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For
Miss Ida M. Tarbell
from
H. O. Knerr. 10/26/96

**ABRAHAM LINCOLN
and
MATILDA EDWARDS**

by
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ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND MATILDA EDWARDS

History is full of personages whose achievements charm and dazzle the imagination. There is perhaps no name so familiar to men and nations as that of Abraham Lincoln. The perspective of more than half a century affords a view of this great character unseen by his contemporaries. Historical research has revealed and is still revealing much that was unknown to those who were privileged to associate with him. His rugged face has become one of the two or three best known in the world. John Buchan, the English historian, now Governor-general of Canada, has grandly said, "What I want to impress upon you about Lincoln is his tremendous greatness. Alone he took decisions which have altered the course of the world. When I study his career behind all the lovable, quaint, and often grotesque characteristics, what strikes me most is his immense and lonely sublimity. He conducted the ordinary business of life in phrases of homespun simplicity, for, he was a plain man, loving his fellowmen, but when the crisis came he could stand alone." That a person so mystical and inscrutable should enter into the warp and woof of our common heritage and remain an enigma, cannot fail to control and inspire us forever.

Let us unfetter fancy and wander over the old trails with a man whose humanity and greatness are the blessed heritage of a united country. In so doing, let us select the nearest approach to chronology regardless of its ramifications.

History and romance are a part of human progress and achievement. As twin sisters, they record some of the most thrilling episodes in the affairs of men. The decade of 1840 to 1850 is replete with personal accounts of social and political rivalry in the border states of the west. The facts are known to every student of American History. It was in the Spring of 1840 that the migratory spirit exerted itself, due to the lure of settling in the vast prairie lands of the new Eldorado.

Incidentally, many of the so-called squatters hailed from the Atlantic seaboard and from the cotton belt of the South. It is a singular fact that the settlers represented a diversity of traits, customs, and practices. Partisan feeling, engendered by local pride and political affiliations, prevailed, and vital issues were often at stake.

By a strange combination of circumstances, there are available some fascinating episodes of pioneer days when the agitation of the slavery question aroused discussion. The scenery shifts as we enter the arena where men of recognized ability appear in public debate. There are two outstanding orators who represent two opposing factions. The people are alert as they listen to the "Little Giant" Stephen A. Douglas and the tall and lanky Abraham Lincoln. We will not go into further details concerning those statesmen of an earlier day, but, let us hark back to Springfield, Illinois, where a future president is just entering the limelight.

There were quite a number of interesting and distinguished citizens in Springfield who were destined to link their names with the history of our country. Among them was the Hon. Ninian W. Edwards, whose uncle, Cyrus, served in the State Senate at the time the capital was transferred from Vandalia to Springfield.

THE PRESTIGE OF THE EDWARDS FAMILY

The prestige of the Edwards family, both socially and politically, had a tendency to attract many of the elite of that time. Thither came Matilda Edwards of Alton to pay an extended visit to her Cousin Ninian whose wife, Elizabeth, was a sister to Mary Todd of Lexington, Kentucky. The two young ladies, Mary Todd and Matilda Edwards, were rivals in the love affairs of the immortal Abraham Lincoln. Tradition tells us that the young ladies happened to occupy the same bed during their stay at the Edwards home. How they confided to each other the secrets of the human heart without manifesting any feelings of jealousy and resentment, we may conjecture.

It was at a cotillion party, sponsored by Mrs. Ninian Edwards that Matilda met the tall and modest young lawyer, Abraham Lincoln, whose towering personality, primitive honesty and wit endeared him to the people of Springfield. A careful scrutiny of the guests assembled there will reveal some outstanding characteristics. The girls in the new capital were almost all Kentucky belles - the prevailing type being brunettes. Matilda was a blonde, tall, willowy, and graceful. As a potential rival of Mary Todd, she was rather reserved but her charming personality served as a magnet to men like Douglas and Speed, who at one time or another proposed or hinted at marriage, but were both rejected as unworthy and unfit for such high venture.

There are many versions regarding the romance of Abraham Lincoln. The biographers have evidently misconstrued the evidence in the case. It was the fearless and trusted friend of Lincoln, Col. Ward H. Lamon, who has handed down first-hand testimony, and, there is no reason why we should not accept his version as reliable and authentic. He says in part, "The love affairs of Lincoln and Mary Todd were destined never to run smoothly. It was a season of misgivings, based on false illusions and dark forebodings. The appearance of Miss Matilda Edwards wrought havoc. She fascinated and attracted many a suitor, and when Lincoln met her he felt his heart change."

