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“The One I Most Prized in Life”: William T. Sherman and the Death of His Son

by Terrence J. Winschel

Union victory at Vicksburg proved to be the turning point in the Civil War, and it boosted the careers of Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman; but for the second general, it led to a personal tragedy from which he never recovered.

At three o'clock on a hot and muggy Mississippi afternoon, as white flags appeared along the Confederate defense line around Vicksburg, an eerie silence settled over the city that for the past forty-six days had been besieged by a relentless foe whose death-like grip had finally strangled its valiant defenders into submission. The date was July 3, 1863, and the silence bore stark witness that for the men who had remained steadfast through the harrowing experience of life under siege the limits of human endurance had been reached.

Riding out from the city was a cavalcade of officers in gray led by Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton. Accompanied by his most trusted subordinate, Maj. Gen. John S. Bowen, and aide Lt. Col. Louis Montgomery, the Confederate horsemen rode out along the Jackson Road and beyond the city's formidable defenses that had denied Union forces entry into Vicksburg for the past six weeks. Riding to meet them was a larger cavalcade of officers in blue led by Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the Union Army of the Tennessee, whose troops cheered wildly as he passed.

It had been a long and hard-fought campaign that led to this rendezvous with destiny for both Pemberton and Grant. As the two men and their subordinates dismounted, both were cognizant of the historical significance of this moment as it would determine the fate of a nation divided against itself. One was despondent and “much excited,” the other “calm and stolid,” betraying no emotion. A native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Pemberton's decision to seek terms of surrender was based in part on his belief that he could get favorable terms on July 4. He had assured his subordinates the night before that, “I know my

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people." In reference to Northerners, "I know their peculiar weaknesses and national vanity," he told them, and asserted that "They would yield then what could not be extorted from them at any other time." Pemberton asked Grant on what terms he would receive the surrender of the city and garrison under his command, and was visibly shaken when Grant replied that he had no terms other than an immediate and unconditional surrender. The Confederate commander snapped, "Then, sir, it is unnecessary that you and I should hold any further conversation; we will go to fighting again at once." Pemberton then angrily shook his finger in Grant's face and said, "I can assure you, sir, you will bury many more of your men before you will enter Vicksburg." They did, however, agree upon a cessation of hostilities and pledged an exchange of notes to settle on terms that were accepted the following morning.¹

Conspicuous by his absence from this meeting was Grant's most trusted subordinate and closest friend in the army, Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman. A native of Lancaster, Ohio, and West Point graduate, class of 1840, Sherman commanded the XV Corps of the Union army and had played a significant role in the campaign for Vicksburg. During the operational phase of the campaign, as Grant's army pushed deep into the interior of Mississippi, Sherman's men had captured Jackson, capital of the Magnolia State, and were the first to reach the gates of Vicksburg. But two failed assaults, on May 19 and 22, in which Sherman's corps suffered heavy loss, compelled Grant to lay siege to the city.

Desperate to save the city and its garrison, Confederate authorities ordered troops from across the South to Jackson that were organized as the Army of Relief under the command of Gen. Joseph E. Johnston. The Virginian was considered by many as the South's second most able general, and Grant held him in high esteem. To counter this threat, the Union commander requested reinforcements of his own that were sent to Vicksburg by the tens of thousands. Most of these troops were used to form what became known as the "Exterior Line" that was established to

¹ J. H. Jones, "The Rank and File at Vicksburg," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, vol. VII (Jackson, 1903), 29; Samuel Lockett, "Defense of Vicksburg," in Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols., (New York, 1884-1889), vol. III, 492 (hereinafter cited as *Battles and Leaders*.); U. S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols., (Washington, D.C., 1890-1901) series I, vol. XXIV, part I, 284-285 (hereinafter cited as O.R.; all references are to series I unless otherwise noted.); John C. Pemberton, "Terms of Surrender," *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, vol. III, 544.

protect the rear of Grant's besieging army. This formidable line of works ran from Haynes' Bluff, overlooking the Yazoo River north of Vicksburg, to the Big Black River east of the city. Grant considered defense of this line vital to the success of his operations and entrusted command of the "Exterior Line" to Sherman. Dubbing this force the Army of Observation, Sherman positioned his troops to guard the Mechanicsburg Corridor, the watershed between the Yazoo and Big Black Rivers, the area in which Johnston was most likely to approach Vicksburg. "Cump" established his headquarters at George Tribble's plantation on Bear Creek, northeast of Vicksburg. Under his command the "Exterior Line" became a formidable obstacle that helped seal the fate of Vicksburg.

