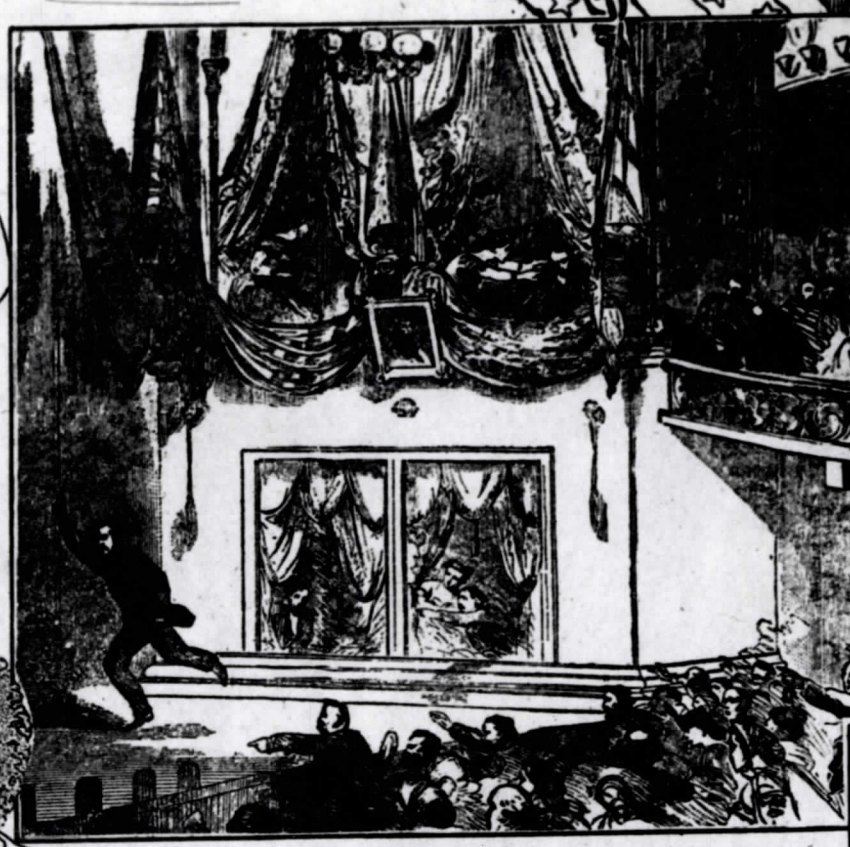
The True Story of Lincoln's Assassination





How Booth Escaped and How Laura Keene Ministered to the Wounded President, as Told by Lieut. C. H. Jones

HOW did Booth get away? Ever since the assassination of Lincoln the world has been wondering.

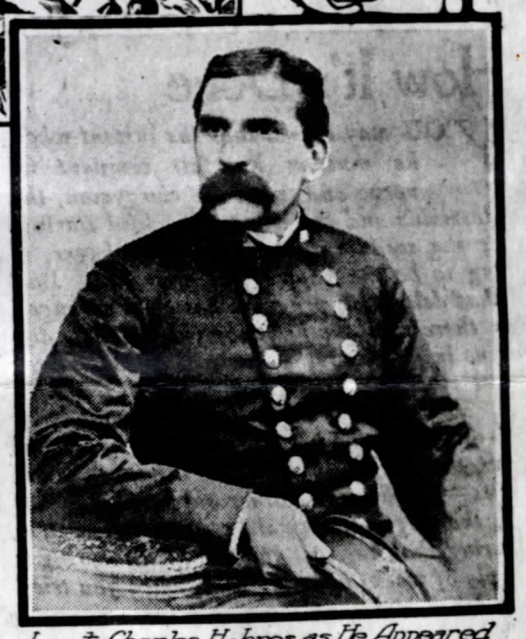
The whole audience might have been expected to be after the murderer, when he leaped from the president's box to the stage, like a pack of foxhounds. A panic would have been the natural result. Yet no one, of all the hundreds ir the house, moved.

