Chicago

“He had said nothing yet about that dreadful next morning. I thought it must be that he was so kind-hearted that he didn’t like to speak of it. But why did he say so much about my mother, and my not causing her a sorrow or a tear, when I knew that I must die the next morning? But I supposed that was something that would have to go unexplained, and so I determined to brace up and tell him that I did not feel a bit guilty, and ask him wouldn’t he fix it so that the firing-party would not be from our regiment! That was going to be the hardest of all—to die by the hands of my comrades. Just as I was going to ask him this favor he stood up, and he says to me: ‘My boy, stand up here and look me in the face.’ I did as he bade me. ‘My boy,’ he said, ‘you are not going to be shot to-morrow. I believe you when you tell me that you could not keep awake. I am going to trust you, and send you back to your regiment. But I have been put to a good deal of trouble on your account. I have had to come up here from Washington when I have got a great deal to do; and what I want to know is, how you are going to pay my bill?’ There was a big lump in my throat; I could scarcely speak. I had expected to die, you see, and had kind of got used to thinking that way. To have it all changed in a minute! But I got it crowded down, and managed to say, ‘I am grateful, Mr. Lincoln! I hope I am as grateful as ever a man can be to you for saving my life. But it comes upon me sudden and unexpected like. I didn’t lay out for it at all. But there is some way to pay you, and I will find it after a little. There is the bounty in the savings-bank. I guess we could borrow some money on the mortgage of the farm. There was my pay, which was something, and if he would wait until pay-day I was sure the boys would help, so I thought we could make it up, if it wasn’t more than five or six hundred dollars.’ ‘But it is a great deal more than that,’ he said. Then I said I didn’t just see how, but I was sure I would find some way—if I lived.

“Then Mr. Lincoln put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my face as if he was sorry, and said: ‘My boy, my bill is a very large one. Your friends cannot pay it, nor your bounty, nor the farm, nor all your comrades! There is only one man in all the world who can pay it, and his name is William Scott! If from this day William Scott does his duty, so that, if I was there when he comes to die, he can look me in the face as he does now, and say, ‘I have kept my promise, and I have done my duty as a soldier,’ then my debt will be paid. Will you make that promise and try to keep it?’

“I said I would make the promise, and, with God’s help, I would keep it. I could not say any more. I wanted to tell him how hard I would try to do all he wanted; but the words would not come, so I had to let it all go unsaid. He went away, out of my sight forever. I know I shall never see him again; but may God forget me if I ever forget his kind words or my promise.”

This was the end of the story of Evans, who got his discharge, and went home at the close of the year. I heard from Scott occasionally afterward. He was gaining a wonderful reputation as an athlete. He was the strongest man in the regiment. The regiment was engaged in two or three reconnoissances in force, in which he performed the most exposed service with singular bravery. If any man was in trouble, Scott was his good Samaritan; if any soldier was sick, Scott was his nurse. He was ready to volunteer for any extra service or labor—he had done some difficult and useful scouting. He still refused promotion, saying that he had done nothing worthy of it. The final result was that he was the general favorite of all his comrades, the most popular man in the regiment, and modest, unassuming, and unspoiled by his success.

IV

THE next scene in this drama opens on the Peninsula, between the York and the James rivers, in March, 1862. The sluggish Warwick River runs from its source, near Yorktown, across the Peninsula to its discharge. It formed at that time a line of defence, which had been fortified by General Magruder, and was held by him with a force of some twelve thousand Confederates. Yorktown was an important position to the Confederates.