Johnston was keenly aware of the situation in Vicksburg as his last communication from Pemberton, dated June 23, said he could hold out fifteen days longer if there was any hope of relief. In truth, the Virginian had already written off Vicksburg and its defending army. Indeed, shortly after his arrival in Jackson on May 13, he wired the authorities in Richmond, "I am too late." Vicksburg campaign historian Edwin C. Bearss writes, "Johnston seemed to think that disaster was inevitable, and he desired to clear himself in advance of any responsibility for it, rather than bend his energy to avert it." Although Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Secretary of War James A. Seddon sent what troops they could, which swelled Johnston's force to thirty thousand men, nothing could spur the general into action. But Johnston knew that it would be the end of his career if Vicksburg surrendered and his Army of Relief remained idle in Jackson. Still, wishing to avoid combat, he delayed until July 1 to finally set his army in motion. On the afternoon of July 3, as his vanguard was within twenty miles of the city, the guns of Vicksburg fell silent. Johnston knew all too well what the silence meant. Fearing that Grant would now turn on him, he fell back to Jackson.²

Following his meeting with Pemberton on July 3, Grant notified Sherman, "Pemberton wants conditions to march out paroled, etc. The conditions wanted are such as I cannot give; I am to submit my propositions at 10 o'clock tonight." He closed by saying, "I want Johnston broken up as effectually as possible, and [rail] roads destroyed. I cannot say where you will find the most effective place to strike; I would say move so as to strike Canton and Jackson, whichever might seem most

² O.R., Vol. XXXIV, pt. 2, p. 215; Edwin C. Bearss, *The Vicksburg Campaign*, 3 vols., (Dayton, OH: Morningside Press, 1985-1986), vol. III, 530.

desirable." Sherman's elation was unabashed: "Telegraph me the moment you have Vicksburg in possession, and I will secure all the crossings of [Big] Black River, and move on Jackson or Canton, as you may advise. If you are in Vicksburg, glory, hallelujah! The best Fourth of July since 1776." Later that afternoon Grant confidently expressed to Sherman, "There is but little doubt but the enemy will surrender to-night or in the morning; make your calculations to attack Johnston; destroy the [rail] road north of Jackson."³

In anticipation of Vicksburg's fall, Sherman prepared his force for the drive eastward. The following day, as Grant led his victorious army into Vicksburg, Sherman's legions were already en route to the Big Black. His force, increased to thirteen divisions that totaled forty-six thousand men, quickly pushed across the river and was hot on Johnston's heels. Sherman drove his men hard and closed in on Jackson on July 10. Despite the intense heat and scarcity of fresh water, the soldiers in blue had outdistanced their supply wagons. Not wishing to storm the Jackson defenses without an adequate supply of artillery ammunition, Sherman decided to lay siege to the capital city and await his supplies. The situation was still fluid on July 12 when, due to outdated orders, a reconnaissance in force turned into an attack in which the division of Brig. Gen. Jacob Lauman was badly mauled. Sherman was livid at the useless loss of life, and Lauman was cashiered for this blunder.

Over the next few days, the Federals quickly extended their lines to the left and right until they were anchored on the Pearl River above and below Jackson. Knowing that his only hope of holding Jackson was to intercept Sherman's supply train, Johnston sent his cavalry on a wide sweep north around the Union flank. But its efforts were thwarted as the wagons were escorted by a powerful brigade of infantry. The supply wagons rumbled along and reached Sherman on the evening of July 16. Knowing that the Union guns would open in the morning, Johnston ordered his army to evacuate the city. After dark, the Confederates withdrew from their works, crossed the Pearl River, and burned the bridges behind them. The following morning, the Stars and Stripes were floating in victory atop the statehouse where Mississippi's Ordinance of Secession had been passed on January 9, 1861. Although Sherman sent a small force across the river after Johnston, due to the "intense heat,

