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Why Booth Shot President Lincoln

New Light Thrown on That Great Tragedy by the Personal Papers of a Surgeon in North Carolina

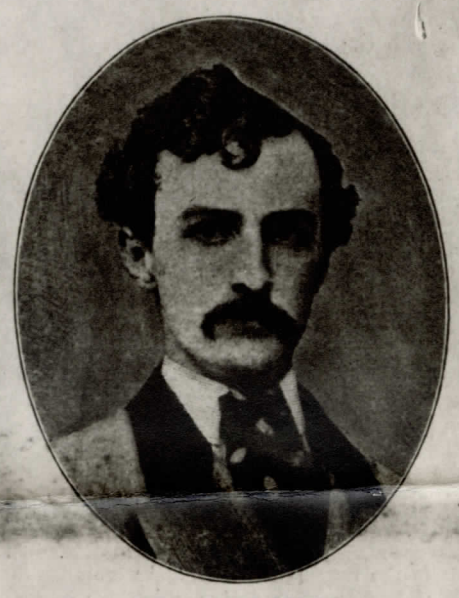
By D. F. St. Clair

THE exclamation—"Sic semper tyrannis!"—uttered by John Wilkes Booth, on the stage of Ford's Theater, just after shooting President Lincoln, has always been taken to indicate, as the motive for the deed, resentment over the failure of the Confederate cause. Booth, it was known, was strongly in sympathy with the South, and the collapse of the Confederacy was supposed to have worked him into a frenzy. This view of his motive also helped to aggravate and prolong the bitterness of the war and the passions of the reconstruction period, for the claim was made at the time and widely believed that well-known Southern leaders had encouraged Booth to the murder.

It now transpires that Booth had another and a more personal motive inciting him to the deed. The story is told in the papers of the late Dr. George A. Foote, a well-known surgeon of North Carolina, who died recently in Warrenton, of that state. From Mr. George A. Foote, Jr., I get the facts disclosed in those papers, and have every reason, because of Dr. Foote's high character, to place implicit reliance upon the statements therein made.

Dr. Foote was a surgeon in the Confederate army, and some time in the latter part of 1864 was captured and imprisoned in Fort Columbus, on Governors Island, N. Y. In the adjoining cell was incarcerated Capt. John Young Beall, a well-educated young Virginian of an excellent family. Beall's execution as a guerrilla and a spy on the 6th of February, 1865, on Governors Island is said to have been the cause of Booth's shooting the President. It is therefore well to recall some of the facts of Beall's history.

In 1862 Beall joined the Confederate navy, and was appointed acting commander in 1863. That year he went to Canada and joined the Confederates, waging a border and guerrilla war upon the United States under the leadership of Jacob Thompson and Clement C. Clay, Jr. Beall and his followers operated in citizen's clothing, and in this way managed often to make raids into New York state and escape without being detected. On Sept. 19, 1864, he and his men boarded the Lake Erie steamer *Philo Parsons* in the character of passengers. At a signal they all produced arms, and, acting under the orders of Beall, they seized the boat, driving all hands below as prisoners. They then captured and subsequently sank another boat, the *Island Queen*. On the night of Dec. 15, 1864, Beall and his men attempted to wreck a train near Buffalo. On the next day the whole force was arrested at Suspension Bridge, N. Y., and brought to Governors Island. These guerrillas had terrorized the northern part of the state, and it was determined to make an example of them in short order. But Captain Beall claimed that he was acting under the authority of the Confederate government and was entitled to the rights of a prisoner of war. He was allowed to correspond with the authorities at Richmond, by virtue of the proclamation of Jefferson Davis, under date of Dec. 24, 1864, certifying that the Confederate government assumed "the responsibility of answering for the conduct and acts of any of its officers engaged in said expedition," namely, that in which Beall was concerned.



JOHN WILKES BOOTH

[From a hitherto unpublished photograph loaned by J. E. Taylor]

A military commission with Brig.-Gen. Fitzhenry Warren as president and Maj. John A. Balls as judge advocate-general was convened at Fort Lafayette for the trial of Beall. He was ably defended by James T. Brady, a lawyer who made his reputation defending Confederate prisoners in New York during the war. The trial settled adversely Beall's claims to the rights of a prisoner of war, for it was clearly proven that he acted not only as a guerrilla in civilian clothing, but that he had done the work of a spy. His execution was deemed to be a pressing necessity, both from a military and a civil point of view, and he was sentenced to be hanged on Feb. 6, 1865.

