

Collier's

May 4, 1940

Hull of the Hills

By Walter Davenport



Uncle Billy said his boy Cord wasn't rough enough to be a lumberman, wasn't sociable enough to be a doctor, couldn't holler loud enough to be a preacher. But Cord, said Uncle Billy, was a right thorough thinker. That might make him President

THE nearer we got to Carthage, Tennessee, the less sure we were that we had come to the right place. At Difficult and Defeated, two branch-water slow-ups off the Nashville-Knoxville highway, they told us that they'd heard that Cord Hull had gone a mite flighty. When we argued that flightiness was not one of the generally recognized characteristics of our Secretary of State they showed us several newspaper photographs of "Uncle Billy's Boy," all of which presented the Honorable Cordell Hull holding a high silk hat. There was a distinct feeling that when a man got to that place in life when he would wear a silk hat, there should be no call for him to take it off to anybody. Yet behold. There was Cord Hull standing at the depot in Washington City, silk hat in hand, making howdy to some fancy feller—likely a French foreigner.

OldMagazineArticles.com

2 Hull of the Hills



Mrs. Cordell Hull with Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles at the Jackson Day dinner.

Mrs. Hull is one of the most self-effacing of statesmen's wives in Washington

At Pushtight and Samson's Well they hadn't heard that Mr. Hull had gone flighty but they did feel that it was too bad that his pa—Uncle Billy Hull—was dead. Uncle Billy would have read in the papers or heard through the radio that Cord was writing letter notes to European foreigners and was not getting any pen-and-ink answers. Uncle Billy'd have put a stop to that. If a man didn't answer you first time—the hell with him. Except if the man owed you money.

If a man owed Uncle Billy money, Uncle Billy'd have gone right down to see that man and get it. Or else. And if the man wanted to make something out of it, Uncle Billy'd help him make it. Nope, if you wrote a polite letter to a man and he didn't answer it like you wrote it, the hell with him. If a man ain't a man first time, that's his fault; if there's a second time that's your fault. Cord Hull was giving folks who aimed to be a skunk too many chances to prove it.

And everybody in the Tennessee Cumberlands knew that Uncle Billy trained Cord right. Once one of the Thwaites over near Nameless owed Uncle Billy three dollars and fifty cents. Uncle Billy was about to go over and get that three dollars and fifty cents but suddenly thought it would be good experience for Cord, who was about fifteen at the time. So he sent Cord, telling him to be back with the money that night or pay it himself. Cord got it. And it wasn't his own money either, because Cord wasn't a bit that way with his own money. If Cord was elected President there wouldn't be no more talk about eeeconomy. No use talking no more about what you got plenty of. If Cord Hull was nothing else, he was right careful about money. Got that from his pa—Uncle Billy—who left Cord close to two hundred thousand dollars.

At Carthage there was a well-controlled feeling that the country could do worse than make Cord Hull President, but that it would be just as well not to expect too much of him. They told us that if we walked up Main Street we'd pass a dozen men smarter than Cord Hull. However, they added, it was hard to tell exactly how smart Cord was because he always gave you the impression that he hadn't done half as good as he was able to. In other words, they explained, it wasn't easy to say what Cord Hull couldn't do good, because if he thought the next man could do a thing better, Cord just wouldn't try that. Cord would just do something else—something he knew he could do good—and

Hull of the Hills

do it so well that folks would sort of forget what it was the other man was doing. And not that Cord would say anything about it; he'd just do it out in the open so that everybody could see him doing it. Not saying anything.

There was one man they particularly wanted us to talk to—an old-timer who had been close to Uncle Billy like a chipmunk's eyes. He knew Cord as well as Uncle Billy himself, having been Uncle Billy's best friend and the only witness at the time when Uncle Billy chopped off two of his own fingers rather than go to the hospital for an amputation like the doctor wanted. They told us that we couldn't miss him if we saw him because he looked "like the caution sign on the strychnine bottle." But we missed him, learning later that he had gone home to bed after an all-night wrangle about the Hayes-Tilden presidential campaign with a Yankee from Kentucky.