³ *O.R.*, Vol. XXIV, pt. 3, pp. 460-461; William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of William T. Sherman*, 2 vols., (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1875), vol. 1, p. 358.

dust, and fatigue of the men,” he did not launch a vigorous pursuit of Johnston’s retreating army.⁴

Flushed with victory, Sherman established his headquarters in the Governor’s Mansion and on the evening of the 18th hosted a victory dinner with his generals. “I will perfect the work of destruction,” he promised Grant. “I propose to break railroads 10 miles, south, east, and north, and out for 40 and 60 miles in spots.” In addition to the destruction of railroads, machine shops and factories were also burned and by July 20 their work of destruction was mostly finished. Leaving Jackson a smoldering ruin, Sherman and his men moved back toward Vicksburg and went into bivouac along the Big Black River.⁵

The campaign for control of the Mississippi River was over, and the “Father of Waters,” as President Abraham Lincoln expressed, “again flows unvexed to the sea.” The Confederacy was split in two. Now trapped in the coils of the giant Anaconda, the South could not long survive.

In his report on the campaign, Grant made special note of Sherman’s contribution to the victory. On July 22, he wrote directly to the president, “I would most respectfully, but urgently, recommend the promotion of Maj. Gen. W. T. Sherman, now commanding the Fifteenth Army Corps . . . to brigadier general in the Regular Army,” and cited his “great fitness for any command that it may ever become necessary to intrust to [him].” Lincoln quickly gave his approval. In the aftermath of the campaign, even the press, which had criticized Sherman relentlessly thus far during the war, looked upon him favorably. No longer was he called crazy and insane, as he had been in 1862. His name was hailed in the press and too in the halls of Congress. According to his brother John, who was a U. S. senator, Sherman’s “popularity was second only to that of Grant.”⁶

Basking in his new-found fame, following his return from Jackson, Sherman settled into camp for the remainder of the summer for some much needed rest and reorganization of his command. The troops that he had led to victory at Jackson established Camp Sherman, which covered a vast area overlooking the Big Black River northeast of Vicksburg. The general himself established his headquarters at “Woodburne,” the

⁴ *O.R.*, vol. XXIV, pt. 2, p. 528.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Henry Steele Commager, ed., *The Blue and Gray: The Story of the Civil War as Told by Participants*, 2 vols., (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), vol. 2, p. 677; *O.R.* vol. XXIV, pt. 3, p. 540; Letter, John Sherman to William T. Sherman, July 18, 1863, William T. Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

plantation home of Parson James A. Fox, that was situated about twelve miles east of Vicksburg. He referred to the headquarters as “Polliwoggle Retreat.”⁷

Although scores of his officers went home on furlough, Sherman remained with the troops. Throughout his tenure in command, Sherman frowned upon officers’ wives visiting their husbands in camp believing it harmful to discipline, but now that the great campaign for control of the Mississippi River was over, the general felt confident enough to invite his family to his new camp on the Big Black. During the siege itself when his wife Ellen and the children had pleaded to visit him, Sherman wrote to his son Willy, “I wish you could see [Vicksburg] for a minute, but it is not right for children to be here, as the danger is too great.” But now that the campaign was over, on July 12 Sherman took delight in inviting his family to visit. He assured his father-in-law, former U. S. senator and cabinet officer Thomas Ewing, that the camp was “one of the best possible,” that it “combines comfort, retirement, safety, and beauty” and that he had “no apprehensions on the score of health.” Ellen and the children were thrilled to receive his invitation and on July 26 his wife replied, “I was so overjoyed by your letter of the 12th, dearest Cump.” In an outpouring of emotion, she assured her husband that “We are all so crazy to go . . . The thought of going down to you has spread sunshine over everything—all have gone to bed to dream happy dreams & my own heart is full of joy—God grant that nothing may occur to mar the happiness we anticipate.”⁸

Four of their then six children traveled with Ellen to Mississippi—Minnie (12), Lizzie (10), Willy (9), and Tommy (6). As had his three siblings who journeyed to visit their father, Willy had been born in California. Their father had been stationed in California beginning in 1847 and consequently saw no action in the Mexican War—unlike so many of his contemporaries. In 1853, Sherman resigned his captaincy

⁷ In a fit of whimsy, Sherman told his brother-in-law, Philemon (his wife Ellen’s oldest brother), that he named the camp “Polliwoggle Retreat” as it was near a large horse pond full of frogs.

