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The Real Double of Lincoln's Assassin

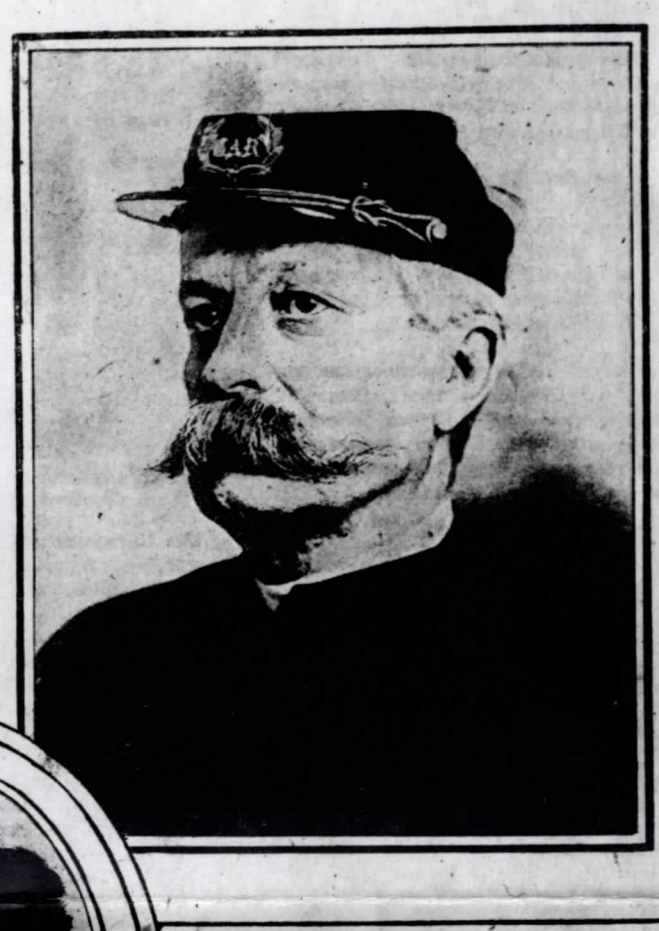
Lieut. W. C. Allen, the Union Cavalry Officer, Who Was the Living Image of John Wilkes Booth, Dramatically Tricked Edwin Booth Into Believing He Had Seen His Brother Wilkes Alive in London Years After the Assassination of President Lincoln.

By John Farrar.

WHY did Edwin Booth believe that his brother, John Wilkes Booth, was living long after Boston Corbett was supposed to have shot him dead in the flames at Garrett's barn?

The great actor, it seems, thought that he had seen his brother alive in Europe. This uncertainty never cleared. Practically to the present day this doubt of Edwin Booth's has given credence to the ever-increasing mystery that surrounded the death of that last flaming spirit of the rebellion. Double after double has arisen with ghostly claim—now the dried mummy of a suicide in Oklahoma, preserved on an office shelf for the gaze of the curious; now the pastor of a Virginia church, secretly believed by his congregation to be the disguised Wilkes Booth.

Edwin Booth was misled by a practical joke. After many years the story of the striking resemblance between William C. Allen, a heroic young officer of the Union Army, and the unfortunate Wilkes Booth, is revealed. It is indeed a dramatic twist of circumstance that caused one of the very men who trapped Wilkes Booth in the burning barn, and may have fired the shot that killed him, to draw the curtain of mystery around his death and burial by a piece of startling mimicry.



Lieut. W. C. Allen, as he looked at the age of 67, forty years after the historic tragedy of April 13, 1865.

THEY had told me that the widow of William Allen was still alive; that she was a woman to whom the life of Abraham Lincoln was a vision and an inspiration, and that she had held in her heart for years certain secrets concerning the death of the man who had brought her "beloved President" from living glory to sudden martyrdom.

