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Edwin Booth *John Wilkes Booth*

THE LAST OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH

THE STORY OF HOW EDWIN BOOTH, IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT, BURNED HIS BROTHER'S PAPERS AND COSTUMES

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BUT few people knew Edwin Booth—the Man. The actor had his hosts of acquaintances and several generations of worshipers. He was fond of a small knot of professional associates, with whom, over a cigar, he could lapse into the past of his recollections. I have often watched his eyes, the Hamlet eyes, that were wont to hold a world of pensive, sad suggestion, slowly brightening under the influence of genial talk until they reached the twinkling stage; little upward lines would appear at their corners, the brows above strike a humorous angle, the ends of his thin-lipped mouth commence to twitch, and I knew that coming from the depths of his memories was a quaint recital of stage life, perhaps of his days of vagabondage, and that the tale would be voiced in a low, somewhat tired tone, with never a touch of bravura or climactic effect. His quiet chuckles denoted how keenly he enjoyed living over these episodes of humor. I sometimes wondered how much of gloom and

melancholy overlay these little springs of joy. The terrified and sensitive soul we guessed at, but there were few to whom it was ever frankly revealed.

There is one glimpse of his brooding spirit that stands fixed in my memory. It did not come from his own lips, but from those of an old property man who had begun active life as a general errand boy about Booth's Theater that stood on Twenty-third Street. He was called "Garrie." His chief occupation was as "basket boy," in which capacity he conveyed the costumes and properties of the actors to and from their lodgings and the theater. Mr. Booth was very fond of Garrie, and employed him frequently in his own personal service.



It was well known how terrible a blow to the tragedian had been the assassination of President Lincoln by his brother John. For a time it was feared that it would seriously affect his reason. He was abnormally sensitive to the remotest reference to it.

At some time prior to the great tragedy at Washington the theatrical wardrobe and personal effects of John Wilkes Booth had been confided to the care of John McCullough, between whom and the former there had grown up a close and sympathetic acquaintance, and conveyed by him across the United States border into Canada. I have never heard it hinted that McCullough was at any time a party to the Lincoln conspiracy, or that he even sympathized with it; but that he was trusted by John Wilkes, and that he stood ready to render his friend a service in an hour of whose true import he, no doubt, was ignorant, is evidenced by the fact that this wardrobe trunk was in his possession during his Canadian engagements, before and after the assassination. McCullough probably concealed and abandoned it very soon after the cry for vengeance arose against all sorts of real and alleged conspirators. It was not a safe thing for an actor to have about while members of his craft were being looked upon with suspicion and fanatics advocated placing the entire dramatic profession under arrest. However, I have not been able to verify that part of the trunk's history. It was a number of years later, in 1873, that Edwin Booth learned of its existence, and it was forwarded at his request by McKee Rankin, the actor, who was then engaged professionally in the Province.

Garrie is still living and active; I will tell the story, as nearly as I can remember, just as Garrie told it to me:

"It happened early in '73. The day had been one of storm and drifting snow, one of those belated days in New York when winter forgets to become spring. Mr. Booth had a snug suite of apartments high up over the stage, in which most of his time was spent between his hours of business and acting in the theater.

"'Richard III' was on for a short run and had drawn a fine audience that night in spite of the storm. And, say! how he had played! Familiar as I was with his performance I found myself again and again standing in the wings watching him.

"On leaving his dressing-room about twelve o'clock, he gave me orders to wake him at three in the morning.

"After the lights of the theater had been put out, I lay on a cot in the property room, but I couldn't sleep—I shouldn't have dared.

"Then, too, I got very nervous listening to the sleet beating on the window panes and to the strange sounds that seemed to come from every part of the big, empty theater. The memory of his performance that night kept haunting me. How wonderful it had been! There was a little clock on a shelf opposite my couch, and I watched its slow-moving hands by the light of a lantern on the floor. Mighty glad I was when the time to call him arrived: the three hours from midnight had been the longest I ever knew.

"I mounted the stairway to his apartment, where, over a spirit-lamp in the library, I proceeded to make some strong coffee. This done I opened the door of his bedroom. He was breathing heavily in a dead sleep. Mr. Booth had one peculiarity—he was confused and irritated if suddenly waked from sleep; sometimes he would throw the nearest thing at hand at the one who had roused him.

