BOOTH AND HIS CRIME

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Family of the Assassin Among Sufferers.

Shadows Which Clouded Lives of the Innocent.

Brother and Sister Bowed by Killing of Lincoln.

John Sleeper Clarke Sent to Seek Fame Abroad.

Results of a Tragedy That Startled the Nation.

APRIL 14, 1865, was a day of general rejoicing among the loyal people of the nation. It was Good Friday, and the many religious people who observed it as a day of fasting and meditation mingled with their religious duties profoundest thanks to the God of nations, because the bloody fraternal war that had lasted for four years seemed about to terminate in the overthrow of the enemies of the republic and the re-establishment of peace.

Only five days before Gen. Lee had surrendered the army of north Virginia to Gen. Grant, and President Lincoln had already grappled with the grave problem of reconstruction. It was regular cabinet day, and a protracted session was held and the question of reorganizing the southern states was elaborately discussed. The President was unusually cheerful, and spoke most hopefully of the early establishment of peace and the reunion of the states. He emphasized his purpose to discard the policy of vengeance.

He is quoted in Nicolay and Hay as saying to the cabinet: "No one need expect that I will take any part in hanging or killing these men, even the worst of them. Threaten them out of the country, open the gates, let down the bars and scare them off. Enough lives have been sacrificed. We must extinguish our resentments if we expect harmony and union."

After an exhaustive consideration of the question, he selected a special committee of the cabinet to formulate a policy of reconstruction on the lines he had indicated, declaring to the cabinet that "they must now begin to act in the interest of peace."

Gen. Grant had just arrived at Washington crowned with the laurels of Appomattox, and sat with the cabinet during most of its session, and telegraphic reports came of the imposing seremonies at Charleston, where Gen. Anderson had hoisted over Fort Sumter the same flag that he had taken down and saluted on that day four years before, when he surrendered the fort to Gen. Beauregard.

During the afternoon the President took a drive with Mrs. Lincoln, and his biographers before quoted say: "Never simpler or gentler than on this day of unprecedented triumph, his heart overflowed with sentiments of gratitude to heaven, which took the shape usual to generous natures, of love and kindness to all men."

The surrender of Lee practically overthrew the military power of the confederacy. There were other confederate armies in the field, the largest of which was in North Carolina, commanded by Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, but in his front was the victorious army of Sherman, largely outnumbering him in every attribute of military strength and confident of an easy victory over the broken, despairing and disintegrated army of the enemy.

The occasion had suddenly come to test the statesmanship of our government, and Lincoln not only well understood the great duty imposed upon him, but he well understood how to incline the South to peace and reunion. He felt that the great work of rehabilitation depended largely upon himself.

Congress was not in session, and would not meet until December, and he was confident that he could attain such progress in reconstruction on generous and sympathetic lines as would practically determine the action of Congress and bring it into accord with the administration. Had Congress been in session the radical elements would have been vehement for vengeance and greatly retarded the reunion that Lincoln had so well considered as possible and so well matured his plans to accomplish.

President Lincoln and Gen. Grant were invited with their wives to appear at Ford's Theatre in the evening to witness the play of "Our American Cousin," by Laura Keene's company, and both had accepted; but Gen. and Mrs. Grant later decided to take a train for the North in the evening, and Maj. Henry R. Rathbone and Miss Harris, daughter of Senator Harris and fiancee of Maj. Rathbone, were invited by Mrs. Lincoln to join them.

It had been publicly announced that Lincoln and Grant would be at the theatre that evening, and the auditorium was crowded from parquet to dome to welcome the President and the victor of Appomattox. When Lincoln and his party entered the theatre there was an instant pause in the play, and the audience rose to cheer the distinguished guest, while the band played, "Hail to the Chief."

About 10 o'clock J. Wilkes Booth, who had acted in the same theatre and had the entree to every part of it, entered and passed unobstructed to the President's box armed with a Derringer pistol and a dagger. He quietly entered the box, and before he was observed by ane one pointed the pistol close to the head of the President and fired. The heavy ball crashed through the skull into the brain, and Lincoln was mortally wounded.

Booth immediately sprang from the box onto the stage whirling his dagger over his head and with the defiant utterance of "Sic semper tyrannus!" he rushed out at the rear of the theatre, where a horse was held in waiting for him. He was a trained athlete, and his spring from the box to the stage was an easy task, but the stage was draped with a bountiful supply of stars and stripes and his spurs caught in the flag, bringing him to a fall that broke one of his legs, thus greatly hindering his escape.