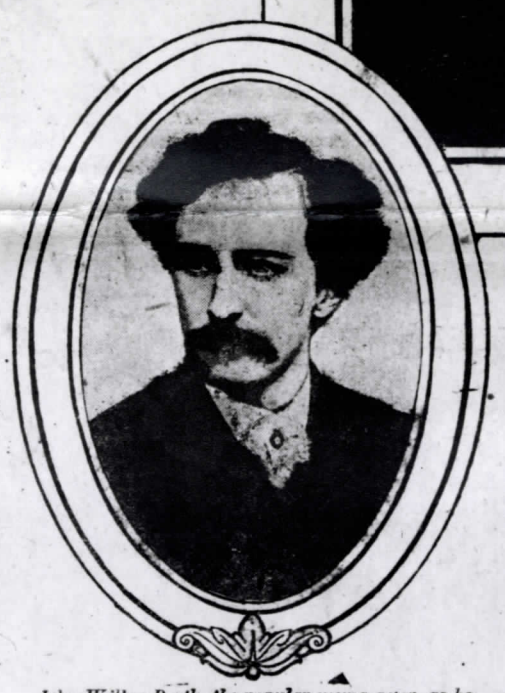
When I made a pilgrimage to Long Island, therefore, on a snowy, blustery day, I expected to find a gentle old lady with a fondness for silk caps, sitting by the fire, perhaps knitting, or perhaps simply dreaming of Lincoln and the dashing young soldier husband who had known him so well.

The house, as I waded up to it through paths covered with light snow, fitted perfectly into the Lincoln story. It was white and long, with lines like a farm-house, and enough of a yard to fool me into thinking it really was in the country. The front porch was colonial, with comfortable seats built in at each side, and a good old colonial door. I knocked. Here I would find my sweet, near-sighted, gentle lady, with her faint, queer perfumes, her soft voice, and her quiet stories about "Old Abe."

A bustling middle-aged woman came toward me down the winding stairway. Her hair was only just beginning to appear gray. She was vividly brisk and cheerful. True, she wore black silk, but the cut was by no means of a past century.

"Did Mrs. Allen expect me?" I asked, looking into the bright room beyond, with its old-fashioned furniture and its quaint hangings.

A little gay laugh, and she led me to a comfortable chair.



John Wilkes Booth, the popular young actor, as he appeared at the time of this great crime.

"Sit there, please do"—and she sat opposite me. Her eyes were mischievous.

"You thought I'd be older, didn't you? Confess! You pictured me as a crinkly old woman, clicking out my last hours on a pair of huge knitting needles. Well, here I am!"

"But," I protested, "your husband was a Lieutenant in the Civil War, wasn't he?"

"He was. He served through the war, enlisted as a private, and was promoted to be a Lieutenant on Gen. Rickett's staff. They earned their promotions in those days, too," she added, with a little toss of her head. "After that, he was detailed for special secret service work in Washington. He was close to Gen. Grant—knew him well. And he knew and loved Lincoln.

"It's an old story for me to tell you of Lincoln's kindliness and greatness. Every good American learns these things in kindergarten days. But I'd like very much to tell you my husband's part in the events that happened after that tragic Good Friday in 1865 when Lincoln was shot. I want to clear away all the misunderstandings and the mystery about the death of Wilkes Booth!"

"AND do you," I said, "remember these things?"

About to be annoyed, she laughed instead.

"Do I look as though I did? No, I married Mr. Allen when I was fifteen years old, and that was many years after all these happenings. William was too young to enlist when the war broke out. I suppose he lied his way into the Army. But he wasn't too young to be a good soldier!

She fluttered with pride, and went on to tell me of him.

Evidently William Allen was a brilliant, bold, impetuous, fearless cavalryman, and an intrepid officer. He had saved the colors of his brigade by hiding them in a wheat field during a mad retreat. He had given his horse to the General, and suffered wounds and imprisonment as a result. Gallant, ready to do or to suffer on the chances of the moment, talented, imaginative, it is not hard to understand later events.

Years later, when William Allen was a well-known figure on Park Row, it is strange that his extraordinary story did not escape him in some leisurely moments, and creep into the newspapers.

Mrs. Allen shuddered, as she told me of his terrible months in Libby Prison.

"But that isn't what you came to hear," she said. "You know, though the wife of a soldier comes to know every moment of his old campaigns.

"You know the old story of Wilkes Booth's escape, don't you? After shooting Lincoln, as Booth leaped from the Presidential box onto the stage of Ford's Theatre, with his 'Sic semper tyrannis,' they say that he broke his leg; but in spite of this he got out of the theatre in the furor, jumped upon the horse held for him by old 'Peanut John,' and went into the night.

"A doctor attended him roughly—cardboard splints, wound hastily dressed; but the pain must have been fearful as he travelled on, goaded by the thought of capture, and the memory of his rash deed. For six days after that he hid cowering in the woods somewhere near Washington.

"Finally, with aid from his accomplices, he managed to cross the Potomac, and with his swollen legs in a pitiable condition, got as far as the Garrett farm at Bowling Green, Va.

