

17 Willie and Tad



Abraham Lincoln was speaking from a candle-light window above the entrance to the White House balcony. A voice from the crowd below shouted up, "What shall we do with the Rebels?" Before Lincoln could say anything, another voice answered, "Hang them." And then young Tad Lincoln, who was listening, said, "Oh, no, we must hang on to them." "That's right, Tad," said his father. "We must hang on to them."

Tad was a boy who loved to have fun. He found schoolwork hard and did not learn to read until he was 12.

Some people saw the president as a plain country lawyer. They were wrong. He may have begun that way, but he was a learner, and he kept changing and growing. Abraham Lincoln was a complicated man: gifted, sophisticated, ambitious, shrewd, kindly, humorous, thoughtful, and very intelligent.

He had a rare sense of compassion. That means he not only cared deeply about others, but he suffered with each hurt they suffered. So as the war progressed he got sadder and sadder. Sometimes he had bad dreams, awful forebodings, and dark depressions.

But there was something that could always cheer him up. It was the antics of his two younger sons, Willie and Tad. They were merry boys, often mischievous, who turned the White House into a playground. Sometimes, in the middle of an important meeting, one or the other would come into Lincoln's office, climb in his lap, give him a hug, and then disappear.

Tad was really Thomas, but he wiggled so much his father nicknamed him Tadpole. One day he fired his toy cannon at members of the cabinet. Another time he was playing in the attic and discovered the controls of the White House bell system. If someone wanted a member of the White House staff he or she pulled a cord and a bell rang. Tad, of course, pulled all the bells and the place went wild. Was there a fire? An emergency? What was going on? When they discovered Tad, he was on the attic floor, laughing away. Another time he sneaked into the White House kitchen and ate up all the strawberries intended-for-a fancy dinner.



Tad and Lincoln played games together in the White House. When they played blind man's buff, the president would trip over the furniture on purpose so that Tad could escape.

Willie was quieter. He wrote poetry and liked to read, but he did his share of giggling, running through the White House corridors, and playing pranks. He had a sweet manner, and his father was especially proud

when a poem the 10-year-old wrote was published in the newspaper. Those who knew him said he was the boy who was most like his father.

Both Tad and Willie loved animals, and their parents let them turn the White House into their own kind of zoo. They had ponies, a turkey, white rabbits, kittens, a pet goat, and a dog named Jip. The boys liked to play soldier and were fascinated with the war. Lincoln often took them with him when he went to visit nearby troops. Sometimes he left them at home—or thought he did. Once, when the president was at an encampment talking to some soldiers, he saw a mule wagon heading his way. The mule drivers turned out to be Willie and Tad, and they were holding wooden swords high above their heads. Sometimes they invited their friends to parade around the president's mansion while they banged drums and blew on horns.

Now, as you might guess, this disturbed some of the distinguished visitors. The politicians and generals and cabinet members complained and said the boys were spoiled and should be spanked. But the president and his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, wouldn't consider it. Lincoln called them his "two little codgers" and often played right along with them.

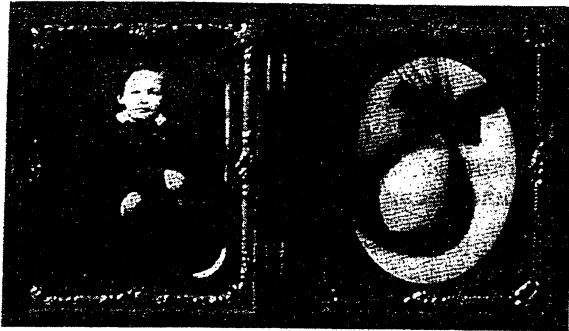
There was an older son, Robert, who was more serious and off at Harvard as a student. A fourth son, Eddie, had died at age four when they lived in Springfield, Illinois. The Lincolns never got over that loss; perhaps that was why they seemed to love their boys with such abandon.

Robert Lincoln became a lawyer and served in Chester Arthur's government as secretary of war.



Mary Todd Lincoln had a hard time as First Lady—for some she could do nothing right. One visitor said, "She stuns me with her low-necked dresses and the flower beds which she carries on top of her head."





A mourning portrait of Willie Lincoln, with a lock of his hair. When 12-year-old Willie died, his father said, "I know he is much better off in heaven, but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die!" Elizabeth Keckley, a friend of the family, wrote of Lincoln, "I never saw a man so bowed down with grief." Willie's death left his brother Tad, nine, without a playmate.

witty, she loved to talk, she often entertained, and she had a husband who loved her. She would show those Easterners. She would have a party that was fancier and finer than any before in Washington.

And so she decorated the White House, bought a beautiful dress, and sent for celebrated caterers to prepare an elegant meal. Then the boys got sick, and the president and his wife thought of canceling the party. But the invitations had been sent and the doctors didn't seem worried.

Tad got better, but Willie's fever wouldn't go away. He got weaker and weaker. The party was grand, as fine as Washington had seen. But all night long the president and his wife took turns going upstairs and sitting with Willie and putting wet towels on his head.

Although they didn't know it, Willie had typhoid fever, probably caught from the contaminated water that was a result of the overcrowding and carelessness and poor sanitary practices of wartime.

When he died—well, it is too sad to tell the details. The president and his wife had suffered a war death of their own. It was almost more than they could bear.

This cartoon was drawn at the beginning of 1863, a few months after Willie's death. The Union was doing badly in the war, Lincoln was deeply sad about Willie, and the outlook was grim. The cartoonist predicted that more government heads would roll.

