

THE LITERARY DIGEST

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The Dreams of Abraham Lincoln

Some of the Lincoln myths cited by the author seem to have a basis in fact, but even these, with the passage of time, have taken on a legendary nature. Lincoln, for example, on excellent authority, has been credited with prophetic dreams. This incident, cited by Mr. Lewis, is supposed to have occurred at a Cabinet meeting on the very day of his assassination:

Long-legged Lincoln eased back in his White House chair and talked informally—the meeting had not yet begun, since it must wait upon Stanton, Secretary of War, who was still bustling around the telegraph office. General Grant, who had come up from Appomattox to be Lincoln's guest at the Cabinet conference, was as solemn in victory as in battle, and told Lincoln that he was anxious about Sherman, away down in North Carolina there, face to face with General Johnston and the remaining "rebel" army. At this Lincoln spoke up, saying that things would be all right. He had had a sign.

All of the dignitaries in the room remembered later what it was that Lincoln then went on to say, altho some recalled the words a little differently from others. Some remembered that he had been very grave as he spoke, others that he had been sad, still others noted nothing unusual. Secretary of the Navy Welles, less superstitious than most men of his time, and with a memory always alert to catch the significant happenings which might be jotted down in his voluminous diary, remembered Lincoln's words like this:

"I have no doubt that favorable news will soon come, for I had, last night, my usual dream that has preceded nearly every important event of the war. I seemed to be in a singular and indescribable vessel, and to be moving with great rapidity toward a dark and indefinite shore."

As the Secretaries and the General watched, the long man talked on:

"I have had this singular dream preceding the firing on Sumter, the battles of Bull Run, Antietam, Gettysburg, Stone River [otherwise known as Murfreesboro], Vicksburg, Wilmington, and so on.

"Victory has not always followed my dream, but the event and the results have been important. I have no doubt that a battle has taken place or is about to be fought, and Johnston will be beaten, for I had this strange dream again last night. It must relate to Sherman; my thoughts are in that direction, and I know of no other important event which is likely just now to occur."

One Middle Westerner who had followed Lincoln to Washington, came forward, after the assassination, "to intensify unwittingly the supernaturalism with which the dead hero was coming to be so widely regarded." He was Ward Hill Lamon of Danville, Illinois. Of his reports, Mr. Lewis writes:

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One time, said Lamon, Mrs. Lincoln attempted to joke her husband out of a dark mood, and had been answered, in slow and measured tones: "It seems strange how much there is in the Bible about dreams. There are, I think, some sixteen chapters in the Old Testament, and four or five in the New, in which dreams are mentioned, and there are many other passages scattered throughout the Book which refer to visions. If we believe the Bible, we must accept the fact that in the old days God and His angels came to men in their sleep, and made themselves known through dreams. Nowadays dreams are regarded as very foolish and are seldom told, except by old women and by young men and maidens in love."

And when Mrs. Lincoln asked him if he believed in dreams, he answered in that slow evasiveness with which he always refused to cross any Fox River until he had come to it:

"I can't say that I do, but I had one the other night which has haunted me ever since. After it occurred, the first time I opened the Bible. Strange as it may appear, it was at the twenty-eighth chapter of Genesis, which relates that wonderful dream Jacob had. I turned to other passages and seemed to encounter a dream or a vision wherever I looked. I kept on turning the leaves of the old Book, and everywhere my eye fell upon passages recording matters strangely in keeping with my own thoughts—supernatural visitations, dreams, visions, etc."

"You frighten me," cried Mrs. Lincoln, usually on nerve's edge. "What is the matter?"

Gradually she drove him into telling of his dream.

"About ten days ago," he began, very slowly, very sadly, "I retired late. I soon began to dream. There seemed to be a death-like stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I thought I left my bed and wandered down-stairs. There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. I went from room to room; no living person was in sight, but the same mournful sounds of distress met me as I passed along.

"It was light in all the rooms; every object was familiar to me; but where were all the people who were grieving as if their hearts would break? I was puzzled and alarmed. What could be the meaning of all this? Determined to find the cause of a state of things so mysterious and so shocking, I kept on until I arrived at the East Room, which I entered. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse, wrapt in funeral vestments. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards, and there was a throng of people, some gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully. 'Who is dead in the White House?' I demanded of one of the soldiers. 'The President,' was his answer. 'He was killed by an assassin.' Then came a loud burst of grief from the crowd which awoke me from my dream. I slept no more that night; and altho it was only a dream, I have been strangely annoyed by it ever since."

*(an excerpt from a 1929 book review of **Myths After Lincoln** by Lloyd Lewis)*