The story of the removal of Lincoln to a humble private dwelling across the street, of his death and the vicissitudes and tragic death of Booth and his associates are too well known to need repetition.

Of all the many sad days of the war, during which I felt its fiercest desolation in my own home in Chambersburg, the morning of the 15th of April I ever recall as the one dark day in which there did not seem to be a semblance of silver lining to the impenetrable cloud that hung over us.

I went to the depot at 9 o'clock in the morning to take a train for Philadelphia, and was there informed by the telegraph operator that a dispatch had just passed over the lines telling that Lincoln had died at 7:22 that morning from a bullet wound inflicted by Booth, the actor, at Ford's Theatre, the evening before. The keen sorrow the tragedy brought to me, with my wealth of affection for Abraham Lincoln, was measurably overshadowed by what seemed to be a sudden plunge of the nation into anarchy just when its deliverance was so brightly promised.

Andrew Johnson, the new Vice-President, had appeared at the inauguration and given such a disgraceful exhibition of himself that he was compelled to retire to escape the threatened resentment of the Senate for its fearfully offended dignity. The elder Francis P. Blair kindly took Johnson to his country home, and he had not been seen in the city from the 4th of March until the 14th of April. He had never entered the Senate after his inauguration as Vice-President, although in the enjoyment of his usual health, and he had been very generally and severely criticised for the dishonor he had brought upon his great office and upon the government.

Such a man called to the presidency to meet the gravest duties which ever confronted an executive, with his unbridled political passions which had been poured out in a floodtide against the South, seemed to dispel the last hope of the reunion of the states. He was then an unknown quantity in politics; had never voted the Republican ticket until he voted for himself as a candidate for Vice-President, and all who had on that fateful 14th of April shared the joy of Abraham Lincoln were suddenly plunged into the starless midnight of despair.

The present generation, which has witnessed the assassination of Presidents Garfield and McKinley, can form no conception of the political and sectional conditions which existed when Lincoln was murdered. Garfield and McKinley were assassinated by unbalanced cranks, and the whole people were stricken with sorrow, but Lincoln fell by the assassin's bullet when the South was implacable in its hostility to him believing him to be a rude jester and relentless butcher, and even in the North, so intense was the partisan strife of that day, there were many who were in sincere sympathy with the South but too cowardly to avow it, who felt no sorrow because of Lincoln's death.

The confederacy was then in the agony of its last throes, and even President Davis, who was then a fugitive from his capital, when advised of the assassination of Lincoln believed that it would strengthen his cause. In his "Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government" he admits that the dispatch announcing Lincoln's assassination was read in his presence to the confederate troops of North Carolina and elicited cheers, and he adds: "For an enemy so relentless in a war for our subjugation, we could not be expected to mourn."

His estimate of Lincoln was that of the South generally. He believed Lincoln to be a relentless tyrant, and hoped that Lincoln's death might in some measure repair his shattered fortunes, but 15 years later, when I visited him in his home in Mississippi, he paid the highest possible tribute to Lincoln, expressed sincere regret that he did not better understand him during the war, and said that next to the day of the fall of the confederacy the darkest day the South has seen was the day of Lincoln's assassination.

The period of more than a generation has passed since the murder of Lincoln, but the painful and often pathetic echoes of that assassination have not yet entirely perished. I never met J. Wilkes Booth personally, and never saw him play but once, and that was at Ford's Theatre in Washington, only a few months before he committed his awful crime in the same forum. He appeared as Pescara in the play of "The Apostate," and I was greatly disappointed to find one bearing the name of Booth, with nearly a decade of experience on the stage, exhibit so little of histrionic ability.

He was a man of strikingly handsome presence, flashing dark eyes and rather pale complexion, with admirable grace of manner, but in the play he seemed to be wildly tragic whenever opportunity offered, and possessed none of the inspiring and impressive attributes of his father or of his brother Edwin. On the stage he showed his true character as fanatical in everything he attempted.

He was a wild enthusiast, a creature of unbridled impulse, delighting in waywardness, and evidently without any adequate moral balance. He was one of the three sons of Junius Brutus Booth, who is remembered as the most accomplished tragedian of his day, and whose life was replete with strange vicissitudes alike in its domestic, professional and individual features, and at times disturbed by mental disorder.