There might have been both a panic and a pursuit had it not been for one man of mystery—a personage who has been entirely overlooked, who was mentioned in none of the accounts of the assassination—a man in evening clothes, who appeared shortly after Booth had disappeared, held up a warning hand to the audience, that was beginning to recover from its temporary paralysis, and announced, significantly:

"He is captured."

Whether this man was an attache of the house intent on averting a disaster or an accomplice of Booth's who had been carefully "planted" for the purpose of averting pursuit will probably never be known. In the excitement of the shooting he was overlooked. No attention has ever been paid to him.

Yet to one man who witnessed the assassination, he stood out above all others who played a part, willing or unwilling, in the dreadful affair. That man was Lieutenant Charles H. Jones, of the American navy, lately retired after an active service of more than forty years. Aside from the flying Booth, the figure that most impressed the then young officer, trained to see and act in emergencies, was the man in evening dress who waved back the audience and allowed the assassin to get away.



Lieut Charles H Jones as He Appeared When He Witnessed Lincoln's Assassination

THOUGH nearly half a century has passed since the assassination, and the eye-witnesses have virtually all gone to that bourne which claimed the martyred president, Lieutenant Jones recalls the fateful night with intense vividness. When seen recently at his home, Fifty-first street and Walton avenue, he was not overly anxious to talk. But when he opened the wells of his memory, his eyes flashed, his manner took on an air of animation and he was again the young naval officer who was living over the most thrilling experience of his career. At times the tears would not be denied, and his voice would choke so that he could hardly talk. Always the name of Lincoln was spoken as though it were sacred, for the speaker knew and loved the wartime president.

As sort of an apology for being at the theater that evening, Lieutenant Jones explained the events of a few days before. "You see, my wife and son and sister-in-law came down to Washington from Philadelphia for the second inauguration of Lincoln. They left after the ceremonies were over, and I thought they were safe on their way home, until I got a letter that they were detained in Baltimore. I was connected with the quartermaster's department at the time, and I asked for a short furlough. I went to Baltimore and took my folks safe and sound back to Philadelphia. Well, when I got back to Washington I was dead broke. I didn't have a cent to my name. So, when one of my comrades suggested that we go to Ford's Theater to see General Grant, who was to be there, I laughed at him. He insisted that I go with him, and finally I told him that I didn't have any money. 'Oh,' he said, 'that'll be all right,' and we started for the theater. I didn't want to put him to too much expense, and we got 25-cent seats up in the top gallery. We were there early and took seats where we could plainly see the president's box. We watched Lincoln come in and take his place; but there were no signs of Grant, and we were both sadly disappointed.

"Nothing occurred during the performance that particularly attracted my attention, until the shot was fired and I saw the president stagger and fall. Booth jumped from the box, tripping on the curtain and falling to the stage. Not half a dozen people in the theater knew that they were witnessing a great tragedy; but I divined that all was not well and flung myself over the railing to the balcony below, and from there lowered myself into the president's box. I said to Major Rathbone, 'Do you think it is serious?' 'Serious?' he said. 'Look!' and showed me his hand. I said, 'My God, man, that is his brain!' I knew then that there was no hope for the president's life, and I was crushed. I felt as though I had met a personal loss.

"The events of that night have been published time and again. All kinds of articles have been written on one of the nation's greatest tragedies. But there is one important thing that, for some reason or another, has never been told, and no living man can contradict me. And it is this: After Booth had made his way behind the scenes, followed by one man, who was outwitted by Booth closing the door in his face, the audience for a minute or two was stunned. Finally, some who were near the box came to their senses, including several military officers, and made an attempt to get on the stage and follow Booth. But a man wearing a full-dress suit, whom I took at the time to be an attache of the theater, came forward and told them to take their places, that the president's assassin had been captured.

"What he meant by telling that deliberate lie, or who he was, or his business, has never been explained. For that matter, I never heard another word about the man from that day to this, and it seems that, amid the excitement following the affair, he was forgotten. But that man has never left my mind. He must have had some reason for making such an announcement. Perhaps he thought that it was the only way to prevent a panic.