⁸ Letter, William T. Sherman to William T. Sherman, Jr., June 21, 1863, Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, CSHR 2/170; Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin, eds., *Sherman’s Civil War, Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 521; Letter, Ellen Sherman to William T. Sherman, July 26, 1863, Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, CSHR 2/108. In family correspondence, the general spelled his son’s name both Willy and Willie.

and became manager of the San Francisco branch of the St. Louis-based bank Lucas, Turner & Co. Willy was born in San Francisco on June 8, 1854. The young boy quickly became his father's favorite child, and the general anxiously awaited his arrival in Vicksburg.⁹

Ellen and the children arrived in mid-August and would spend six weeks in Mississippi. They were met by Sherman at the city's waterfront and were taken by ambulance to his headquarters. Arriving at "Woodburne," Ellen was pleased to see two large hospital tents pitched together for her use as a bedroom and parlor. Minnie and Lizzie, along with a servant brought with them from Ohio, slept in a tent next door. The two boys reveled in staying in their Uncle Charley's tent. (Capt. Charles Ewing was the youngest of the three Ewing brothers who became generals during the Civil War and served on Sherman's staff as inspector general.) Ellen's brother, Hugh, whom they called by his middle name, Boyle, commanded a brigade in Sherman's corps and was also nearby. Although she longed for her two youngest children, four-year-old Elly and two-year-old Rachel who had been left behind in Lancaster, Ellen especially relished the time spent with her brothers. Sherman biographer John Marszalek notes, "The disappointments of the past seemed far behind. The present provided a rarely felt contentment, and the future was promising. Sherman saw a smiling wife and excited children . . . At last, he was able to enjoy a long-sought success. Order and stability had finally been achieved and reigned in his family as it did in the war itself."¹⁰

There was much merriment for the Shermans. The family often went into Vicksburg to visit with General Grant and his wife, Julia, who were quartered in the Lum house on Washington Street. There they were frequently serenaded by various regimental bands or enjoyed singing

⁹ In addition to Willie, the children who visited Vicksburg were: Maria (Minnie) Ewing Sherman January 29, 1851-November 22, 1913; Mary Elizabeth (Lizzie) Sherman November 17, 1852-April 6, 1925; and Thomas Ewing Sherman October 12, 1856-April 29, 1933.

¹⁰ Eleanor Mary Sherman, September 5, 1859-July 18, 1915, and Rachel Ewing Sherman, July 5, 1861-October 26, 1919. John F. Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion For Order*, (New York, NY: The Free Press 1993), 231. Charles Ewing was born on March 6, 1835. On May 14, 1861, he was commissioned a captain in the newly authorized 13th United States Infantry of which his foster brother and brother-in-law, William T. Sherman, was named colonel. During the Vicksburg campaign, Charles commanded Company C of the 1st Battalion. On May 19, 1863, in the first assault against the city's defenses, Ewing had his right thumb shot off while carrying the national colors.

by formerly enslaved people. Willy would sometimes stay overnight with Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson, one of Grant's corps commanders, whose headquarters was in the stately Balfour house on Crawford Street. (This house is situated next to the one used by General Pemberton as his headquarters during the siege and in which he made the decision to surrender Vicksburg.)