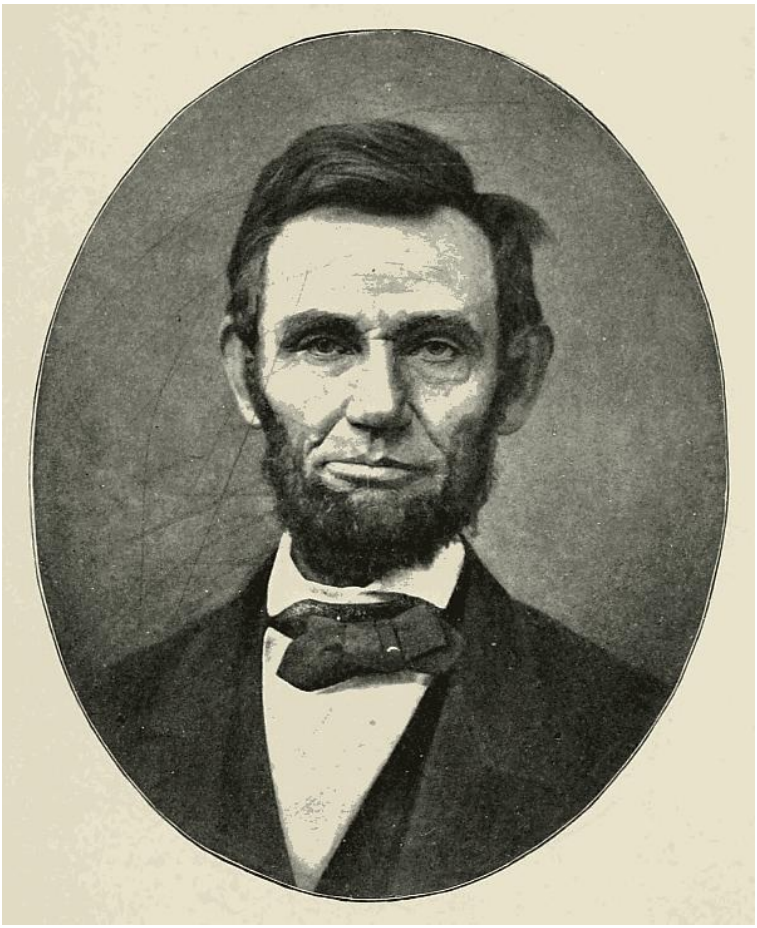
On April 15th the division of General Smith was ordered to stop the enemy's work on the intrenchments at Lee's Mills, the strongest position on the Warwick River. His force consisted of the Vermont brigade of five regiments and three batteries of artillery. After a lively skirmish, which occupied the greater part of the forenoon, this order was executed, and should have ended the movement.

But about noon General McClellan with his staff, including the French princes, came upon the scene, and ordered General Smith to assault and capture the rebel works on the opposite bank. Some discretion was given to General Smith, who was directed not to bring on a general engagement, but to withdraw his men if he found the defence too strong to be overcome. This discretion cost many lives when the moment came for its exercise.

General Smith disposed his forces for the assault, which was made by Companies D, E, F, and K of the Third Vermont Regiment, covered by the artillery, with the Vermont brigade in reserve. About four o'clock in the afternoon the charge was ordered. Unclasping their belts and holding their guns and cartridge-boxes above their heads, the Vermonters dashed into and across the stream at Dam Number One, the strongest position in the Confederate line, and cleared out the rifle-pits. But the earthworks were held by an overwhelming force of rebels, and proved impregnable. After a dashing attack upon them the Vermonters were repulsed, and were ordered to retire across the river. They retreated under a heavy fire, leaving nearly half their number dead or wounded in the river and on the opposite shore.

Every member of these four companies was a brave man. But all the eye-witnesses agreed that among those who in this, their first hard battle, faced death without blanching, there was none braver or more efficient than William Scott, of Company K, debtor for his own life to President Lincoln. He was almost the first to reach the south bank of the river, the first in the rifle-pits, and the last to retreat. He recrossed the river with a wounded officer on his back—he carried him to a place of safety, and returned to assist his comrades, who did not agree on the number of wounded men saved by him from drowning or capture, but all agreed that he had carried the last wounded man from the south bank, and was nearly across the stream, when the fire of the rebels was concentrated upon him; he staggered with his living burden to the shore and fell.

An account of the closing scene in the life of William Scott was given me by a wounded comrade, as he lay upon his cot in a hospital tent near Columbia College, in Washington, after the retreat of the army from the Peninsula. "He was shot all to pieces," said private H. "We carried him back, out of the line of fire, and laid him on the grass to die. His body was shot through and through, and the blood was pouring from his many wounds. But his strength was great, and such a powerful man was hard to kill. The surgeons checked the flow of blood—they said he had rallied from the shock; we laid him on a cot in a hospital tent, and the boys crowded around him, until the doctors said they must leave if he was to have any chance at all. We all knew he must die. We dropped onto the ground wherever we could, and fell into a broken slumber—wounded and well side by side. Just at daylight the word was passed that Scott wanted to see us all. We went into his tent and stood around his cot. His face was bright and his voice cheerful. 'Boys,' he said, 'I shall never see another battle. I supposed this would be my last. I haven't much to say. You all know what you can tell them at home about me. I have *tried* to do the right thing! I am almost certain you will all say *that*.' Then while his strength was failing, his life ebbing away, and we looked to see his voice sink into a whisper, his face lighted up and his voice came out natural and clear as he said: 'If any of you ever have the chance, I wish you would tell President Lincoln that I have never forgotten the kind words he said to me at the Chain Bridge; that I have tried to be a good soldier and true to the flag; that I should have paid my whole debt to him if I had lived; and that now, when I know that I am dying, I think of his kind face and thank him again, because he gave me the chance to fall like a soldier in battle, and not like a coward by the hands of my comrades.'