LAURA KEENE'S DEVOTION

"A few weeks ago I was talking to several other men, and one of them told me that I looked like President Grant. I differed with him; but, anyway, it caused our conversation to drift to the wartime, and I told them of the president's assassination as I had seen it, just as I am telling you. There was one man, a Mr. Benjamin, who kept quiet throughout the conversation. He was a stranger to me, and I didn't think anything of it. But when I was through, he said: 'Lieutenant, I have listened intently to you, and every word you have said is right, for I was there myself.' I said, 'Do you remember the man who announced the capture of the assassin?' He said, 'I most certainly do, I, too, have wondered why he was never mentioned in the accounts of the shooting.'

"To get back to the story. I was only in the president's box a few minutes, but the thing that struck me as being the most pathetic was the devotion of Laura Keene to the dying president. While one member of the theatrical profession had brought on his suffering, another was doing all in her power to alleviate it. When she went into the box from the stage she had on a beautiful white dress, but when I had left her it had turned red, for it was covered with the blood of the martyr."

Lieutenant Jones paused for a minute or two. He could go no further until he had swallowed the lump that was in his throat. When he had recovered, he said: "Talking about Booth and Laura Keene, some people say that Booth was not a good actor. Well, I want to say right here that he was. I have seen various members of the Booth family often, and I never saw a better Romeo than John Wilkes Booth. And the way in which he carried out his crime, as fiendish as it was, and his cry of 'Sic semper tyrannis! The south is avenged!' directed to the audience, showed that he could act as dramatically in real life as on the stage. But I do not think that the man was in his right senses, for there was a streak of insanity that ran all through the Booth family.

"When I went out in the street, I heard that attempts had been made on the lives of Secretary Seward and his son. Well, I lost no haste in getting to the government buildings, and told of Lincoln's death to the secretary in charge. He could hardly believe it. 'Yes,' I said, 'they have tried to kill Secretary Seward and his son, too.'

"I didn't have my clothes off from that Friday night until the next Thursday, for I was placed in charge of the corps that was assigned to place mourning on the public buildings. We took down the bright decorations that had been put up in honor of the second inauguration and placed instead the signs of the nation's grief.

"Strange to say, I went to the theater for the express purpose of seeing General Grant, and he was one of the first persons I met the next day. Later I went to the War Building with my men and knocked on the door of one of the offices several times, and getting no reply, opened the door. There was General Grant. One could easily see that he was heavily burdened by grief. I said, 'Excuse me, general; I did not know that you were in here. I knocked several times and did not get a reply. We are draping the front of the building.' 'Oh, that's all right,' the general said. 'Don't mind me. Go on with your work, and don't let me interrupt you.'

"Well, of all the people, generals, statesmen and noted civilians, that I met during that period, the man who impressed me the most was a southerner who ran a notorious gambling house. He stopped me on the street and asked me if my men would drape his house. I had heard of him and knew of his rabid views. I said, 'I thought you were from the south.' He said, 'Yes, I am a southerner, and one to the very core; but I loved President Lincoln better than any other man I ever knew, and I want to show my respect to his memory. I will pay you anything you want.' I told him that we could not accept any pay, but that I would put the matter before Secretary Stanton. The secretary said that, after we were through our work on the government buildings, we could drape the southerner's house and those of any other citizens who asked us.

"Well, do you know that of all the houses we went to, and they numbered those of the highest men in the country, that old southerner was the only one who had the common decency to treat us like human beings. He gave us refreshments and made us feel at home in every way; and it was a relief, after so much excitement and hard work, to have some one treat us kindly. In the houses of the statesmen, Seward, Stanton and others, one would have thought we were common thieves. The families locked themselves in their rooms and did not come near us; but they sent their servants to keep close watch over us. Nice treatment to give to men in the employ of the government, wasn't it?"