

TAPS

THE STORY OF TWO BROTHERS

Characters

Pete Williams
Ben Williams
Carolyn Williams
Jake Williams
Trudy Williams
Alice Williams
Union Officer
Soldier 1
Soldier 2

(Pete is chopping wood)

Narrator: Over one hundred years ago, the United States was drawn into a terrible war with itself, a Civil War which led the northern states against the south, a struggle which divided our country. It happened that the call to war descended upon a small town surrounded by farms and peaceful ranches. On one of these ranches lived the Williams family. Life had been idyllic and productive for them until the word spread that war had at last broken out between the north and the south. Carolyn and Jake Williams were both too old to actively participate in the war, but each son felt required to take a side and become a soldier. Their beliefs were strong, and equally strong were their feelings of love for each other.

Ben: Hey, little brother, you better hurry with that wood. Pa's expecting it before supper.

Pete: Can you help me for a minute?

Ben: Well ... sure.

Pete: Thanks.

(Ben hauls the wood Pete has cut around behind the wagon. Jake enters)

Jake: Hey, boys, did you hear the news?

Ben: What is it, Pa?

Jake: Sheriff just came into town with the official news that we got ourselves a new president.

Pete: Who?

Jake: The Indiana boy, Abe Lincoln.

Ben: Looks like we've done it now.

Pete: What do you mean?

Ben: Old Abe's one of those Yankee republicans that hate the south.

Pete: You mean he's against slavery. Well I agree that -

Ben: No! I mean he don't care about us southerners or our way of life. He -

Jake: Boys, boys. We can talk about this later. Besides, arguing ain't gonna do much about it. Finish hauling the wood you go there and get ready for supper.

(Jake exits. Pete and Ben haul the remaining wood around behind the wagon. Alice, Trudy, and Carolyn enter and set the table.)

Trudy: I don't see how the North has any business with the way we live our life here in the south.

Alice: What do you mean. It's all one country, Trudy. The people as a whole elected Lincoln.

Trudy: I don't know. I bet they cheated up in the north. Besides, nobody listens to what we care about in the south.

(Jake, Pete, and Ben enter and all sit down)

Jake: Dear Father in heaven, we thank Thee for this food. We ask your blessing our country and our new president. Give him wisdom and courage. Amen.

Ben: It won't work.

Carolyn: What do you mean, Ben?

Ben: Abe Lincoln. He'll just make a mess of things.

Trudy: He'll forget about us down here in the south. Them big city folks never listen to us.

Ben: There's been talking about setting up our own government here in the south.

Pete: Impossible! You know what that would mean?

Carolyn: Now boys, we're at the table.

Jake: Well, it seems that if this is the issue we are all thinking about we should be able to discuss it at the dinner table if we keep it civilized. For my part, I think the idea of a government here in the south is foolishness. Our country has only been established for fifty years. It may take awhile to get a government that listens to all the people fairly, but it will happen in time if our representatives speak up enough.

Pete: What's so bad about abolishing slavery anyway? Some folks around here don't treat their slaves as well as they treat their dogs.

Ben: It would make the south poor. All the plantations around here would have no one to work in the fields and wouldn't be able to produce their crops.

Alice: The blacks would still have to work somewhere.

Pete: Give them their own land.

Ben: It wouldn't work.

Pete: It would I tell you. Look, they -

Ben: No!

Pete: Just listen -

Ben: You want the south to be poor?

Pete: They're people, Ben.

Ben: Maybe so, but -

Jake: Boys! Listen.

(The boys stop arguing)

Jake: You know what's really important for a man?

Ben: A good harvest.

Pete: A pair of well matched mules.

Jake: Well, I guess those things are kind of nice, but the family is the most important to a man, and I'm proud of our family. You two are grown up and hard working, not lazy. You've got good head's on your shoulders. Now that tensions are getting high between the north and south, people are getting mighty blood thirsty. This is the time for a family to pull together. I want you boys to wettle your differences for my sake. You think you can do that?

Ben: Yeah, Pa.

(Carolyn, Trudy, and Alice clear the table. Ben, Pete, and Jake move to the fire.)

Narrator: The days dragged on. The boys kept their promise to their father, but that did not change their private opinions. Pete still thought the north was right and Ben still thought the south was right. News soon came that confederate guns fired on a union detachment at Fort Sumpter. America's bloodiest war had begun.

(Trudy comes rushing in. Alice is with her)

Trudy: We did it! We did it! Our brave boys are chasing off those Northerners and we finally get to live the way we want to.

Jake: What are you talking about?

Trudy: We did it! We fired on the Union troops.

Pete: Where'd you hear that?

Trudy: Down at Grogans. They're going to have a meeting tonight. They want to send boys to join the new Confederate army.

Jake: Now wait a minute. Settle down. I don't believe a level-headed person's going to start a civil war. In spite of all the talk of secession, I don't believe it's possible. You must have heard it wrong.

(Carolyn enters)

Carolyn: What's this?

Alice: Trudy just came back saying that Confederate troops started a civil war.

Ben: And I say good for them!