"As a precaution I removed the lamp, the

pipe and the book with which he had smoked and read himself to sleep, his tobacco-jar (you know he was a great smoker), and all the movables from the reading-stand beside his bed; even his boots I placed across the room. Then I shook him gently by the shoulder and told him the time. As I expected, he sat up dazedly and reached about for something to throw at me; but it was only for a moment that his wits wandered. He sat for a few minutes, looking down across the foot of his bed, very still and thoughtful. I fetched the coffee I had made. After drinking two cups of it he asked about the weather.

"'Still snowing, Garrie?'

"'Yes, sir.'

"'It's three o'clock, you say?'

"'Yes, sir.'

"I helped him into his coat (he had lain down partly dressed), and took the lantern.

"'Where are we going, Mr. Booth?' I asked.

"'To the furnace-room, Garrie,' he said.

"So I led the way down the stairs, across the black stage, and into the cellar. The theater building was erected before the days of general steam heat, and the furnace-room was a cavernous place of vaulted brick, which held the big, old-fashioned heater that warmed it.

"Briggs, the fireman, had raked and banked his fire and had gone home for the night, when the performance was over, but now the furnace drafts were roaring again.

"I lighted a single gas-jet, and it made a bright spot in the gloom. Over near the furnace I saw an unusually large trunk, almost like a packing-case, tied with ropes; there were seals on it, some on the cords, some at the edges where the cover and the body of the trunk met.

"'I shall want an ax, Garrie,' said Mr. Booth. There was one in the corner by the coal-bins, and when I had found it I was told to cut the cords of the trunk and knock off the top. This was but little work, for the box was rickety and old. The lid was soon off, and out came a smell of camphor and musty fabrics. There they lay, the costumes of John Wilkes Booth. Edwin must have told some one about the receipt of his brother's trunk, for the story had got about the theater. I didn't have to ask whose wardrobe it was. I shouldn't have had the courage to do so, anyway; Mr. Booth's manner, the scary cellar, and the weird hour of the morning weren't things that made for conversation.

"There was no tray in the trunk—the dresses lay solidly packed and on the top of the pile were some swords and wigs. For a few moments he stood looking down at the things, then he laid the wigs and swords aside on the overturned trunk cover, and commenced taking out the costumes. The first was a Louis XVI coat of steel-blue broadcloth, embroidered with flowers in silk—probably John Wilkes's *Claude Melnotte* coat, I thought, and was aching to ask, but I said nothing. He turned it about at arm's length, as if he were fancying his brother's figure in it, and perhaps remembering when he saw it worn last. Then he handed it to me. 'Put it in there,' he said, pointing to the heater. I opened the furnace door—the coals were all red and blazing. I paused for a little—'twas such a shame to destroy so handsome a garment—and looked back at him, but he was as still as a statue—just waiting. There was no help for it—I threw it in. It settled down on the blaze with a sort of a hiss—a bit of the lace at the sleeve caught and the coat was in flames. We watched it without a word until it was nothing but a spread of red film in the blue coal flames. A satin waistcoat, a pair of knee breeches, and several pairs of tights were next taken out, and they followed the coat. He didn't spend much time over these, merely handed them to me and motioned toward the fire.



Booth's Theater

"After these there was a black-beaded *Hamlet* hauberk, which Mr. Booth turned affectionately about before he passed it to me. It needed but little guessing to know how hard it was for him to part with it. Then there came some 'shape' dresses of the Elizabethan period, and some fine silk hose and velvet shoes. They

may have been worn for *Iago*—he had played the part. There were cavalier's costumes, such as are used in 'The Hunchback' and 'The Duke's Motto.' These had seen much service and showed their wear, for John Wilkes's most successful performances, with the exception of his *Richard III*, had been in the romantic plays. One, particularly striking, was a cut-leather jerkin with slashed green velvet sleeves, a sword belt to match studded with steel nail-heads—the velvet trunks like the sleeves—and a broad-brimmed hat with a handsome ostrich feather. These, with a pair of cavalier boots, went to the funeral pyre. Then his Roman things for *Marc Antony*, the velvet coat and gray trousers he had worn for *Raphael* in 'The Marble Heart,' his costumes for *Romeo*, *Shylock*, *Macbeth*, and a gorgeous robe for *Othello* made of two East India shawls, so fine you could have pulled them through a lady's bracelet.



