THE SHOOTING OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

(The original copy of this narrative, together with the coat worn by Mr. Withers on the night of the assassination, has been presented to the United States government.

A short time before his death, on December 5, 1916, Mr. Withers gave to his sister, Mrs. Louisa Withers Beck of Rye Beach, N. Y., a copy of the manuscript he had prepared for the government.

With it he gave permission to have it published over his own name for the first time.)—Ed.

The Hartford Courant 2-11-17

(By William Withers.)

A FEW WEEKS before that fatal fourteenth of April, 1865, I had composed music to the words of a poem entitled "Honor to Our Soldiers," and the song had been sung in public on several occasions very successfully.

This song was directly responsible for my meeting with John Wilkes Booth a moment after his attack on the President, and I might say it almost cost me my life.

When it was announced in the newspapers of Washington that President Lincoln intended to attend a performance of "Our American Cousin," I decided it would be particularly fitting to have my song rendered between the acts, and, after talking the scheme over with the manager, I went about making arrangements. I hired a quartet, and, when Miss Laura Keene, who was appearing in the leading part in the play, heard them in one of their rehearsals, she volunteered to assist in the chorus with her entire company. It was finally decided that the song be given between the first and second acts.

Friday the fourteenth of April, 1865, was a muggy, warm day. Men had been at work all day in the theater decorating it with flags and bunting for the President's visit. The Presidential box, which under ordinary circumstances was divided in two, was thrown open into one large compartment and smothered in the National colors.

On the night of the performance crowds began to gather in Tenth street outside the stage entrance, watching the people collecting and, shortly before going to the music room, I stepped next door to a saloon, frequented by actors and employees of the theater. When I entered, the first person I met was John Wilkes Booth. He was standing at the bar in his shirt sleeves, his coat thrown over one arm and his hat in his hand. There were several men with him, and they were laughing and joking. When Booth saw me, he cried: "Hello, Billy, come have a drink with me."

We drank together and, during the conversation, which I think was about different members of the theatrical profession, I laughingly remarked that Booth would never be as great as his father. An inscrutable smile flitted across the actor's face as he replied:—

"When I leave the stage, I will be the most talked about man in America."

At that time the statement had no significance for me, but afterward I remembered it with a shock. I left the little party in the saloon and hurried to the music room, as it was almost time for the overture to start.

When I took my place in the orchestra, people were crowding down the aisles, and, when the bell rang for us to start playing the house was packed. After the overture and before the curtain went up on the first act, in looking over the audience, I noticed Booth in the rear of the building leaning against the last row of orchestra chairs.

The first act had not progressed very far, when I heard cheering—I knew what that meant and quickly gave the sign to the members of my orchestra to play "Hail to the Chief." Of course, there was lots of excitement, and men and women stood up and cheered the President.

As Lincoln climbed the stairs to the first balcony the enthusiasm increased, and as he walked down the narrow aisle leading to his box the uproar was deafening. As he reached the end of the aisle he stopped and, placing his right hand over his heart, leaned against a white column and bowed twice to the audience. He disappeared through the curtained entrance and took a seat a moment later in the extreme left hand corner of the box. The President was almost hidden from the audience by a curtain and finally the cheering stopped and the play, which had been temporarily forgotten, was resumed. At the end of the first act when my song was to be sung, I was called to the speaking tube by our stage manager, Mr. J. B. Wright, and requested to play my extra act music, as Miss Keene was not ready to assist in my song, but probably would be at the end of the second act.

Towards the close of the second act I saw Booth in the balcony close to the President's box, apparently deeply interested in the play. This was the last time I saw him, until we met as he was making his escape.

When the act was over I was informed again through the speaking tube by our manager that Miss Keene was not ready to do her part in the song. Feeling vexed at this, I went behind the scenes to find out why the extra feature had been slighted. To reach the stage I had to take an underground passage to a narrow stairway in the rear of the building.

I found Mr. Wright standing in one of the wings with several members of the company gathered about him. As I approached a scene shifter named Spangler got in my way and, as I asked him to move, he turned on me suddenly and snarled, "What do you want here?"

I was taken aback at his sudden display of temper, as I had always found him a quiet and altogether inoffensive sort of a man. However, I told him I was not there on any business that concerned him and again asked him to move. He stepped to one side reluctantly, and, as I advanced to the manager's side, and, before I said anything regarding my song, I pulled the cover over a box on the brick wall called the governor which contained a lever controlling all the gas lights in the house. I rested by arm against the cover and made inquiries about my song. Mr. Wright told me that he was not to blame for the song being left out and said that Miss Keene was so nervous and was trying so hard to give a good performance that her promise to assist in the extra feature had slipped her memory. I became disgusted with the whole affair and started back to the orchestra. I had reached the stairway leading to the underground passage and had taken two steps downward when I heard the report of a pistol. I stood there on the steps and tried to account for it. I knew there were no firearms used in the play, and I quickly concluded that an accident must have happened and started to retrace my steps to the stage manager to find out what the trouble was.