J. Wilkes Booth was a blatant secessionist before and during the war. He was a volunteer in aiding the capture of John Brown. He had staked everything on the success of the confederacy, and expected to be lionized as its great tragedian after it had been established. In the latter part of 1864 and the early part of 1865 he saw that the military power of the confederacy was broken, and his distempered and unbalanced mind was absorbed in schemes to halt the adverse tide against the lost cause.

He first planned the abduction of Lincoln, and gathered around him a little circle consisting of Lewis Powell, alias Payne, an ex-confederate soldier from Florida; George Atzerodt, who had been playing spy and Potomac blockade runner; Samuel Harrold and Michael O'Laughlin, confederate soldiers from Maryland, and John H. Surratt, son of Mrs. Mary E. Surratt, at whose house in Washington the conspirators met.

Booth's plan was to abduct Lincoln and conduct him to Richmond, thereby making himself the hero of the confederacy and attain peace; but disaster followed disaster to the confederate cause, and finally the surrender of Lee so inflamed Booth that he resolved upon the murder of Lincoln, Seward and Johnson; and when the announcement was made that Lincoln would attend the theatre on the evening of the 14th of April he suddenly decided that the murderous work must be completed that night.

He assumed to become the murderer of Lincoln, Payne was assigned to murder Seward and Atzerodt was given the task of murdering Johnson. He executed his part and gratified himself by posing as a most heroic murderer; Payne attempted but failed in the murder of Seward, and Atzerodt was too cowardly to attempt the performance of the fiendish task assigned to him.

Booth was hunted with tireless energy, and when his monstrous crime was made known to his friends in Maryland and Virginia, from whom he sought shelter, they taught him the deepest measure of despair by refusing to be in any way connected with him, although many of them gave him food and shelter outside of their homes. He was finally overtaken in a barn where he had taken refuge, the torch was applied, and when the fury of the flames lighted up his hiding place Boston Corbett fired upon him and inflicted a mortal wound, and after three hours lingering in excruciating pain he died at 7 o'clock on the morning of the 25th of April, 1865.

J. Wilkes Booth promptly paid the penalty of his fearful crime, but, terrible as were his sufferings, and tragic as was his death, there were others innocent as the unborn babe who suffered untold agonies and worse than a thousand deaths because of the Lincoln assassination.

John Sleeper Clarke is well remembered by the people, but most of those of the present day recall him only as he has appeared on our theatrical boards for two or three brief seasons since he made his home in London. I well remember him as one of the most delightful of our young comedians at Wheatley & Drew's Arch Street Theatre, Philadelphia. He rose rapidly in his profession, and there are many yet who remember his Toodles, his Paul Pry, his Wellington DeBoots and other characters in comedy in which he was excelled by none and equalled by few.

When just attaining his high position as a comedian he married Miss Asia Booth, only daughter of the elder tragedian, and they made their home in West Philadelphia. He was an accomplished gentleman, devoted only to his profession and his home circle, which to him was the holiest place of earth, and J. Wilkes Booth, when temporarily visiting Philadelphia, made his home with Clarke.

On the morning of the 15th of April, 1865, while Clarke was shaving himself, he was shocked by a terrible scream from his wife, who had the morning paper brought up to her before she left her bed. When Clarke rushed to his wife and inquired the cause of her disturbance she pointed to the terrible headlines in the paper announcing that J. Wilkes Booth had murdered the President. Language could not define the terrible blow to Clarke and his wife. She was not in vigorous health, and while vainly trying to calm her hysterical agony a United States marshal knocked for admittance, placed a guard about the house, and permitted none to enter or leave it.

Clarke was notified that he and his wife were under arrest for complicity in the murder of Lincoln. The officer knew Clarke well, and knew that he was entirely guiltless of any knowledge of the murderous purposes of his erratic brother-in-law, but the whole nation was shocked, and every possible source of information relating to the conspiracy was seized by the omnipotent power of the government. The house was carefully searched, and, of course, nothing found to indicate that the murder had been considered there.

Clarke was taken as a prisoner to Washington and committed to the old capital prison, but no charge was made against him, and when the case was finally unravelled and the guilty parties discovered he was given his freedom without conditions, and thereby publicly acquitted of all participation in, or knowledge of, the crime of Booth. Mrs. Clarke was held for some time as captive in her own house, where a few weeks after the liberation of her husband, Creston Clarke, the present distinguished dramatic artist, well known throughout the land, was born.

