

Si Pendleton's One Treasure Was the Valuable

Lincoln Letter

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I PENDLETON and his wife were just finishing supper when the black sedan squeaked to a stop outside of the window. Si stared incredulously, then yanked the napkin out of his collar and hastened to his feet.

"Looks like the Pendleton House is getting another customer," he said hurriedly. "You got right on eating, Stella. I'll take care of him."

Grey-haired, spare, and slightly stooped, Si shuffled out to the office. He wore no jacket, and his vest dangled open. He reached the desk just as a stout, ruddy man in tweeds pushed his way through the door. The stranger looked hot and moist. He carried a grip; and as he set it down, he asked:

"Got a room for the night?"

"Sure have!" Si answered heartily. He turned the register. "Sign your name right there, if you don't mind. It'll be a dollar a night."

The perspiring man inscribed his name—John C. Millet. As his glance rose to the entry above his own, he smiled cryptically.

"Mean to say," he asked, "you haven't had anybody stop here since August the sixteenth? That's more than a month."

Si Pendleton sighed. "Bad days," he admitted. "Ever since they built the new State Highway three miles west of here, there ain't many cars come through Pineville. Reckon business ain't been so bad in the whole ninety years this hotel's been standing here."

"Ninety years?" incredulously.

"Yep. My grandpa used to run the place. Then my father got it, and now I'm the owner. Don't know how long I'll be able to keep things going, though."

John C. Millet mumbled something in the way of consolation. He picked up his grip and started toward a door; but his eyes were suddenly held by a

framed document on the wall above the desk. It was a letter on yellowed paper.

The letter of which he'd heard in Philadelphia; which he had traveled eighty miles to see. For an instant he stared at it in simulated surprise. Then he set the grip down again and went closer to the wall. Narrowing his eyes, he read the framed note:

January 2, 1862,

Hiram Pendleton, Esq.,
Pendleton House,
Pineville, Pennsylvania.

Sir:

Let me express again my gratitude for your kindness and care during my stay at the Pendleton House. It is meeting men like you, sir, which lightens the burdens of these unhappy days. I offer you my most sincere thanks.

Yours,
A. Lincoln.

The stout traveler looked in astonishment from the yellowed letter to Si Pendleton.

"Say," he exclaimed. "How did you get this?"

Si sent bony fingers crawling back through grey hair.

"It was sent to my father," he explained. "Reckon it's about the nicest heirloom we've got."

"I should say it is!" Millet agreed. "I imagine the thing must be worth something."

Si nodded. "I been offered as much as fifty dollars for it," he confessed. "But shucks, my wife and I wouldn't part with it."

Fifty dollars! John C. Millet knew where he could easily get two hundred and fifty for it.

"How'd your father come to get it?" he asked casually.

"Well—" Si looked at the frame. "It's a story you'll never find in history books, Mr. Millet. The way Dad used to tell it, old Abe Lincoln came

through this part of the state on his way to Philadelphia. It was winter, and he'd caught a mighty bad cold. When he got here he was sniffin' and feverish and altogether in a bad way. There were two other men with him—a Cabinet member and a doctor—and they were scared about the news of this Lincoln sickness getting out. The country was panicky enough in those days. If there'd been a rumor that Mr. Lincoln was in danger, it might have cracked the courage of quite a few people. Well, seems like my father played nurse to Mr. Lincoln. Kept him here two days and tended him personally every minute of the time. He never hardly slept. In fact, he waited on Mr. Lincoln until the President was completely over his cold. After the President left—about two weeks later—this letter came. We've kept it ever since."

John C. Millet turned back to the document. He studied it closely. He had seen scores of samples of Lincoln's handwriting. This, indubitably, was an authentic relic. A collector's item. And it was clear that Si Pendleton had no accurate idea of its value.

"I'll give you sixty dollars for it," suddenly offered Millet.

"Eh?" in surprise. Si blinked. "Why—no-o. I don't think—"

"Seventy-five!"

Si Pendleton parted his lips. "You mean that, mister?"

"I certainly do! Seventy-five dollars in cash."

Si stood dazed. He rubbed his chin, while his startled eyes traveled from Millet to the framed letter and back again.

"Well, that's a good bit of money," he finally said, hesitating. "If you'll just wait a minute, Mr. Millet, I'll talk to my wife. After all, seventy-five dollars is something to think about these lean days. I don't mind telling you it's more than we've ever been offered before."

"Go on. Talk to your wife," Millet urged.

SI hurried into the dining room excitedly to tell Stella of the offer.

While he waited, John Millet peered again at the framed letter. His hands were clasped behind his back. There was about him the intentness of a connoisseur. The longer he studied the document, the more shrewdly he smiled.

But he became instantly grave when Si Pendleton returned, hesitantly rubbing his chin. Stella, looking exceedingly worried, followed him.

"Well," said Si. "I talked to my wife. She kind of agrees that maybe I ought to sell at that price, conditions being what they are. But I give you my word, Mr. Millet, if times weren't so bad, I'd never let that letter out of the family. We're mighty proud of it."

John C. Millet was already drawing a wallet from his pocket. He smiled broadly, encouragingly.

"Lot of people," he assured Si, "have been selling family treasures this year. We've come to a time when cash means more than anything else."

In the morning, when Millet had departed with the Lincoln letter, old Si Pendleton and his wife climbed wearily to the attic of the dilapidated hotel. There was a battered desk in a corner. From its drawer Si drew a sheet of yellowed paper.

He sat down somewhat creakily, dipped a quill pen into an inkwell, and fastened his eyes critically on the framed Lincoln letter that hung directly in front of him. As he leaned forward to write, squinting, he muttered:

"If it wasn't for this old yellow paper Pa left around and for my practisin' all winter to copy Lincoln's handwriting, gosh knows what would be happening to us this summer! Prob'ly starve. That makes four we've sold so far, Stella. These city slickers think they make suckers out of us. Yet not one of them noticed that I didn't come right out and say that Lincoln *wrote* the letter."

"A fine way to make a living," Stella bristled with self-righteousness. "I never thought I'd see the day when you could write anything worth seventy-five dollars!"