As I approached the narrow entrance where Mr. Wright had been standing only a few seconds before, I heard a dull thud as though some one had fallen on the stage. Just as I was about to step into the entrance, I heard an iron bar strike the brick wall and fall to the floor.

The next thing I knew I was standing in almost the same spot I had vacated a moment before. Some one cursed fiercely, and, looking up, I faced Booth, the assassin!

Should I live a thousand years I shall never forget the ten seconds of my life that I spent between Booth and his liberty. As he faced me, he looked terrible. His eyes seemed starting from their sockets, and his hair stood on end. In his left hand, there was a long dagger while with his right he seemed to be balancing himself against the brick wall.

I stood before him, dumbfounded and speechless. I was glued to the floor with amazement. Behind the assassin, I saw the iron bar used to control the lights lying on the floor. It had fallen from the governor, and it flashed upon me that this was what I had heard strike the wall and clatter to the floor. I have often wondered if Booth recognized me in that brief period that we faced each other. I sometimes think that he muttered my name, but I am not sure.

He glared at me like a wild beast

TOLD BY AN EYE WITNESS

for a few seconds, then lowered his head, and, with arms flying, made a rush.

"Let me pass! Let me pass!" he shouted.

With the dagger, he made a desperate lunge at me. I was so bewildered that I made no move to defend myself, and his second stab sent the sharp blade ripping through the collar of my coat, penetrating my vest and undergarments and inflicting a flesh wound in my neck.

This blow sent me sprawling on the floor, and he was about to deal me another thrust, which would have probably been the end of me, when a loud shouting from the direction of the auditorium caused him to forget me and make a dash for the stage door. I was lying in a position to see his movements, and, as he grasped the knob with both hands and pulled the door open, I caught a glimpse of a horse's head and saw a young fellow called "Peanut John" holding it by the bridle.

The next thing I knew a detective named Stewart jumped over me and disappeared out the stage door only a few seconds after Booth had closed it.

Harry Hawk and several members of the company went stumbling over me in a rush to get to their dressing rooms. Finally, a detective picked me up. I asked him what had happened. He didn't answer but led me to the stage, which by now was crowded with people, and pointing to the President's box said:—

"Look there! Look there!"

I looked and saw Lincoln, with his head resting on the back of his chair, apparently dead. His wife was bathing his face with her handkerchief, and Miss Laura Keene stood near with a pitcher in her hand.

The detective hissed in my ear:—

"The President is dying—shot by an assassin!"

Until then my brain had been in a chaotic state. The happenings of the last five minutes had taken no definite shape in my mind, but, as I stood there in the detective's grasp, the horror and the pity of it all rushed upon me like a great black cloud—and I wept.

I recovered myself and told the detective to take me to police headquarters as I had important information.

The most sorrowful sight I ever beheld was when the President was carried up the aisle that only a few hours before he had walked down smiling and bowing. The audience that had gathered was now crying. The handkerchiefs that had been waved enthusiastically were now wet with tears.

The President was taken to Mr. Peterson's house, opposite the theater, and put to bed in a room occupied by John Matthews, a member of Miss Keene's company, where he died at half-past seven the next morning.

When I reached the street with the detective, there was a great mob in front of the theater, and, as they caught sight of us, there were cries of—

"Kill him! Lynch him! Hang him!"

And the threats were nearly carried out, too, before it was made known that I was not the man who had killed the President. When we arrived at police headquarters, I was taken before Mayor Wallock, of Washington, who questioned me closely and to whom I told my story.

My wound was examined and attended to, and, after I had given all the information I could, Mayor Wallock told me that I would be detained over night but to go home in the morning and stay there because, if Booth had friends in Washington, they would endeavor to put me out of the way if they thought I had any valuable information.

When I had finished my story, detectives began to rush out, and it was not long afterward that if was announced that Booth's dagger had been found a short distance from the stage door. There were a great number of conspirators arrested, and I was summoned to appear at the trial which was held in the arsenal in the navy yard.

Spangler, the scene-shifter, was sentenced to serve a term at Dry Tortugas. After serving his time, he returned to his home in Brooklyn, N. Y., where he was taken ill and, before he died, was interviewed by a reporter on the staff of the Brooklyn Eagle. He stated then that I probably saved the lives of many people in the audience by appearing when I did and asking him to move away from the governor, as his first part in the plot was to turn off all the lights in front of the stage when he heard the pistol shot.

When I pulled the cover over the governor, Spangler did not have time to get back and turn the lights off before Booth's pistol went off. Booth, in his wild dash to escape, seeing that the lights were still on in the auditorium, must have tried to turn the gas off himself, and, in his excitement, wrenched the lever from its place, and it struck the wall in falling to the floor.

I still carry a scar on my neck about three inches long as a reminder of my encounter with John Wilkes Booth.

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