There existed between John Wilkes Booth and Captain Beall the strongest sort of personal attachment. They were together in school at Baltimore. The two young men were subsequently roommates at a college in Virginia, and Booth was a frequent visitor at Beall's home. Beall had been a "promoter" for Booth in his stage career, helping him financially as well as in other ways. While Beall was under sentence, Governor Andrews, of Massachusetts, was doing all he could for the young officer's release. Other very influential persons went to see Mr. Lincoln in his behalf, but it was Booth who worked day and night for his friend.

Booth came often to Beall's cell, and Dr. Foote was taken into their confidence. On one occasion Booth came in great glee to see his friend, and reported that he had just returned from Washington, where he was permitted to see the President. He had fallen on his knees before Mr. Lincoln, so he reported, and with tears in his eyes had pleaded for the life of his friend. He said that Mr. Lincoln had promised him that Beall should be saved.

When, however, it was seen that Beall was to be executed, Booth set about to effect an escape. Dr. Foote was a party to the plans. Two efforts were made, but in vain. A dark night and bribery of the keepers was relied upon. Booth had many wealthy friends in the city, and could command any amount of money at that time, for he was not only one of the most popular actors on the stage, but he had the confidence of all who knew him well. Nevertheless his efforts resulted in naught.

On Sunday, Feb. 6, the order was executed, and Beall was hanged within 30 yards of Dr. Foote's window, inside Fort Columbus, and not at Johnson's Island, as has been so often reported.

Booth came to New York on the morning of Beall's execution, and, being so grievously disappointed at what had occurred, he became, according to Dr. Foote's story, really an insane man. For what he termed the perfidy of President Lincoln toward himself and his friend Beall he at once swore to avenge his friend's death by killing both Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Seward, for the latter he held to be largely responsible for the President's course in this affair. Dr. Foote says he himself had no knowledge at the time of Booth's purpose to murder the President. Booth confided this to only one man, and that only an hour before the assassination. The man to whom he thus confided his purpose begged him not to carry it out; and finding that Booth was not to be turned from his revenge, left the city before the terrible tragedy occurred. Dr. Foote does not state who this confidant was nor how he (Dr. Foote) came to know about him. The probability is that Dr. Foote's long silence has been due to apprehension that he himself, if the story were told, would be held to have been an accomplice in the crime.

(Concluded on page 15.)

THE MILITARY COMMISSION THAT TRIED THE CONSPIRATORS

[From a photograph loaned by James E. Taylor]



Standing: M. Harris, Lew Wallace, August Kautz (brother of the admiral), and Col. Henry Burnett
Seated: Col. David B. Clendenning, Col. Charles H. Tompkins, Col. Albion P. Horne, James A. Eakin, Daniel B. Hunter, Robert C. Foster, John A. Bingham, Joseph Holt

Why Booth Shot President Lincoln

(*Concluded from page 1.*)

Booth, it is said, did not intend to shoot the President in the theater; but the contemplated opportunity did not offer itself elsewhere. But for the fact, says Dr. Foote, that Booth's spur caught in the curtain that fatal night he would have escaped—at least for a time. The failure of the Confederate cause had nothing to do with the assassination of the President; it was due simply to revenge engendered by Booth's love for his friend.

Whether this account is true or not, it may be added that the late Dr. Foote has not left a friend or acquaintance in his native state who would not readily vouch for his high character.

The above story by Dr. Foote corroborates statements made by the late Colonel Forney less than a month after Lincoln's assassination. Colonel Forney, in his paper, the Washington *Chronicle* (May 10, 1865), tells of Booth's desperate efforts to save the life of Beall. He interested McLean, of the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, at that time in Washington, and Senator Eugene Hale, of Maine, in his endeavors, and Colonel Forney himself was induced to write a letter to the President in Beall's behalf. Finally, according to Forney, McLean, Hale, and Booth called on the President after midnight, and until 4 A.M. Booth pleaded for a pardon. The scene is described as a most pathetic one, and in the course of it Booth confessed that he and some of his friends had a short time before formed a conspiracy, meeting at the house of Mrs. Surratt, to kidnap the President and hold him as a hostage for the release of certain military prisoners.

The result of the interview, according to Forney, as according to Dr. Foote, was the President's promise to save Beall's life. But when Seward was the next morning informed of the promise, he protested, finally threatening to leave the cabinet if the promise were fulfilled. So far Colonel Forney's story tallies closely with Dr. Foote's. The colonel, however, stated that Booth had several accomplices—Harold, Atzerodt, and others—who were to assassinate Seward. According to Dr. Foote, Booth had no accomplices. From the nature of the case it is improbable that either Colonel Forney or Dr. Foote speaks from any personal knowledge on that particular point.

