

# LINCOLN LORE

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## MRS. LINCOLN AND "YOUR SOLDIER BOY"

In the little personal notes that passed between Abraham Lincoln and his wife during the White House days, he often addressed her as "mother." It is to be regretted that she has not been allowed to occupy this reverent role in the thinking of the American people, but possibly in the atmosphere of "Mother's Day" her most ardent critics will not begrudge her this brief tribute.

There seems to have been few attempts to gather and emphasize some of the commendable things that Mary Lincoln did, and it was refreshing, indeed, to come across a brief personal reminiscence of her by Howard Glyndon appearing in *The Independent* for August 10, 1882. He writes:

"She was very generous to the sick soldiers in camp and in the hospitals around Washington. I remember many of her voluntary and unsolicited deeds of kindness, and she visited the camps and hospitals frequently. These were not the things which it suited the convenience of her defamers to have a cognizance of, or to allow to go on record. I am ashamed that today nothing of Mary Lincoln's goodness of heart in this respect nor the sums of money spent by her and by Mr. Lincoln for the sick and suffering during the war is remembered or spoken of."

A more important reference to Mrs. Lincoln's motherly attitude toward the soldiers is told in a story released in the *Chicago Times Herald* in June 1897. A reporter interviewed James H. Agen, a Civil War soldier, and learned that he had in his possession a valuable letter written to his mother. Upon being questioned for more detail about the letter Mr. Agen told the following story:

"Let me tell you a story before answering your double question: In 1864, while following Grant near Richmond, and when we had come so close to it that they could hear our muskets, and we their church bells, I was stricken with a fever and sent to hospital. In time they landed me, more dead than alive, in one of the great hospitals at Washington. I was a very sick boy. Boy is right, for that was all I was—sweet 16, as a girl of that age would be. For three weeks I had no ambition to live.

"One day, after I had passed the danger point, and was taking a little notice of what was going on, a number of ladies came through the hospital. They had baskets containing delicacies and bouquets of beautiful flowers. One of them stopped at each cot as they passed along. A bunch of blossoms was handed to each sick or wounded soldier, and if he desired it a delicacy of some kind was also distributed. Every now and then one of the women sat in a camp chair and wrote a letter for the poor fellow who hadn't the strength to write himself.

"I wanted nothing to eat or drink, but those pretty posies held my attention. One of the ladies stopped at my cot. I hadn't yet got my full growth, and in my then emaciated, pale condition I must have looked like a child. She seemed surprised as she looked at me.

"'You poor child, what brought you here?'"

"'They sent me here from the Army of the Potomac.'"

"'But you are not a soldier?'"

"'Yes, madam. I belong to a New York regiment. The surgeon here has the record.'"

"'Can I do anything for you? Can you eat something or take a swallow of wine?'"

"'I'm not hungry or thirsty.'"

"'Can I write a letter for you?'"

"'Not to-day. I'm too weak.'"

"'Then I will leave some of these flowers with you. President Lincoln helped to cull them. I will come again in two or three days. Keep up your courage. You are going to get well. You must get well.'"

"She was the first woman who had spoken to me since I had reached the army. Looking at the sweet flowers which Mr. Lincoln had 'helped to cull,' and thinking of the dear woman who had spoken so kindly and hopefully had more effect in brightening my spirits than all else that had occurred in the hospital.

"Three days later the same lady came again, and direct to my cot.

"'How is my little soldier boy to-day?' she asked in a way so motherly that it reminded me of my good mother back in New York, the patriot mother who had given her consent to my going to the war after praying over the matter many times. The hospital angel—that was what we learned to call those noble women—after giving me a taste of chicken and jelly, asked me if I had a mother. She saw by the tears in my eyes that I had.

"'Now we will write mother a letter.'"

"Then she sat by my side and wrote the letter. I hadn't been able to write for a month.

"'I have told your mother that I am near her soldier boy and have talked with him. What shall I tell her for you? That you are still too weak to write yourself?'"

"'Please don't tell her that. It will make her worry. Tell her I am fast getting well.'"

"The first day I got home my mother asked me how I liked Mrs. Lincoln, the President's wife.

"'I never met Mrs. Lincoln. What made you think I had?'"

"Then she took from a box closely guarded in an old bureau a letter. It read like this:

"'Dear Mrs. Agen: I am sitting by the side of your soldier boy. He has been quite sick, but is getting well. He tells me to say to you that he is all right. With respect for the mother of the young soldier.

"'Mrs. Abraham Lincoln.'"

"That was the first that I knew that it was the President's wife who had made me those two visits. I begged my mother to give me the letter. 'You can have it when I am gone.' When she died, a box and an old letter folded in a silk handkerchief were among her gifts to me.

"The box, kerchief and letter will pass along the Agen line as mementos too sacred for everyday display."