HOW BOOTH'S BODY WAS HIDDEN

The True Story Told for the First Time in

The Columbian, April, 1911.

The Army Officer Who Hid the Body Relates the Grewsome Details.

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To my knowledge, the only persons present on that grewsome occasion were the four enlisted men, Mr. E. M. Stebbins, military storekeeper of the arsenal, and myself, the only commissioned officer present, then an assistant army surgeon stationed at the arsenal as medical officer.

I pledged my word as an officer and a gentleman that I would reveal nothing which occurred on the night of April 27, 1865, until such time as all necessity for secrecy had passed.

In the years which have passed since that awful April night, the public has been given various accounts in the newspapers, magazines and books as to what was done with the remains of the actor-assassin, which varied in detail with the imagination of the relator. Many of the imaginary stories of Booth's burial mention my presence and, with partiality and resignation, my death. With the single exception of a communication to a Washington, D. C., paper some years ago, I have never read a fairly good description of the first hiding of Booth's body. That account was probably inspired by information from the War Department. Even with that information no one could locate the precise locality; for the building and enclosing wall of the old penitentiary were razed to the ground over forty years ago.

The ultimate disposition of the body is a matter of record. When the taking down of the old penitentiary nedessitated the removal of Booth's remains, the key of the apartment, which was neither cellar nor cell, could not be found and there is said to have been a lively time at the War Department for the key had been in the care of Mr. Stanton, Secretary of War. Finally, however, it was found, the place of secretion was unlocked

and, in the presence of a number of officers, the body was removed in 1867 to one of the large store houses upon the eastern side of the parade ground of the arsenal.

In February, 1869, President Johnson gave Edwin Booth permission to remove it to Baltimore, Md., where it now reposes in the Booth lot in Greenmount Cemetery. It was stipulated that the actual location of the remains should not be marked by monument or mound.

The reason for the attempted secrecy may be found in the turbulent condition of public affairs, the general consternation and almost universal suspicion. The departments in Washington were demoralized; the clerks were not trusted to copy official orders that were written by the chief personally and transmitted directly by messenger.

At 1:45 o'clock on the morning of April 27th, the tug which Baker was using came alongside of the Montauk; that officer being armed with an order from Secretary Stanton to the commandant of the Washington Navy Yard to permit Baker to come alongside to transfer one or two prisoners. Booth's body was securely wrapped in a gray army blanket in which Lieutenant Edward P. Doherty had sewn it.

Commodore J. B. Montgomery, commandant of the Navy Yard, sent this report to the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, later in the morning:

"David E. Herold, prisoner, and the body of Wilkes Booth were delivered here at 1:45 this morning. The body of Booth is changing rapidly. What disposition shall be made of it? It is now on board the ironclad Montauk."

So far as is known the Navy Department made no reply to this communication. But the subsequent happenings clearly indicated the policy of secrecy upon which the government had decided, and for reasons readily understood at the time, and today, when one considers the suspicion and fear on every side produced by the assassination of Lincoln and the plot to kill off the official heads of the recognized lawful authority.

By nine o'clock in the morning of the same day, the Secretaries of War and Navy had issued the following order to Commodore Montgomery:

"You will permit Surgeon-General Barnes and his assistant, accompanied by Judge

Advocate-General Holt, John A. Bingham, Major Eckert, William C. Moore, Colonel L.C.Baker, Lieutenant Baker. Lieutenant-Colonel Conger, Charles Dawson, J. L. Smith, Mr. Gardiner, photographer, and an assistant, to go on board the Montauk and see the body of John Wilkes Booth. Immediately after the surgeon-general has made an autopsy you will have the body placed in a strong box and delivered to the charge of Colonel Baker, the box being securely sealed."

That the visit of this official body was unexpected and unknown to Commodore Montgomery is shown by the report of the executive officer of the Montauk to him and by the commodore transmitted to the Secretary of the Navy. It says:

"About eleven o'clock A.M. Surgeon-General Barnes came on board, and without asking for the captain of the guard or the commanding officer of the vessel or showing any written authority or informing any officer who he was, or seeming to pay the slightest attention to military etiquette due to one officer from another, walks up to the corpse and commences to cut adrift the wrapping. He was stopped by the inquiry as to his authority for so doing. He replied: 'By order of the Secretaries of War and Navy.' and afterward Major Eckert produced the written order.

Booth's handsome countenance was unmarred by the agony of his lingering death. His moustache and the long lock of hair which had hung down his forehead Booth cut off at the house of Dr.Mudd, where he had stopped in his flight.

The commission or coroner's inquest was held in the commanding officer's cabin; and while the testimony was being taken which established the identity of the body, Surgeon-General Barnes and his assistant were holding the autopsy on deck. Several persons had recognized the remains as those of Booth and had so testified. Charles Darson, chief clerk of the National Hotel, positively identified the body by the initials "J. W. B." which had been tattooed in India ink on the right hand between the thumb and forefinger. Dawson swore that he had frequently observed the letters on Booth's hand while he was signing the hotel register, and on one occasion had said: "Booth, what a fool you were to disfigure that pretty white hand in such a way."