For Ellen and the children their days were full from dawn to dusk. "The children are happy and well and their Father is delighted to have them with him," Ellen wrote her mother, Maria Boyle Ewing. "Minnie and Willy ride horseback with him while Lizzie and Tommy drive about with me in the carriage." Ellen, a devout Catholic, had the added comfort of a Notre Dame priest, Father Joseph Carrier, who was an army chaplain. With delight she informed her mother, "Sunday we attended Mass at brother Hugh's headquarters and heard Father Carrier preach."¹¹

It was an idyllic time for the family, and Sherman took pride in showing them around the siege lines. Willy, especially, who inherited his father's love for the military, took delight in collecting battlefield souvenirs. The visit was a great adventure for the young boy, and he reveled being so close to his father. A proud father later wrote, "Willie took the most intense interest in the affairs of the army," and boasted that "he was a great favorite with the soldiers, and used to ride with me on horseback in the numerous drills and reviews." One soldier wrote of Willy, "The little fellow . . . won the[ir] hearts by his winning ways and his fondness for playing soldier." Sherman's oldest boy spent much of his time with his Uncle Charlie's battalion of Regulars. The general noted that his son "learned the manual of arms and [almost daily] attended the parade and guard-mounting of the Thirteenth [U.S. Infantry], back of my camp." The men of the battalion made Willy an honorary sergeant and had a uniform made for him. It was difficult to determine who smiled more broadly as he paraded around camp in his uniform of blue, the little sergeant or his father who wore two stars on his shoulders.¹²

¹¹ Anna McAllister, *Ellen Ewing: Wife of General Sherman* (New York, NY: Benziger Brothers, 1936), p. 264. Joseph C. Carrier had been born in France in 1833. He came to America in 1855 and entered the seminary. Carrier was ordained a priest in the Holy Cross community at Notre Dame in 1861 and went on to serve as a chaplain with the Sixth Missouri Infantry during the siege of Vicksburg. He died in 1904.

¹² Sherman, *Memoirs*, vol. I, 373; Richard Wheeler, *Sherman's March* (New York, NY: Ty Crowell Co., 1978), 14.

Even young Tommy provided moments of laughter at headquarters. One day, a group of Confederate soldiers came into camp under a flag of truce to deliver a letter to Grant. Sherman played a gracious host providing them with dinner, complete with wine and cigars afterwards. During the course of conversation, a Confederate officer said that the Federals should stop fighting because they could never conquer eight million people. Tommy, who was destined to become a Jesuit priest, honed in, "Why, father can whip you fellows every time." Laughing, one of the soldiers in gray asked how he could be so sure. The young boy proceeded to give the numbers and locations of Union troops in the area. Startled by his son's knowledge and candor, Sherman said, "Why, you young traitor, you must be court-martialed and you will probably be shot."¹³

Despite the laughter and smiles, the war was never far from Sherman's mind, and the general knew that active campaigning could resume at any time. As Sherman and his men rested along the Big Black on September 19-20, the Union Army of the Cumberland, commanded by Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans was routed at Chickamauga in northern Georgia and driven back to Chattanooga where it was soon besieged. General-in-Chief Henry Halleck ordered Grant to send twenty thousand troops to Chattanooga immediately. Grant, in turn, directed Sherman to organize and command the relief operations. His time of bliss was over.

Sherman was ordered to take his force upriver to Memphis and then to repair the railroad en route to Chattanooga. On September 27, Sherman moved his headquarters onto the steamboat *Atlantic* in preparation for the trip northward. An officer was sent to fetch Willy who was at General McPherson's headquarters at the Balfour house. Looking proud of himself and carrying a double-barreled shotgun, "Sergeant" Sherman came aboard the boat and the vessel cast off. As the boat slowly moved upstream, Sherman stood at the rail and pointed out the places where his men had fought and camped during the campaign for Vicksburg. Ellen, however, was more concerned with Minnie who had experienced a recent bout of fever and stayed with her in their cabin. Thus, no one at first noticed that Willy was also a little pale and feverish. That night he complained about diarrhea and was listless. Ellen put him to bed and called for a surgeon. Chicago Surgeon E. O. F. Roler of

¹³ *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, March 16, 1896, in Mary Elizabeth Sherman Fitch Armstead Scrapbook, William T. Sherman Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

the 55th Illinois Infantry attended to the boy and initially diagnosed him with dysentery and malaria, both maladies that were common in that climate. But they are also symptoms of something far worse, even deadly—typhoid, a disease to which children are especially vulnerable. Caused by contaminated food or water that was often prevalent in army camps of the period due to poor sanitation, typhoid is a bacterial infection caused by the bacteria *Salmonella typhi*. Although diarrhea is an uncommon symptom, which may have led to the misdiagnosis, Willy exhibited other symptoms of the disease: high fever, weakness, vomiting, abdominal pain, dry cough, and sweating. Everyone soon realized that his life was endangered.

