

The Son Lincoln Didn't Know

ROBERT TODD LINCOLN, the eldest son of President Abraham Lincoln, was in Washington on a special mission. He was determined to persuade his father to permit him to join the Army when he graduated from Harvard College in a few weeks.

It was late fall of 1864. Lincoln had just been re-elected to a second term as President. U. S. Grant had been put in command of the Army of the Potomac and was closing a ring about Robert E. Lee. The end of the war was in sight—and Robert Lincoln, draft-age son of the President, was still a civilian and feeling it keenly.

There had been caustic and bitter cartoons in the opposition press about "The Prince of Rails," as Bob Lincoln was derisively called. While his father enforced a draft law he considered unjust (because it permitted a draftee to avoid service by offering money or a human substitute), some newspapers were saying: "Lincoln buys his own son out of the Army while calling for new drafts of the sons of others."

For two years, Bob had wanted to leave college and join the Army. But before doing so, he wanted his father's permission, in order to avoid family scandal.

The President's permission had not been forthcoming, however, and Bob knew the reason. His father's reluctance stemmed from the fact that his mother was still grieving over the loss of Bob's brother, Willie, a sensitive, precocious child who died in the White House in 1862, when he was just 10 years old. Mary Lincoln simply couldn't bear the thought of risking the loss of another son—this time in battle.

And so Robert remained at Harvard, trying, when he could, to get the ear of his father.

THERE WAS a strange, detached relationship between the two. Bob had seen little of his father when he was growing up. When Abraham Lincoln had finally settled down to practicing law in Springfield, Ill., Bob had been sent to school in New Hampshire. Physically, Robert was short and slight, and personally he was quiet and reserved—in many ways the exact opposite of his father.

On his infrequent visits to the White House, he would sometimes observe with envy his father's easy, affectionate relationship with his two



It took Robert Todd's unexpected appearance in an unlikely place to thaw the strange coolness between him and the President

By JOSEPH N. BELL

ILLUSTRATION BY ISA BARNETT.

younger brothers, Willie and the irrepressible Tad. Once he had found 12-year-old Tad sporting a "lieutenant's commission" (given him in jest by the War Department) and imperiously drilling the White House servants at the end of a long working day, Bob ordered Tad to stop. When he refused, Bob angrily reported the incident to his father. The President dismissed it as a joke, leaving his eldest son bewildered and hurt.

Now, Robert Lincoln was in Washington determined to exact a promise that he could join the Army. He had been trying unsuccessfully to see his father all day—and the evening was denied him, too. There was a state reception for visiting diplomats, and the President would have to stand for hours in the receiving line. Bob had to return to Harvard the following morning; yet he must see his father. But how?

That evening, in the midst of the reception, the bored and distraught President—his thoughts far away on the battlefield with General Grant—was brought abruptly back to the queue of people before him. A familiar voice was saying: "Good evening, Mr. President. I wonder if I might have a few minutes of private conversation with you?"

THE DELIGHTED President couldn't believe his eyes. It was the sober, serious Robert; he had worked his way up through the long line of well-wishers to his father. For an instant, there passed between them a warmth that neither had ever fully known before. The President cuffed his son playfully on the cheek, then drew him aside from the line. They talked.

Soon after, a letter was sent from the Executive Mansion to General Grant in the field. It said in part:

"Please read and answer this letter as though I was not President but only a friend. My son, now in his 22nd year, having graduated at Harvard, wishes to see something of the war before it ends. Could he, without embarrassment to you or detriment to the service, go into your military family . . . ?"

Robert Lincoln served for the remainder of the war on Grant's staff. He won the friendship and respect of his comrades in arms.

And he not only survived the war, but the rest of his family, as well. Robert Lincoln, who died in 1926 at the age of 83, was the only son of Abraham Lincoln to reach maturity—and the last surviving male descendant of one of America's most beloved Presidents.

COVER:

Artist Homer Hill has composed love mementos against the background of a Rodgers and Hart favorite, "My Funny Valentine." On p. 12, Jerry Lewis' wife tells what life is like with her comic valentine.

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