The Mary Todd affair, according to Stuart, Herndon, and Lincoln himself was a "Policy Match"; but with Miss Edwards it was love, pure and undefiled, a compelling force, a recurring dream that haunted Lincoln night and day. The fits of melancholy to which he was subject seized and controlled him for a long time. It was only after serious reflection that he concluded to render a statement to the lady from Lexington, in which he cited his reasons for cancelling his engagement to her.

[illegible]

The date known as the fatal first of January, 1841 had arrived and everything was in readiness for the wedding ceremony of Lincoln to Mary Todd, but the bridegroom failed to appear. Cause, insanity!

Herndon confidently believed that Lincoln's insanity grew out of an extraordinary complication of feelings - an aversion to the "Policy Match" and a counter attachment to Miss Edwards.

Another friend of Lincoln's, J. H. Methany, said, "After a year of unspeakable mental anguish and dismal forebodings that could not be assuaged, Lincoln faced the ordeal of marriage - going like a lamb to the slaughter." It was only after a nightmare, weird and gloomy, that he gained sufficient courage to yield to the "Policy Match".

That Lincoln hesitated so long at the brink of matrimony was due largely to his infatuation with Matilda Edwards. She was without doubt the ideal of Lincoln's unvarying affections - all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

There is something fantastic about this episode in Lincoln's life. The years of research have revealed very little concerning Matilda Edwards. It was after the close of the year 1842 that she returned to Alton where she was betrothed to the Hon. Newton D. Strong of Reading, Pennsylvania.

According to the records in our local archives, Newton D. Strong was born in Somers, Conn., in the year 1810. He acquired a thorough academic education and was graduated from Yale College in 1831. After graduating he was appointed a tutor at Yale, a position he held for two years. It was at the request of his brother, William, that he removed to Reading to assume the study of law. After his admission to the bar he practiced his profession for a few years at Easton, Penna., and then moved to Alton, Illinois, where he took a leading position among the legal counselors of that state. The years that terminated his career were spent in St. Louis, Mo. where he died, August 2, 1886. His remains were interred in the Charles Evans Cemetery at Reading, Pennsylvania.

There is very meagre data extant concerning the family life of Newton D. Strong. No children came to bless and perpetuate their name. Mrs. Strong was buried at Reading February 9, 1851, three days before the forty-second anniversary of Lincoln's birth.

The following letter from a niece of Matilda Edwards will substantiate the facts surrounding the episode in Lincoln's life.

Alton, Illinois
March 22, 1895

Dear Sir:--

Your letter to the Hayner Memorial Library has been given to me to answer as I am a granddaughter of Cyrus Edwards and a niece of Matilda Edwards Strong. Cyrus Edwards, a son of Benjamin Edwards was born in Montgomery county, Maryland, on his father's plantation, Mt. Pleasant. His boyhood and early manhood were spent there. William Wirt was a tutor in his family. Following the tide of immigration the family moved to Kentucky, where they remained but a few years. During 1817 Cyrus Edwards followed his brother Ninian, to Illinois where in 1809 he had been elected territorial governor. Cyrus Edwards was a man of commanding presence, six feet four inches tall, always elegantly dressed, a lawyer and politician. His oldest daughter, Matilda, was born at Elkton, Kentucky, August 1, 1822. She was a most fascinating and handsome girl, tall, graceful, and rather reserved. She moved at ease among the social and refined classes at Alton.

Abraham Lincoln was a frequent visitor to her father's house. It was on a visit to her cousin, Ninian, that she formed a warm friendship with Lincoln. Tradition tells us that Lincoln and Douglas were both in love with her.

Matilda Edwards married Newton D. Strong at "Woodlawn" the country home of her father near Alton. Her married life was of short duration and she had no children to bless and perpetuate her name. Somewhere among the records of the old court house at Reading, Pennsylvania, you will find more of the life of Newton D. Strong and his devoted wife, Matilda, who as a young lady exerted a powerful influence in the life of the immortal Abraham Lincoln.

Pray believe me --

Truly yours,
Alice Edwards Quigley