

LINCOLN LORE

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MRS. LINCOLN'S MENTAL COLLAPSE

Among all the burdens which Abraham Lincoln shouldered during the Civil War including executive, political and military demands, one seldom emphasized—the domestic tragedies in his own household—seems to have contributed largely to his solicitude and discomfort. Above all the personal factors which disturbed him, possibly even greater than the loss by death of his 12 year old son, Willie, was the consciousness that his brilliant and highly intellectual wife was revealing symptoms of a distraught and unstable mind. That his fears were well grounded can be observed by the tragic experiences of his wife and widow which found their climax ten years after his own death in a court pronouncement with reference to her mental collapse.

The editor of Lincoln Lore many years ago was fortunate in having an opportunity to interview Emily Todd Helm in her home near Lexington, Kentucky. She was Mary Todd Lincoln's favorite half sister and visited Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln in the White House in the fall of 1863. The previous year the Lincoln's had lost an unusually bright child, as mentioned above, and all these months Mrs. Lincoln had been grieving over this loss. In the meantime three of her brothers had been killed in war and now there had come to visit her, Emily Todd Helm, the young widow of General Ben Hardin Helm of the Confederate army.

Mrs. Helm recalled for me many incidents which occurred while she was at the White House. The one which most impressed me related to a spell of hysteria on the part of Mrs. Lincoln which she observed. "Brother Lincoln," as she called the President, came into the room during the emotional demonstration and throwing his arm gently about his wife's shoulders pleaded with her to try and compose herself as they walked to the window together. From this viewpoint Mrs. Helm stated there could be seen a sort of a private sanitarium where mentally ill people were treated. Mrs. Helm further continued that "Brother Lincoln" must have realized, as early as this episode, that his highly intelligent companion for twenty years some day might be obliged to enter such an institution.

A journal written by Mrs. Helm or "Little Emily" as Mr. Lincoln called her, mentions this visit to the White House and refers to conversation she had with the President about Mary's health at which time he expressed his deep concern for the long continued mourning period for Willie and the alarming symptoms accompanying his wife's emotional climaxes. Emily's own observation with respect to Mrs. Lincoln's strange behavior is recorded in these words, "It is unnatural and abnormal, it frightens me." Dr. W. A. Evans, possibly the best authority on Mrs. Lincoln's health said in my presence that after the death of Willie, in 1862, there were times when Mrs. Lincoln should not be held responsible for the way she acquitted herself.

None of the calamities which befell Mrs. Lincoln both socially and domestically after reaching Washington could be compared with the shock suffered by her husband's assassination as she sat by his side in Ford's Theatre on the night of April 14, 1865. For over a month she remained in the White House in a state of almost complete exhaustion. The tragic death of the President accentuated tremendously the symptoms earlier observed by her now lamented husband, after the death of the child, Willie. The heated discussion over the disposition of Mr. Lincoln's remains added fresh fuel to the newly kindled emotional flame.

Mrs. Lincoln settled in Chicago with her two remaining sons and the year following Mr. Lincoln's death she paid a visit to Springfield and while there was interviewed by William Herndon, a former law partner of Mr. Lincoln. Just what was said at this meeting we shall never know but apparently the remarks laid the foundation for a vicious attack on the President's widow by Mr. Herndon which continued as long as he lived. Three months after this interview Herndon delivered and had put in print his now famous lecture on Mr. Lincoln in which he featured a purely fictitious love affair of Lincoln and Ann Rutledge. This untrue and wholly unreliable story accentuated Mrs. Lincoln's mental condition to such an extent that for the first time Robert Lincoln, her son, is lead to comment on her serious mental disturbance.

Six years after Mr. Lincoln's assassination Thomas or "Tad," the youngest son of the Lincoln's who had been Mrs. Lincoln's constant companion during this interim, passed away in Chicago at eighteen years of age. Mrs. Lincoln lived over again in her reminiscences all the mental anguish of the other tragedies. Abraham Lincoln's widow, with her husband and three sons dead and her only surviving son married and in a home of his own, was almost alone in the world.

A few months following "Tad's" death while Mrs. Lincoln was still in deep mourning there came from the press, Lamon's *Life of Lincoln* based on the manuscripts and pieces of folklore gathered by Mr. Herndon. Not only was the Rutledge story and all its implications repeated and widely broadcasted, but a more vicious and brutal attack was made on Mrs. Lincoln by an entirely irresponsible portrayal of certain alleged incidents which never occurred, associated with the betrothal of Lincoln and Miss Todd.

The condition of Mrs. Lincoln's mind for the next few months was pitiful indeed and the necessity of protecting her against herself became evident. On May 19, 1875 with Leonard Swett and Isaac N. Arnold among the counsel, a jury declared Mrs. Lincoln insane and "a fit person to be sent to the State Hospital." The next day while preparations were being made for her removal she attempted suicide but an alert druggist prevented this act which brought to the climax her gradually approaching mental collapse.

Robert Lincoln's conclusions with respect to the cause of his mother's mental condition is set forth by David C. Mearns in his book *The Lincoln Papers* in these words, "He (Robert) probably concurred with the doctors who held that part of his mother's trouble was attributed to Herndon's lectures."

Mrs. Lincoln was later released from the Bellevue Place Sanitarium at Batavia, Ill., where she had been confined and went to live in the home of a sister in Springfield. This was in the very house where she was courted by, and later on married to Abraham Lincoln. In 1879 she suffered a fall which caused a severe spinal injury. With other physical ailments contributing to her physical suffering and with her mental ailment agitated, she was stricken with apoplexy producing paralysis. She was spared the humiliation she would have suffered in reading the further questionable deductions in *Herndon's Lincoln* about her domestic life because she died on July 16, 1882, seven years before the book appeared.