"That day in Washington a detachment of the Sixteenth New York Infantry had received orders to search the countryside for Booth and his confederates. They located him, surrounded the barn, touched a spark to the hay, and set fire to the structure. You know how quickly flames leap through dry hay-stuffs!

"The excited posse stood outside waiting. Orders, some say, were given not to fire; but as the head and face of Booth were silhouetted against the whirling red within, almost at the same instant came the sound of several shots."

MRS. ALLEN paused. Her eyes were bright. She was remembering now so clearly the fiery patriotism of that soldier husband, dead ten years since.

"Some say that it was Boston Corbett who fired the shot that killed Booth. They say that he afterward went insane. But the truth is, I believe, that no one knows who fired the shot.

"My husband was one of that posse. He had taken part in the pursuit. He was there when the barn was in flames. He, too, fired! No one knows who it was that executed Wilkes Booth!

"They say, too, that it was some one other than Booth who was shot that night—Ruddy, or one of the other accomplices who resembled him. They are wrong! It was Booth, Booth himself. I'm sure. William knew him, and knew what he looked like better than most others, and for a peculiar reason."

She leaned forward.

"My husband was almost a living image of Wilkes Booth!"

"They were both very handsome men; chestnut hair, almost auburn, straight, clean-cut features, dark mustache, and wonderful eyes—deep brown. I suppose," with a little apologetic laugh, "you'd call them soulful.

"Yes, the two were so much alike that when Booth had shot Lincoln the newspapers, needing a picture quickly, had seized on one of my husband, taken only a week before by a Washington photographer, and printed it through the country captioned as the President's assassin. Later every attempt was made to suppress the photograph. My husband was naturally annoyed. It caused much confusion also, though it was little known.

"That's why he was so sure that it was Wilkes Booth and no other who lay dead in front of the burning barn with a wound in the back of his head; who was sewed

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in an army blanket and, later, buried on Capitol Hill under the flagging of the old prison yard.

"Later, my husband, detailed from the Secret Service, was present when Booth's body was exhumed—some time in 1869, I think it was.

"They had gone to the prison in the early morning, around 2 o'clock. They dug up the body, his relatives thought they recognized it, and it was taken to the family cemetery of the Booths in Baltimore.

"THE next thing I'm going to tell you has always seemed a little odd to me. It was one of those strange things that one does on the impulse of a mad moment or the dare of a thoughtless friend. Perhaps my husband was led on by the mere deviltry of it to play the trick that fed the rumor that Wilkes Booth was still living and in Europe, and mystified two continents."

She paused and looked out at the mad flurries of snow across Long Island.

"My husband had been in Europe," Mrs. Allen went on, "for several months. This was some years later. Edwin Booth was acting in London at the time. Mr. Allen and a party of friends had gone to see the great American actor in one of Shakespeare's plays. I've forgotten what play it was. It seems to me it was 'Richard III.' Did Booth act that? It doesn't much matter.

"During the course of the evening the memory of Wilkes Booth was constantly with them. They talked of my husband's strange resemblance to him. They watched the great brother, and remembered how dashing and talented Wilkes had been, with that fiery, artistic temperament, that gift of brilliant acting, a lover of heroics, a champion of lost causes, who had played the assassin when he believed he was playing the martyr. Then, carried into the world of make-believe by that power of the magnificent actor, the surviving Booth, they came out from the theatre with a mad plan in their heads.

"Don't you know how you come out of a theatre sometimes with a feeling of unreality, sometimes almost a glow of mimicry reflected from the stage? You are yourself, yet not yourself, and at such times you would do things that in cold daylight without the magic influence of the emotion through which you had just passed, you would never think of doing.

"Well, the idea crystallized, either in my husband's head or the minds of his friends. It was a foggy night. They went around quietly to the stage door. The crowd had cleared away, leaving the back of the theatre in shadows and the white drifting fog. A cab had drawn up and was waiting to take away the star.

"As Edwin Booth came out in the sudden little oblong of yellow light reflected on the fog from the opened door and seated himself in the cab, a solemn face showed for a moment at the window. A face from the grave—hatless it was, with wavy hair, the luminous brown eyes, the aristocratic features.

"'Wilkes!' gasped the actor, 'Wilkes!'

"But the vision had faded into the fog of London.

"My husband never declared himself. I don't know why."

SO one of the underlying mysteries of the Wilkes Booth tragedy is cleared.

Wilkes Booth in Europe was William C. Allen, Lieutenant of Cavalry of the Union Army of the United States.