LINCOLN IN 1865

From a photograph by Rice

“His face, as he uttered these words, was that of a happy man. Not a groan or an expression of pain, not a word of complaint or regret, came from his lips. ‘Good-bye, boys!’ he said, cheerily. Then he closed his own eyes, crossed his hands on his breast, and—and—that was all. His face was at rest, and we all said it was beautiful. Strong men stood around his bed; they had seen their comrades fall, and had been very near to death themselves: such men are accustomed to control their feelings; but now they wept like children. One only spoke, as if to himself: ‘Thank God, I know now how a brave man dies!’

“Scott would have been satisfied to rest in the same grave with his comrades,” the wounded soldier continued. “But we wanted to know where he lay. There was a small grove of cherry-trees just in the rear of the camp, with a noble oak in its centre. At the foot of this oak we dug his grave. There we laid him, with his empty rifle and accoutrements by his side. Deep into the oak we cut the initials, ‘W.S.,’ and under it the words, ‘A brave soldier.’ Our chaplain said a short prayer. We fired a volley over his grave. Will you carry his last message to the President?”

I answered: “Yes.”

V

SOME days passed before I again met the President. When I saw him I asked if he remembered William Scott.

"Of Company K, Third Vermont Volunteers?" he answered. "Certainly I do. He was the boy that Baldy Smith wanted to shoot at the Chain Bridge. What about William Scott?"

"He is dead. He was killed on the Peninsula," I answered. "I have a message from him for you, which I have promised one of his comrades to deliver."

A look of tenderness swept over his face as he exclaimed: "Poor boy! Poor boy! And so he is dead! And he sent me a message! Well, I think I will not have it now. I will come and see you."

He kept his promise. Before many days he made one of his welcome visits to my office. He said he had come to hear Scott's message. I gave it as nearly as possible in Scott's own words. Mr. Lincoln had perfect control of his own countenance: when he chose, he could make it a blank; when he did not care to control it, his was the most readable of speaking human faces. He drew out from me all I knew about Scott and about the people among whom he lived. When I spoke of the intensity of their sympathies, especially in sorrow and trouble, as a characteristic trait of mountaineers, he interrupted me and said: "It is equally common on the prairies. It is the privilege of the poor. I know all about it from experience, and I hope I have my full share of it. Yes, I can sympathize with sorrow."

"Mr. President," I said, "I have never ceased to reproach myself for thrusting Scott's case so unceremoniously before you—for causing you to take so much trouble for a private soldier. But I gave way to an impulse—I could not endure the thought that Scott should be shot. He was a fellow-Vermonter, and I knew there was no other way to save his life."

"I advise you always to yield to such impulses," he said. "You did me as great a favor as the boy. It was a new experience for me—a study that was interesting, though I have had more to do with people of his class than any other. Did you know that Scott and I had a long visit? I was much interested in the boy. I am truly sorry that he is dead, for he was a good boy—too good a boy to be shot for obeying nature. I am glad I interfered."

"Mr. Lincoln, I wish your treatment of this matter could be written into history."

"Tut! tut!" he broke in; "none of that. By-the-way, do you remember what Jeanie Deans said to Queen Caroline when the Duke of Argyle procured her an opportunity to beg for her sister's life?"

"I remember the incident well, but not the language."

"I remember both. This is the paragraph in point: 'It is not when we sleep soft and wake merrily ourselves that we think on other people's sufferings. Our hearts are waxed light within us then, and we are for righting our ain wrangs and fighting our ain battles. But when the hour of trouble comes to the mind or to the body—and when the hour of death comes, that comes to high and low—oh, then it isna what we hae dune for oursells, but what we hae dune for others, that we think on maist pleasantly. And the thoughts that ye hae intervened to spare the puir thing's life will be sweeter in that hour, come when it may, than if a word of your mouth could hang the whole Porteous mob at the tail of ae tow.'"

THE END

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