The boy's condition rapidly became critical, and the boat's captain, Henry McDougal, was urged to make the utmost speed to reach Memphis. But Atlantic was a slow moving vessel, and it took the boat one week to make the trip upriver during which time Willy's condition worsened. The vessel arrived in Memphis at ten thirty at night on October 2, and Willy, who was semiconscious, was taken by ambulance to the Gayoso Hotel.

Father Carrier had traveled with the family and stayed at Willy's side almost constantly. Sensing the seriousness of the boy's condition, the chaplain began to gently speak to him of heaven. "Willy then told me in very few words that he was willing to die if it was the will of God," Father Carrier wrote Ellen a few weeks later, "but it pained him to leave his father and mother." The priest continued, "He said this with an expression of such deep earnestness that I could hardly refrain from giving way to my feelings. I endeavored to soothe his sentiments of subdued regret." "Willy," I said quietly and calmly, "If God wishes to call you to Him—now—do not grieve, for He will carry you to heaven and there you will meet your good Mother and Father again." "Well," said the boy with an air of singular resignation. When his mother began to cry, the dying child reached out his hand and caressed her face.¹⁴

Willy drifted in and out of consciousness, waking only to inquire of the whereabouts of his prized shotgun. "He never complained," Ellen recalled. "How I wish he would have complained more!" At five o'clock in the afternoon on October 3, the young sergeant died peacefully. The grief-stricken father later wrote, "Mrs. Sherman, Minnie, Lizzie, and

¹⁴ Stanley P. Hirshson, *The White Tecumseh: Biography of General William T. Sherman* (New York, NY: Wiley, 1997), 165-166.

Tom were with him at the time, and we all, helpless and overwhelmed, saw him die.”¹⁵

At noon the next day, the men of the First Battalion, 13th United States Infantry, with muffled drums and arms reversed, escorted the family to the riverfront where the little steel coffin with Willy’s remains was placed aboard the steamer *Grey Eagle* for the sorrowful journey home. Sherman accompanied his grieving wife and children on board only to say goodbye as the exigencies of war prevented him from going with them. Ellen and the children continued upstream to Cairo where they boarded a train and rode the iron rails home to Lancaster where Willy was buried.

Having placed his family on the steamer to return home, Sherman found himself alone on October 6 preparing to return to Vicksburg and the continuation of the war. From the *Gayoso*, he wrote his wife a letter of utter despair: “I have got up early this morning to steal a short period in which to write you, but I can hardly trust myself. Sleeping, waking, every-where I see poor little Willy. His face and form are so deeply imprinted on my memory as were deep seated the hopes I had in his future. Why oh why should this child be taken from us, leaving us full of trembling and reproaches? Though I know we did all human beings could do to arrest the ebbing tide of life, still I will always deplore my want of judgement in taking my family to so fatal a climate at so critical a period of the year To it must be traced the loss of that child on whose future I had based all the ambition I ever had.”¹⁶

A deep sense of guilt tormented Sherman who on October 10, just prior to leaving Memphis, wrote Ellen another letter in which he confessed that he occasionally gave in to “the wish that some of those bullets that searched for my life at Vicksburg had been successful, that it might have removed the necessity for that fatal visit.” A few days later he again raised the question, “Why was I not killed at Vicksburg and left Willy to grow up to care for you?” Indeed, the grieving father harbored that sense of profound guilt for the remainder of his life.¹⁷

¹⁵ McAllister, *Ellen Ewing*, 268; Sherman, *Memoirs*, vol. I, 374.

¹⁶ Letter, William T. Sherman to Ellen Sherman, October 6, 1863, Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, CSHR 2/07; Mark Antony de Wolfe, ed., *Home Letters of General Sherman* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 275; Simpson and Berlin, *Sherman’s Civil War*, 556.

¹⁷ Letter, William T. Sherman to Ellen Sherman, October 10, 1863, Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, CSHR 2/07; Simpson and Berlin, *Sherman’s Civil War*, 556.