Nevertheless, we got our ears filled with most of what Smith, Jackson, Pickett and Fentress counties had to say about Cordell Hull; and it struck us as curiously little until we began to realize that he is a man of few parts, well-rounded. As you prowl about Ohio seeking intimate pictures of Robert Alphonso Taft, who is very eager to be the Republican candidate for President, and hear more about Senator Taft's brother, Charles P., so in Tennessee you hear much more about Uncle Billy Hull, father of the gentleman who gives no sign whatever of wanting to be the Democratic candidate. And yet they may face each other in the fall.

Not the Colorful Type

Like Mr. Taft, Mr. Hull seems to have no hobbies. Like the senator, he'd rather work than play—was always that way. As Mr. Taft asks for nothing merrier than a large roomful of industrial statistics garnished with graphs, Mr. Hull is happiest when presented with a few nice, fresh, fat volumes of foreign-trade problems with an unmade tariff bill to tune up on. Cordell Hull a fisherman? Noooo, Cord's no fisherman. A hunter? Noooo, Cord Hull's no hand with a gun. Now Uncle Billy—well Uncle Billy was a direct-acting man. Shake his hand and you got yours shaken back; draw on him and you got drawn on. Roughlike, now and then, but aimed to be a gentleman. Didn't weigh more than a hundred and forty and dressed like the only clothes he had weren't worth throwing away. Walked like somebody was holding him back by one arm—sideways like. That's because he had an eye shot out by one of the Stepp boys over at Mrs. Cindy Lovelace's farm. Quarreled about something—some say it was about a hog-huntin' rifle. Stepp boys—Jim and Dave—just opened up on Uncle Billy and his friend Alec Smith. Killed Alec. One bullet got Uncle Billy on the side of the nose under his right eye. It came out the back of his head. They'd have liked to finish Uncle Billy if Cindy hadn't flopped herself down on him yelling he was dead already. That's where those Stepp boys made a mistake.

Billy wasn't dead. When he was feeling better he went out looking for the Stepp boys, figuring to see about it. Found Jim Stepp sitting on a fence on a farm in Kentucky and Jim said howdy. But Uncle Billy wasn't feeling howdy and Jim lit out. Uncle Billy shot him between the shoulders and plugged him dead for luck.

There are a variety of versions of the

Hull of the Hills

story, but this seems to be the generally accepted one. Anyway, Uncle Billy wasn't much of a hand on taking chances. Uncle Billy came back to Tennessee then and folks said some things just can't be helped so there was no more said about it. But Cord? Noooo, Cord's no hand with a gun.

Understand, we're making no predictions. Maybe Cordell Hull will stick to his determination not to be his party's candidate. And perhaps Senator Taft won't be nominated. But if they're picked to fight it out you need expect no sniping, grenade throwing nor other such snappy dueling; it will be a battle of big guns solemnly booming now and then with the side with the most ammunition winning. A grave, professorial theorist lately come at fifty into the political rowdydow against an old-timer realist who's seen everything and doesn't think much of it. Cordell Hull is sixty-nine and has been in the political racket forty-eight years. Noooo, Cord Hull's no hand at getting flustered no matter which-a-way it turns out. And, noooo, he don't play golf games or drink whisky that's been mixed with something to whittle it down to boys' size. But the Cumberlands reckon that if he comes out anywheres second-best, it's because second-best's the paying end of the bargain. They tell you of the advice that his pa—Uncle Billy—gave him.

"Cord," said Uncle Billy just after Cord came out of law school, "there's bargains everywhere—in the woods, in the store, in the lawyer's office. Never buy anything you don't want unless you can get it for no more'n half what it's worth."

Now Uncle Billy, he'd make a right good President. Uncle Billy'd drink right out of a tin cup off the White House dinner table. Not that Cord ain't got his playful side.

