He Was Nearly Imprisoned When Lincoln Was Shot

Perhaps no one more vividly remembers the scene of the night of Lincoln's assassination than Mr. L. G. Jaquett, a soldier of this city, who enlisted and was sworn in at Harrisburg, Pa., with Company H, First Rifles, Pennsylvania Reserve Volunteer Corps, May 15, 1861, and who participated in several battles while in the service. His regiment was better known as "Kane's Bucktails," among the first to respond to Lincoln's call for three-years' men. He recently gave me the following account of how near he came to going to the old Capitol Prison under suspicion as a conspirator.

"The night President Lincoln was assassinated," he said, "I was at the theater and sat in the dress circle nearly opposite the President, his wife and Major Rathbone. I went there expecting to see Gen. Grant, as it was reported that Lincoln and Grant would both be there. Grant had been unexpectedly called to New York and was not there.

"Well, the play was nearly over when there was a pistol shot. Lincoln had been leaning forward with his arms resting on the front of the box. Everyone was quiet, for it seemed for a moment Lincoln had dropped his head on his arms apparently to rest, when there was a sudden shriek from Mrs. Lincoln; then a man jumped over the front of the box and hung by his hands with his face toward the box. He dropped to the floor, shuffled diagonally across the stage with his face toward the audience and in a tragic manner, with his hands raised above his head, a pistol in one and a dagger in the other, said something but few understood, "Sic semper tyrannis," and then a terrible excitement ensued.

"Men and women wept and moaned. Before Booth got across the stage two large men by the name of Stewart, brothers, jumped from the orchestra seats, and tried to catch Booth, but he was soon beyond their reach.

"There was pandemonium in the theater. Doctors hurried to the box to find the victim still alive but unconscious. After Lincoln was borne away a friend and I went into the box. There were double boxes on each tier, and a narrow hall was made back of the front box leading to the farthest one, and then a petition down between the two boxes. As the President was there, this petition was taken down, leaving the hall still there, a door leading from it to the dress circle.

"Booth, or his assistants, had dug a hole in the wall (before hand) and papered it over. That night he placed a stick in the hole, and the end pressed against the lock of the door to the end of the hall. Waiting his chance while all would be looking at the play, Booth fired. Well, the door to the hall had been burst open and the stick, about three feet long by one and one-half to two inches, had fallen to the floor, and as they carried the President out, blood had fallen on the stick nearly its entire length. I picked up this stick and carried it to my room; cut an inch off it for a friend who was very anxious to take it with him to Maine. So many were begging pieces of this stick I hid it in my room for fear of losing it altogether.

"The next Saturday, a week after the assassination, a messenger from the War Department came to me just as we were starting home from the office, and said that a sergeant and several soldiers were at my boarding place, and were in my room turning everything 'topsy turvey' hunting for that stick, as a link in the chain of evidence. I hurried home; the guard met and seized me as though I had been a murderer, and they were about to take me to the theater, which was the company's headquarters, when the great government detective, Baker, stepped up, took me one side, and asked me to state fully to him all I knew in regard to the stick—which I gladly did.

"He then told the sergeant I would have to go to the War Department to give my evidence before the court of inquiry, then sitting. The sergeant said he had orders to take me to the theater, and he should obey, but at last yielded. I objected to going along the streets under guard, so the detective took me in his carriage.

"When we reached the War Department the commission had adjourned and gone home. Detective Baker said I could go home and come the next day, but the sergeant stepped up and said I must go with him. I objected to going as if under arrest, for the excitement was terrible, and some who had been arrested had been stoned and hooted as criminals. At last he consented to let me walk ahead of him. When we reached the theater the officers met us, jerked me rudely by the arm as though I was the assassin. I asked them to hear the sergeant and the detective, but they said they wanted no instructions from me, and ordered the officer to detail a guard to take me to the "Old Capitol Prison."

"Just then an officer came up and bade them let me go, saying he had listened to my story, and, greatly to my relief, they let me go, shook hands, and asked to be excused, saying it was an exciting time, and they wanted to see that nothing escaped them in a case of such importance.

"This is how near I came to being taken to prison, which was a very undesirable place in those days. I was one of the witnesses at the trial of the conspirators; saw and identified the stick with the small piece I had cut off tied to it, which had been brought from Maine by my friend. This, with all and everything used by the conspirators, is deposited in the judge advocate general's office, in the War Department; and I often take my friends there.

"I was well acquainted with Mr. Lincoln, as in 1856 I was for many months in Illinois, stopping at Decatur and Clinton, where I met and saw very much of this great man.

"That terrible night is a living memory, and the old soldiers who rallied to the call of Abraham Lincoln will be the last to forget every incident connected with his assassination."

M. D. L.

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