Perhaps in an effort to help relieve that sense of guilt and in part to comfort himself, Sherman penned a letter to his son Tommy in which he wrote, "You are now our only boy, and must take poor Willy's place, to take care of your sisters, and to fill my place when I too am gone." And in a letter to his daughter Lizzie, he stressed, "We must all now love each other the more that Willy watches us from Heaven." In a rare display of affection, Sherman, who normally closed letters to his children by simply signing his name, closed these by subscribing himself "Yr. Loving Father."¹⁸

Broken-hearted, Sherman also took pen in hand and poured out his grief in a note to Ulysses S. Grant. "This is the only death I have ever had in my family," he wrote in anguish, "and falling as it has so suddenly and unexpectedly on the one I most prized on earth has affected me more than any other misfortune could." He confessed, "I can hardly compose myself enough for work, but must and will do so at once," he assured his commander. (Although Grant replied with heartfelt words of comfort and support, that letter has been lost to history.) Sherman also penned words of gratitude to Captain Charles C. Smith and the men of brother Charlie's former battalion of Regulars adding in agony, "The child that bore my name . . . now floats a mere corpse, seeking a grave . . . with a weeping mother, brother, and sisters clustered about him;" and wondered in torment, "God only know why he should die thus young." "For myself, I ask no sympathy," he beseeched his men. And, as was his nature, Sherman steeled himself and closed by reaffirming his commitment to their joint cause writing, "Oh, on I must go, to meet a soldiers' fate or live to see our country rise superior to all factions." Several days later, in the midst of military matters, Sherman wrote in similar vein to Admiral David Porter. "I lost recently my little boy by sickness incurred during his visit to my camp on Big Black," he wrote in anguish. "He was my pride and hope of life, and his loss has taken from me the great incentive to excel, and now I must work on purely and exclusively for love of country and professional pride."¹⁹

The Angel of Death would visit the Sherman family again all too soon. Unbeknownst to the general, during the family's visit to Vicksburg,

¹⁸ Letter, William T. Sherman to Tommy Sherman, October 4, 1863, Sherman Family Papers, University of Notre Dame; Simpson and Berlin, *Sherman's Civil War*, 537.

¹⁹ John Y. Simon, ed., *Papers of U. S. Grant*, 27 volumes (Carbondale, Illinois, 1967-2005), vol. IX, 274; Sherman, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, pp. 374-375.

Ellen became pregnant. On June 11, 1864, while her husband was battling his way toward Atlanta, Ellen gave birth to a son she named Charles Celestine. Sadly, less than six months later, the infant developed pneumonia and died on December 4. Sherman never set eyes on the baby, which only added to his grief and sorrow.²⁰

The deaths of his children, especially his beloved Willy, affected Sherman as deeply as it would any father. Despite the fame and success he achieved during the war, Sherman bemoaned the fact that Willy did not live to see him become a great general and take pride in his accomplishments. Still, Sherman cherished and clung to the bond between father and son that had united them in life. In 1867, Willy's remains were moved from Lancaster to St. Louis, where the Shermans then lived, and interred in Cavalry Cemetery where Sherman regularly communed with his son. Willy was joined there by the baby, Charles Celestine, whose remains were transferred from South Bend, Indiana, and later by their mother who died on November 28, 1888. One year before his own death on February 14, 1891, Sherman left with his daughter Lizzie detailed instructions for his eventual burial. It was his expressed desire to be laid to rest alongside his "faithful wife and idolized soldier boy." On February 21, amidst solemn pomp and ceremony, the general was finally reunited with his little sergeant. Thus, for William T. Sherman, the triumph and tragedy that was Vicksburg remained the defining chapter of his life.

²⁰ Sherman was not alone in experiencing a father's grief during the war, for it was shared by many other Civil War notables—Robert E. Lee lost his daughter Annie, who also died of typhoid in 1862. That same year, Confederate General James Longstreet lost three children to scarlet fever. In Washington, President Abraham Lincoln lost his favorite son, also named Willie, to typhoid in 1862. And in Richmond, Confederate President Jefferson Davis lost his favorite child, Joe, who died in 1864 after falling from a balcony at the Confederate "White House."