A Marvel at Poker

There are those who will venture that he's the best poker player in Tennessee. Others go further, vowing that his equal isn't to be found in the wide world. Mr. Hull has been back to Smith County but once since Mr. Roosevelt made him his Secretary of State. It was in 1935. Cord just dropped in upon Carthage like a traveling salesman and took a room at Carrie Chapman's hotel. Then he walked up to the county courthouse where the boys were talking about the Hayes-Tilden campaign and how the Democrats were robbed by the Yankee Republicans. Cord listened some and talked some and after a while a man came up from the hotel and handed him a telegram. Cord read it, stuffed it into his pants pocket and went right on listening some, talking some and chewing tobacco.

After supper the boys sat down for a little poker and Cord took a hand. At three in the morning Cord had all the money and the boys quit, saying they'd see him that afternoon again at the courthouse. But Cord didn't say anything. He'd sat there all night dealing some, betting some, drawing some and filling some and he never unbuttoned his coat. Instead of rising like the others, Cord sat at the table all alone for another three-quarters of an hour, dealing himself a few hands of solitaire. Then he got up, pulled out that telegram, read it, swore some and went to bed, where he slept some.

He got up, ate his grits, ham and eggs and hot bread and drank four cups of coffee. Then he packed his valise and

Hull of the Hills

while the man was bringing his automobile around to the front door he walked down to see his old friend and campaign manager, Lawyer McGinness.

"Leaving, Cord?" asked Mr. McGinness.

"Yep," said Mr. Hull. "Guess I'd better. Mussolini's raising sand."

Cordell Hull is the third of Billy and Elizabeth Hull's five sons. Elizabeth was right lavish in naming her lads—Orestes, Sanadius Selwin, Cordell, Wyoming and, as if the brave lady had paused for breath, Roy. They're all gone except Cordell and Sanadius Selwin, the latter living in San Antonio where he's working for the government—the Federal Housing Administration or something kin. Known as S. S. or Nade. But Cord was his pappy's favorite, inheriting the greater part of Uncle Billy's money and being the executor of the will that Uncle Billy wrote on a page out of a school pupil's yellow notebook with pencil on the porch of Carrie Chapman's hotel. It's all as American as a barber-shop quartet.

Uncle Billy came out of Virginia just after the Civil War, married to a pretty young girl named Elizabeth Riley and looking for a place to settle down and fight. There was Indian blood in Elizabeth and the physical sign thereof is stamped upon Cordell. If you ask them in the Cumberlands what tribe's blood was in Elizabeth they'll tell you that nobody's going to law you if you say Cherokee. Anyway, Billy and Elizabeth Hull arrived at the headwaters of the Cumberland River away up near the Kentucky line owning only the clothes that covered them.

Billy Hull built a whisky still and made what the old-timers remember as Number Nine Moonshine. It was calculated to hang bells on a man's ears. With a few Number Nines inside you you could get on a mule's back, lean forward, blow your breath in the mule's face and the mule'd mind you like a hound dog, knowing that it wasn't no use. Anyway, Billy made about a thousand dollars selling Number Nine and quit the moonshine business, making it thereafter only for personal consumption and in case anyone should get sick in the night. Hell, mister, every man worth calling by name made moonshine those days.

Uncle Billy Got Along

With the money he bought a stand of poplars, logged them down the Obey and the Cumberland rivers, consigned them to the Nashville mills. With the profits he bought acres of walnut trees and more poplars. And thus he founded his considerable fortune, the bulk of which eventually went to Cordell. Some say that Uncle Billy Hull died worth three hundred thousand. Some say half a million. Anyway, he was perhaps the richest man in the Cumberland plateau.

The slabside house that Billy built still stands at Olympus, a barely breathing back-road hamlet in Pickett County. And in it Cordell was born, a nativity item that will become a major issue if he is nominated to succeed Mr. Roosevelt. But Cordell wasn't born to be a logger. Uncle Billy, seeing the signs, sent Cordell off to Professor Joe McMillin, who held forth in Celina teaching reading, writing, Latin, Greek, astronomy, surveying and geometry to whosoever came seeking enlightening at ten dollars a week and found. Cordell was not Professor McMillin's star pupil but he was one of his least frivolous.