Perseverance of Demosthenes

THE story of the struggles and perseverance of Demosthenes to success as an orator has been told again and again, but is worth repeating. He had a weak voice, an impediment in his speech, and very short breath. His audiences often in the first days of his oratorical experience hissed him off the stage; but he persevered. He stammered to such a degree that he could scarcely pronounce some words at all. To overcome these obstacles, he put small pebbles in his mouth and pronounced the difficult words. He also practised speaking while going up steep and difficult places, so that his breath might be tried. He went to the seaside, and in the face of the most violent seas delivered orations to accustom himself to the roar of assemblies and people who might object to his speeches. He took no less care of his actions than of his voice. He practised before a looking-glass to teach himself gesture. To correct an ungraceful habit of shrugging his shoulders, he practised standing upright in a kind of narrow pulpit over which hung a spear in such a manner that if, in the heat of action, he should shrug his shoulders the point of the weapon would admonish him of the fact.

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DESCRIPTION

OF

JOHN WILKES BOOTH!

Who Assassinated the PRESIDENT on the Evening of April 14th, 1865.

Height 5 feet 8 inches, weight 160 pounds; compact built; hair jet black, inclined to curl, medium length, parted behind, eyes black, and heavy dark eye-brows; wears a large seal ring on little finger, when talking inclines his head forward; looks down.

Description of the Person who Attempted to Assassinate Hon. W. H. Seward, Secretary of State.

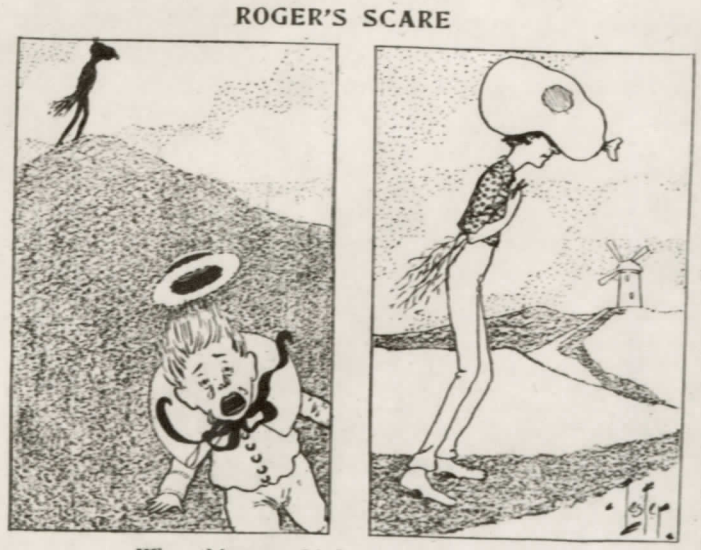
Height 6 feet 1 inch; hair black, thick, full and straight; no beard, nor appearance of beard; cheeks red on the jaws; face moderately full; 22 or 23 years of age; eyes, color not known—large eyes, not prominent; brows not heavy, but dark; face not large, but rather round; complexion healthy; nose straight and well formed, medium size; mouth small; lips thin; upper lip protruded when he talked; chin pointed and prominent; head medium size; neck short, and of medium length; hands soft and small; fingers tapering; shows no signs of hard labor; broad shoulders; taper waist; straight figure; strong looking man; manner not gentlemanly, but vulgar; Overcoat double-breasted, color mixed of pink and grey spots, small—was a sack overcoat, pockets in side and one on the breast, with lappells or flaps; pants black, common stuff; new heavy boots; voice small and thin, inclined to tenor.

The Common Council of Washington, D. C., have offered a reward of $20,000 for the arrest and conviction of these Assassins, in addition to which I will pay $10,000.

L. C. BAKER,
Colonel and Agent War Department.

FACSIMILE OF THE DESCRIPTION OF BOOTH CARRIED BY MAJOR DOHERTY, WHO COMMANDED THE SQUAD BY WHICH THE ASSASSIN WAS CAPTURED (AND SHOT). THIS WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE ACTUAL CIRCULAR CARRIED BY DOHERTY, WHICH WAS LOANED "THE NEW VOICE" BY JAMES E. TAYLOR

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In terror Roger fled;
But 'twas only Silas Hayseed with
A meal-sack on his head!

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