Pete: What? Ben, has it ever occurred to your small brain what this means?

Ben: Who are you to -

Carolyn: Boys, that's enough. You promised your father that you'd leave this alone. We're a family, and we'll not be fighting.

(Ben and Pete stalk out. Jake follows them)

Jake: Boys, where are you going?

Ben: I'm sick of this brother of mine thinking he's always right just because he's older.

Pete: O yeah? You never even listen to what I say. You always pick the opposing side just to argue over something.

Ben: That's not what I'm getting at.

Pete: Then what?

Ben: States rights. What kind of a Southerner are you anyway?

Pete: I'm as good a southerner as any but I'm also a citizen of the United States. Besides, war ain't gonna solve this problem. You're just too hot-blooded to stay out of a fight!

Ben: You're just chicken. I'll show you. I'm going to join the Confederate army.

Pete: Yeah? Well I ain't gonna stand by and watch this family support the rebels. I'm going to join the Union side.

Jake: Boys, war eats up men. Don't you know that? Don't leave each other like this!

(Pete exits one way and Ben the other. Jake and the women exit too)

Narrator: It was several years late, toward the climax of the struggle, when every citizen of the country had recognized the tragedy the Civil war had become. Ben Williams joined the Confederate army and fought in several major battles. Pete Williams took up with the Union army and had his share of action as well. One crisp autumn night, after a small skirmish with the opposing side, Pete's unit settled down for the night.

(Officer marches the soldiers in)

Officer: Company, halt! All right, men, listen up. Those rebels ain't gonna wait for you guys to get your act together. We're going to have to stop his rebellion and we can't wait for you guys to take your time becoming soldiers. We march south in the morning.

(Officer exits)

Soldier 1: Well, that old lieutenant is bucking for a promotion.

Soldier 2: Yeah. A guy like him will get us killed quick. Remember when our last lieutenant tried to take a southern trench? We had to run over a hundred yards over open ground. Got himself a mini ball through the side of the head. Didn't last long, did he?

Soldier 1: Nope, and this new guy ain't going to last long either.

Soldier 2: Nor us if we ain't careful.

Soldier 1: Boy, this war is the messiest thing I've ever seen. If I'd have known it'd be like this I would have dodged the draft.

Soldier 2: I'm too poor to pay the three hundred dollars to get out of the war. Those rich guys have all the luck. They can even hire people to serve for them.

Soldier 1: What you got here is a rich man's war and a poor man's fight.

Soldier 2: Hey boy, you're kinda quiet. What's your name anyway? Pete?

Pete: Yeah.

Soldier 1: So how'd you get out here? Get drafted?

Pete: No.

Soldier 2: I can't figure out why any sane person would be here unless he had to or are you trying to free them slaves?

Pete: Not really.

Soldier 1: (impatiently) So why are you here, boy?

Soldier 2: You ain't running from trouble, are ya?

Pete: No. It's kind of hard to explain. My brother and I I got in a fight over this war. He wanted to join the south and it made me mad. So I decided I couldn't stand by and watch my family support the southern cause so I decided to even things up.

Soldier 2: Man, I don't think my family cares.

Soldier 1: Well, my wife works in a factory eighteen hours a day. I never saw much of her anyway. I'd give anything to have a family like yours.

Soldier 2: Hope you live through it to get back. This war ain't all it's cracked up to be. You'll find that you and you brother will be getting along just fine after it's all over.

Soldier: You're just lucky to have a family. It's one of the more important things in life.

(Officer enters)

Officer: Listen up. Scouts say there's a Confederate camp not two miles from here, so you better be careful. Some reb's liable to ride up and slit your throat while you're sleeping, so we'd better keep a careful watch. Pete, you take the first watch. Be careful. You know the penalty for sleeping on duty.

(Officer exits)

Soldier 2: (unrolling his blanket) What do you say? Here or over under those trees?

Soldier 1: Under the trees. They'd be more likely to see us here in the open.

(Soldiers exit)

Narrator: The dark, lonely hours passed slowly for Pete. Every rustle in the bushes seemed like an enemy soldier, every cracking twig a Confederate soldier ready to leap out at him. Toward midnight, the moon rose, casting strange shadows across the clearing and making it hard to tell what was real and what was only a shadow.

(Ben, hidden in the bushes, rustles around a bit)

Pete: (gun pointed) Who's there?

(No answer. Pete takes cover. The rustling continues)

Pete: Stay where you are!

(The rustling continues. Pete takes aim and fires)

Ben: (As he is hit) Wait!

(Ben falls forward out of the bushes. Pete cautiously approaches, then pulls him out into the moonlight where he discovers to his horror that it is his brother. He cradles Ben's body in his arms and weeps. Finally he pulls out a piece of paper and writes a few lines. He places the paper on Ben's chest and slips away. Officer enters and notices the paper and reads it aloud as the staff begin to hum taps)

Officer: Day is done
 Gone the sun
 From the lake
 From the hills
 From the sky
 All is well
 Safely rest
 God is nigh

(The staff slowly sing taps)