

“...To Bind Up The Nation’s Wounds...” Lincoln’s Last Days



Act I - Scene 1: Inauguration Day, March 4, 1865

[Soundtrack: “I Vow to Thee My Country”][Lights Up]

[The scene opens with a large crowd of people gathered at the East Front of the U.S. Capitol Building to witness President Abraham Lincoln take the Oath of Office for his Second Term as the nation's Chief Executive. Among the spectators in the crowd are several key characters in the drama: Mary Todd Lincoln, Tad Lincoln, Lincoln's friend Noah Brooks, Poet Walt Whitman, John Wilkes Booth, Lewis Paine, David Herold and George Atzerodt. Booth is standing in the crowd, above and to the left of the Speaker's stand, and the conspirators Booth hired to assist him in abducting Lincoln are below the platform. Lincoln has just been sworn in as President. He is about to deliver his Second Inaugural Address. Noah Brooks steps forward to center stage in order to describe the scene.]

Noah Brooks: 'Abraham Lincoln, rising tall and gaunt among the groups about him, stepped forward to read his inaugural address, printed in two broad columns upon a single page of large paper. As he advanced from his seat, a roar of applause shook the air, and again and again repeated, finally died far away on the outer fringe of the throng, like a sweeping wave upon the shore. Just at that moment the sun, obscured all day, burst forth in its unclouded meridian splendor, and flooded the spectacle with glory and with light. Every heart beat quicker at the unexpected omen.'

President Lincoln: "...Fondly do we hope-ferverently do we pray-that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said; 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'"²

Noah Brooks: 'The President's speech was brief and eloquent, one of the most beautiful expressions of the English language. Many eyes were filled with tears as he read the magnificent closing sentence:'

President Lincoln: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan-to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

[Crowd cheers and wave flags as Lincoln concludes his speech. Lincoln exits backstage and reappears momentarily at center stage, extending his hand to Noah Brooks. As he does so, Mary Todd Lincoln, holding Tad's hand, separate themselves from the crowd and stand next to Lincoln as if waiting for their carriage to transport the Presidential family back to the White House.]

President Lincoln: There's my good friend Brooks. I am glad to see you. 'Did you notice that sunburst? It made my heart jump.'³

Noah Brooks: Yes, Mr. President, I certainly did. There was another strange occurrence, a bright star was visible in the sky. I intend to mention these things in the next dispatch I write to my newspaper, the *Sacramento Union*,⁴ describing the events of this day. The American people are anxious for any sign or reassurance that this terrible struggle will end soon; that the storm clouds of war will part-that the bright light of peace and prosperity will shine down on our united country once again.

President Lincoln: I couldn't have said it better myself, Brooks. *[Lincoln reaches out and catches his eleven-year old son Tad on the run]* And what did you think of the ceremony young man?

Tad Lincoln: I saw the sunburst too, Paw. [sic] I think all those people you were giving that speech to must have been listening. That part about widows and orphans made the ladies cry.⁵ It made me cry too, even though I'm a boy.

President Lincoln: *[thoughtfully and with affection]* Did it now? I hadn't noticed that. You see, Brooks, children notice many things their parents don't. Did I ever tell you about what happened last Christmas when a group of distinguished visitors came to call on me at the White House? They were amazed to find Tad here marching a group of hungry, ragged children into the kitchen. Do you remember Tad what you told those people that I overheard?

Tad Lincoln: *[proudly]* 'I'm fetching them for dinner.'⁶

President Lincoln: That's my boy! 'If he grows to be a man, Tad will be what women all dote on: a good provider.'⁷ Come to think of it, a year before that, Tad

came to me on Christmas Eve with an armload of books he had collected to give to the soldiers we had met when I took Tad with me to visit the camps.

Tad Lincoln: *[interrupting]* 'Do you remember how lonesome the men looked?'

President Lincoln: 'Yes, my son.' I still do. I told him to send a big box.

Tad Lincoln: Paw also told me to ask Mother for plenty of warm things and to tell Daniel our cook to pack in all the good eatables he could, and to mark the box " 'From Tad Lincoln.'" ^s

Noah Brooks: It appears to me, sir, that the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree.

Tad Lincoln: What does that mean Paw?

President Lincoln: It means that when you grow up, you will be a lot like me. *[suddenly sad]* No, Mr. Brooks, with all due respect, let us hope that Tad's life is much different than mine was. I want to give him all the things I never had. Things like toys, a good education and a home to call his own. Since his brother Willie died three years ago, poor little Tad has been very miserable.⁹

[At this point, Mary Todd Lincoln enters the conversation, putting her hand on the President's arm as if to gently lead him away. She grasps Tad's arm with her other hand in order to do the same thing. She acknowledges Noah Brooks with a slight nod of her head.]

Mary Todd Lincoln: Come now, Father, we mustn't be late for dinner or the Inaugural Ball. Tad and I have a special surprise cooked up for you.

Tad Lincoln: Oh boy! Guess what it is Paw? *[unable to control his excitement]* It's your favorite meal-chicken with gravy and biscuits. *[everyone laughs.]*

President Lincoln: 'Oh Mary, this is good. It seems like old times have come back.' Why don't you join us for dinner Brooks? With that inaugural party looming afterwards, it will turn into a long night.

[Lights slowly dim as the Lincolns and Noah Brooks exit. Couples enter the stage area and dance as if to simulate the Inaugural Ball. President Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln reenter and join the dancers by standing in a receiving line to greet their guests. Walt Whitman and Tad Lincoln enter and come to center stage.]

Walt Whitman: *[to audience]* 'I saw Mr. Lincoln, drest [sic] all in black, with white kid gloves and a claw-hammer coat, receiving, as in duty bound, shaking hands, looking very disconsolate, and as if he would give anything to be somewhere else.' *[Whitman exits]*