Hull of the Hills

They'll tell how Cord, who was but fifteen when he hitchhiked over to Celina for schooling, wrote to his congressman—Benton McMillin, brother of Professor Joe—and received for his pains many fat volumes of trade and treasury statistics, surveys and arithmetic writing. Cord would read them from here to the yonder side of hell, poring over them like they were these here red hell dime novels. Got so that he wouldn't laugh at a joke unless it had figures in it. Prepped by Professor McMillin, Cord went to the National Normal University, once the pride of Lebanon, Ohio, and after a spell of law reading at Bowling Green he returned to Tennessee, where he took a six-months course at the Cumberland University Law School. He was admitted to practice when twenty years old, but got himself elected to the legislature a year later.

He was in the legislature until 1906. Then the governor appointed him to the state's circuit court. In one year of that he gave Tennessee something to remember. As a judge he was so tough on the sinful that crime lost much of its allure and nearly all of its profits.

But after a year on the bench Cordell ran for Congress and after a campaign in which he wore out three horses, busted three wheels and two sets of springs on his buggy and stunned the mountaineers with tax talk, he was elected by seventeen votes. After that, until the Harding landside in 1921, he was re-elected either without opposition or over a foe who didn't get votes enough to elect a bee to a beehive. Defeated in 1921, he became chairman of the Democratic National Committee, serving until he was returned to Congress in 1923. And there he remained until 1931, when he was elected to the United States Senate. In 1933 Mr. Roosevelt appointed him Secretary of State. That, shorn of dull detail, is the career to date of Cordell Hull. Actually there seems to be no detail. Uncle Billy always said that Cord ought to make a first-class politician because he never left a trail where he didn't want to. And others said that Cord always showed up at the right place at the right time although Cord was so respectable that any place would be the right place if he was there. Like church.

Like his pa—Uncle Billy—Cord was never a hand at churchgoing. If he felt like going to church he went to the nearest of the three Cumberland denominations—Methodist, Baptist and Christian. If there was a big revival at the Christian church, Cord would drop in and shake hands softly with the brethren. If there was special preaching at the Baptist, Cord was among those present. If a big missionary was in the Methodist pulpit, Cord would be listening.

Like Uncle Billy, too, Cord got himself a Virginia wife. She was Rose Frances Witz of Staunton, Virginia, daughter of a long-established Jewish family. Her father, shrewd like Uncle Billy, amassed an even larger fortune than Cordell Hull's pappy and she brought a healthy fortune to her husband. In the Cumberlands they say that Mrs. Hull inherited a million dollars, maybe two million. But we didn't go into that. Mrs. Hull is the only wife of any of the potential candidates for the presidential nomination—on either side—who declines firmly to frisk into the political limelight.

Lucky Spaniards

The Spanish-American War interrupted Cordell Hull's political progress

Hull of the Hills

for a spell. When it started, Cord left the Tennessee legislature without the formality of resigning, recruited a company of mountaineers on the basis of their sharpshooting, and marched off to Cuba with a hundred men as long, lean and wide-striding as he at his heels. By the time they got to Cuba the war was over, which was just as well for the other fellows. To while away their time the Tennessee sharpshooters did a spell of policing, keeping their eyes and figures in trim by shooting small objects off distant perches for the edification of the natives and to the amazement of the erstwhile enemy. But Cap'n Hull, rather magnificent in a longhorn mustache and a vast campaign hat, spent much of his time sitting in at various poker games. He won about seven thousand dollars and more than half of all the money his own regiment had. Boss poker players from all parts of America were sent for to take on the Tennessee terror—and they all walked home with their hands in their pockets and nothing else. Veterans of Cap'n Hull's command tell you that it was as hot as a red-plush undershirt in Cuba but that Cord would sit in all day and all night looking froze. Didn't sweat enough to wash the dust off a new-born tick. Every time he raked in a pot he got a little holier and sadder-looking. Tears welled in his gentle eyes as he pondered the ignorance of his fellow men.