Clarke's high hopes of a long and successful dramatic career in this country were suddenly ended; and he went to London with his family. He never severed his relations with his old friends here, and evidently had great pride in the country he felt he could visit only as a stranger.

I remember him calling at my house one morning when he was filling an engagement in this country some 15 or 18 years ago, and he left with me his check for $500 as a contribution for a popular celebration of the Fourth of July, then a few days distant. It was easy to see that he was broken-hearted, and it was hard for him to say that his wife had not visited her home country because of her infirm health and great suffering during sea voyages, but between the lines could be well understood the fact that Mrs. Clarke never could entertain the idea of visiting the United States, where the crime of her brother would be on every tongue.

Clarke won fame and fortune abroad, and always had large investments in this country, but his life was ever overshadowed in the terrible cloud of sorrow that hung like a pall over him and his household.

Creston Clarke grew up as a boy in London entirely ignorant of the crime that attached to his family, until one day, when 10 years of age, while playing with some American boys in London, one of them asked him whether he was related to the Booth who had murdered Lincoln. The boy was dumfounded, and immediately ran home and asked his mother what it meant. With tears in her eyes, she simply answered: "Ask your father." He did so, and then for the first time learned the story that had brought consuming and ineffaceable sorrow to his parents.

Mrs. Clarke lived only at the altar of her home and family, and was personally unknown in London, save to a very few trusted friends. She died broken-hearted, and welcomed the grave as giving the peace that life refused. A few years ago Clarke followed her to the long home for which both had sighed through many years.

Another sad life was a most pathetic echo of the assassination of Lincoln for more than a quarter of a century. On the night of the 14th of April Edwin Booth, brother of J. Wilkes Booth, played to a crowded house in Boston in the character of Sir Edward Mortimer, and the next morning, when he read the terrible announcement of the assassination of Lincoln, he was utterly overwhelmed, and at once announced his purpose to retire from the stage forever.

He was a gentleman of the highest culture, a most blameless character, genial, refined and beloved by all who knew him, and he was credited as the only one of the three sons of the great tragedian who inherited a large measure of his father's genius. He was then in the zenith of his fame and just in the noontide of life. Five years before he had married Miss Mary Devlin, an accomplished and highly respected actress, but in less than three years she died, leaving a daughter, Edwina.

It is an open secret that at the time of the assassination of Lincoln Booth was engaged to a very beautiful and accomplished Philadelphia lady, but soon thereafter her father on his deathbed exacted from her a promise that she would not become the wife of Edwin Booth. The promise was given, and after the death of the father the lady entered a convent in France and dedicated herself to the church.

For nearly a year Booth was practically a recluse, shunning all appearance in public and seeing only a few of his devoted friends. He was naturally of quiet, sober temperament, and the fearful calamity had brought him continued melancholy. His friends finally urged him to resume his profession, but he at first vehemently refused it.

After repeated and earnest appeals to him to resume his life work for his own sake, with the assurance that the public would welcome him with generous sympathy because of his unspeakable suffering, he finally reappeared in "Hamlet" at the Winter Garden Theatre of New York in 1866, and was received with boundless enthusiasm. He then continued his great career as a dramatic artist, and with the highest measure of success, not only at home but abroad. He played in nearly all of the leading cities of the country, with the single exception of Washington, where he always refused to appear.

Later on he had associated with him as leading lady Miss McVicker, of Chicago, one of the sprightliest little actresses of her time. She was a ray of sunshine wherever she went, and soon rekindled in Booth the hopes and affections which he had consigned to forgetfulness. They were married and played together for several years, when another sad affliction befell him, as his bright and charming wife became first a prey to melancholy, which finally ended in hopeless insanity that soon gave her refuge in death.

His last efforts on the stage are well remembered as the most successful of any of our distinguished dramatic artists. It was in association with Barrett, on whom the sobered and sorrowing spirit of Booth could rely for devoted friendship and business management; but Barrett's death in 1891 made Booth feel like a tempest-tossed ship at sea, without rudder or compass, and he lived quietly in his home in the Players' Club, New York city, which he had founded, until June 7, 1893, when this sad and most pathetic echo of the Lincoln assassination went to final rest in the City of the Silent.

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