Without a word Mr. Booth inspected each article, touching it fondly as if it were his own flesh and blood, before handing it to me to be burned

"Pinned in a cloth was a stunning Indian dress—genuine thing—with a photograph of John Wilkes in the same costume, dated Richmond, Virginia, 1859-60. I guessed the part to be *Metamora*.

"It was agonizing, living through these moments, while without a word Mr. Booth inspected each article, touching it fondly as if it were his own flesh and blood, before handing it to me to be burned. Sometimes a draft through the furnace door sent a swarm of floating sparks into the shadows of the cellar space, and I watched them to see that they did not set fire to the building. He didn't notice them: his gaze was fixed on the flames, and his face was drawn and white.

"Presently he came across a package of old letters, wrapped in a handkerchief and tied with a faded pink ribbon. As he examined

their addresses I glanced over his shoulder, and could see that they were directed to his brother, and some of them in what seemed to be a woman's handwriting. He had looked over only a few when his eye flashed, his lips pressed together, and crushing the package in his hands he moved quickly past me and threw it angrily on the coals. This was the first time he had been moved out of the calm which he had held since we began. 'Twas like some of the flashes of anger in his performance of *Othello*. But it was over in a moment—temper was always that way with him. Since that night I have often wondered who had written those letters. No one will ever know.

"Finally he drew out of the trunk a long, belted, purple-velvet 'shirt,' ornamented with jewels and gilt lace, and a like-colored robe made to attach to the shoulders. Both garments were much creased, and in places the fabric was worn threadbare. He held them out for a moment, then sat down on the edge of the trunk with the costume on his knees. For fully a minute he didn't move, and as he sat looking at the costume, his eyes filled with tears, which ran down his cheeks, falling on the tinseled trappings. After a while he glanced up at me, as if for the first time he was aware that anyone was near him.

"'My father's!' he said, his voice hoarse and shaking. 'Garrie, it was my father's *Richard III* dress. He wore it in Boston the night I first went on the stage as *Tressell*.'

"'Don't you think you ought to save that, Mr. Booth?' I ventured to ask. He became quieter. 'No—put it with the others.' In a few minutes it was nothing but ashes. I felt as if I had assisted in a crime.

"He didn't linger so long with the various articles after this, except now and then to pause over a costume as if he were puzzling his brain to recall what part it had been used for. It was curious how eager he was to see every fragment destroyed. I was obliged to turn the flaming mass over so frequently with the long furnace poker that my face and hands were scorched with the heat. Sometimes he took the iron rod from me and performed the task himself. When the bottom of the trunk had been reached and the last garment, a couple of finely wrought daggers, broken scraps of stage jewelry, and various odds and ends, which, strangely enough, included a pair of women's pink satin dancing-slippers, were thrust in on the coals, I threw in the wigs and even the swords that lay upon the cover—they would break and melt before the fire could be mended again. At the last I was directed to knock the trunk to pieces, and these, with the cords that had bound the box, were the final contribution to the flames. We stood for a few moments, silently watching the snaky rims running through the feathery ashes and the sword blades glowing to a molten heat, then he bade me shut the furnace door. The sacrifice was complete—complete with one exception—a simple wreath of bays tied with a broad white ribbon. 'Twas his one memento.

"'That will do,' he said quietly. 'We will go now.'

"I looked at my watch. It was nearly six.

"The morning was still black; the storm had not broken; the wind was howling through the streets outside. Somewhere a shutter, loose and creaking, was being flung now and then by the wind against the side of the building, and the echo of its blows went booming through the empty galleries.

"What emotion had arisen during that scene in the furnace-room had sunk to the depths, and his face had found again its old, set look of gentle melancholy. We came up to the stage and crossed to the stairway leading to his rooms. 'You needn't come, Garrie. Thank you,' he said.

"I ventured a 'Good morning, sir,' but he merely nodded, and I stood at the foot of the stairs with my lantern until I heard his door shut above."

This is Garrie Davidson's story of how Edwin Booth placed the seal on the tomb of his brother's memory.