Dr. J. Frederidk May was another witness who established the identity of the body beyond cavil or question. Booth had been a patient of his a couple of years before, having a small tumor removed from the left side of his neck, three inches below the ear. Booth had been afraid that it would leave a scar, but had been advised by Dr. May that he should be careful in his movements, so that the wound would heal by "first intention." Some days after the operation Booth called on his surgeon saying that he had met with an unforeseen accident. While playing with Charlotte Cushman in Baltimore, some stage business called for her to grasp him by the shoulder. In her excitement Miss Cushman seized Booth by the neck, tearing open the wound. This finally healed "by granulation," leaving a mark similar to a vaccination scar. Dr. May gave his testimony without knowing Booth's body was on deck or seeing it. The commission immediately went on deck, examined the body and found the scar as described by the surgeon. This ended identification testimony.

Surgeon-General Barnes cut from Booth's neck a section of the vertebra through which the ball from Boston Corbett's revolver had passed. It has been stated also that the assassin's brain and heart were removed, and were placed in the museum of the Medical Department of the Army, which strangely enough was the former Ford's Theatre, where the assassination took place; but of this I have no knowledge.

There has been much controversy as to what happened to Booth's body immediately after the autopsy was held on board the monitor Montauk, The following from the records of the Navy Department would seem to settle this for all time. This is the report of Commodore Montgomery, commandant of the Navy Yard to the Secretary of the Navy;

"By telegram yesterday P.M. I reported to the department the removal of the body of the assassin Booth from the Montauk to the United States Arsenal in this district (as supposed).

"I have to report that the removal was made entirely without my knowledge or any reference to me on the part of officers and others commissioned by the War and Navy Departments to visit the ironclad, and the first intimation given me of the removal was from the executive officer. I called at once for explanation from the marine officer, who said the body was so suddenly and unexpectedly removed to the boat which conveyed it away that he had no opportunity of reporting before the workwas accomplished. The unusual

transaction deprived me of the opportunity of inclosing the body in the box prepared for it, as ordered by the Department. The box is now on board the Montauk and ready for delivery when called for."

Acting under these orders Colonel Baker had the body taken from the Montauk about three o'clock in the afternoon by two men in a boat, who rowed down the eastern branch and around to the landing on the west side of the arsenal grounds, where it was placed under guard.

Midnight was being called by the sentries from the various posts as the military storekeeper of the arsenal, Mr. Stebbins, four enlisted men, one of them leading a team attached to a cart, another carrying a lantern, and myself, the only commissioned officer present, met at the little Summer house where a sentry was on guard over the thing in the gunny sack. The four enlisted men were members of the Ordinance Corps and picked for their reliability and discretion. They were sworn to secrecy regarding the happenings of the night.

Two of the men picked up the gunny sack and contents, grunting at its unexpected weight, and placed it in the body of the cart. At a word the man leading the horse started it down the avenue. Men marched on each side of the cart, Stebbins brought up the rear, and I walked ahead with the man carrying the lantern, the flickering rays of which cast fantastic shadows on the surface of the broad avenue. Not a word was spoken by a member of our party. The only sounds to disturb the stillness of the night were the crunching of the wheels, the shuffling of our feet and the fall of the horse's hoofs on the gravel road.

Between the administration and jail ends of the penitentiary was a middle section, which had been used as a storage place for fixed ammunition at the outbreak of the war, and later as a general storage quarter. It was a large room about fifty by forty feet, with supporting columns of stout cedar. There were two enormous doors in it sufficiently large to drive a team and wagon through them, opening on the south and north sides. In this room were a number of cases of good and fixed ammunition; although the greater portion of the latter had been removed a short time before our adventure owing

to the explosion of a shell, and the attendant fear that the entire series of building might be blown into the sky by a like accident.

The cart was led up to one of the doors, which E. M. Stebbins, the military storekeeper, unlocked with a key which he produced. Once inside the apartment, the door was carefully locked and the cart was led to the extreme southwest corner of the storeroom. By the flickering light of the lantern we saw a shallow hole lying before us. Whether there was a box in it, I do not know. A pile of dry earth was on one side of the excavation. Grotesque shadows were cast by the light of the lantern falling upon the gun boxes and the packing cases.

Two of the men picked up the body of Booth, still in its wrapping of gunny sacking and enshrouded in an army blanket, and deposited it in the shallow hole, which could not be dignified by the term "grave." This was quickly filled with earth, packed down and the surface smoothed off. The surplus dirt was thrown into the cart and removed. As the floor of the chamber was a dirt one, there was little trouble in concealing the fact that a hole had been dug in it and then filled up.

It is possible that there were some persons secreted from our view in the chamber, who could watch our every movement and report our doings; but I think this is improbable. It is possible for the dim light of the lantern did not penetrate the darkness far, neither could we see behind the things which were stored there; it is improbable, for after we had secreted the body Mr. Stebbins, who had the key locked the doors of the apartment and we left. Stebbins and I going to our quarters, and the soldiers returning to their barracks. The only means of egress from the apartment in which the body of Booth was secreted was through the doors which Stebbins had locked, and the key of which was later delivered to Secretary Stanton, through the proper military channels.

It has been said that we secreted the body of Booth in the cellar of the penitentiary.* All of the buildings that were standing forty-five years ago on the night of the so-called burial of Booth have been razed, so far as I know, to give place to the War College and officers' quarters.

*There was no cellar in the penitentiary.