Although he is generally conceded to be the ablest member of Mr. Roosevelt's Cabinet—better equipped for his job, better balanced, even craftier—he is by all means the most independent. His influence on the New Deal has been greater than the New Deal's influence on him. By most of Mr. Roosevelt's eager satellites he has been regarded scornfully from time to time as a home-spun hack with a one-way mind into which nothing new had entered since the turn of the century. How wrong they were they learned when several of them tried to brush him off. They complained that he didn't seem to understand what they were talking about. So did he. Among the first things the Ickeses, Moleys and Corcorans learned when they turned to New Dealing was to let Uncle Billy's boy alone. Once Mr. Ickes tangled with Mr. Hull (helium) and once Mr. Moley essayed to teach the old man the true principles of internationalism. Mr. Moley never did get properly on his political feet again.

Two former Secretaries of State—Henry L. Stimson and Charles E. Hughes—think he's a great man. And they ought to know, having been themselves masters of the job. An economist of the old conservative school, he has frequently applied his favorite epithet to the gadfly variety with which Washington has buzzed during the past seven years—a vulgar variant of pismire. Always at heart a free trader, high-tariff legislation enrages him. In the mountains they tell you that, properly aroused, Cord Hull can cuss a mule bow-legged. He keeps his tongue in practice on the Smoot-Hawley Act, which, he says, was responsible for the depression.

For years he had been advocating multilateral trade agreements. Mr. Roosevelt, inviting him into the Cabinet, told him he would have the whole-hearted backing of the White House in negotiating them. When Congress recently threatened to curb his powers in such treaty-making he overcame the menace without raising his flat, high-

Hull of the Hills

keyed voice. He talks with a lisp ("This is cowect pwocedure fo' all Cwistian countwies") and his formal speeches are not warranted to make his audiences reach for their shotguns. If he and Mr. Taft are the candidates, your emotions will not be fired nor will your sleep be disturbed by them.

He's no utilities-baiter, soaker of the rich nor labor-coddler. He believes that it will be a long time before we have a President as great as Woodrow Wilson. For seven years he has been about the only important man in Mr. Roosevelt's administration who has not weeded the word No from his vocabulary and survived. As a congressman he wrote our current income-tax legislation. He regards the National Labor Relations Board as unfair to all sides—the employer, the worker and the public. And it's his opinion that the Securities Exchange Commission requires simplification and conservative administration. At the moment he appears to be the only possible Democratic nominee to succeed Mr. Roosevelt who could expect the sincere support of both wings of the party.

At Montevideo, leading the United States delegation at his first Pan-American conference, he scandalized his own retinue and charmed the Latin-Americans by his simplicity, disdain for formality and his general lack of side. He walked humbly, talked discreetly and thought shrewdly. Later, at Buenos Aires, his sincerity, courtesy and gentle wisdom disarmed the suspicious South Americans. Deaf to the entreaties of the austere and convention-worshiping Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, he launched the conference at night on the eve of the conversations, in his carpet slippers. For a long while he sat on his bed reading some, chewing some and thinking some. Then, his suspenders dangling on his hips, his pajama coat flapping free, he scuffed off down the hall to the rooms of Dr. Francisco Castillo Najero, Mexico's ambassador to the United States, and sold that gentleman the idea of presenting, next day, the Hull Plan of Pan-American solidarity. Thus he allayed suspicion.

But whatever Cord Hull does doesn't surprise the Tennessee Cumberlands. He had a right smart pappy. Cord ain't more'n a patch on his pappy—Uncle Billy Hull. Cord, said Uncle Billy, wasn't set enough to be a schoolteacher, wasn't rough enough to be a lumberman, wasn't sociable enough to be a doctor and couldn't holler loud enough to be a preacher. But Cord, said Uncle Billy, was a right thorough thinker.

So the Cumberlands think that he'd nake a right smart President. Not naybe as good as Uncle Billy. But who would?

Collier's