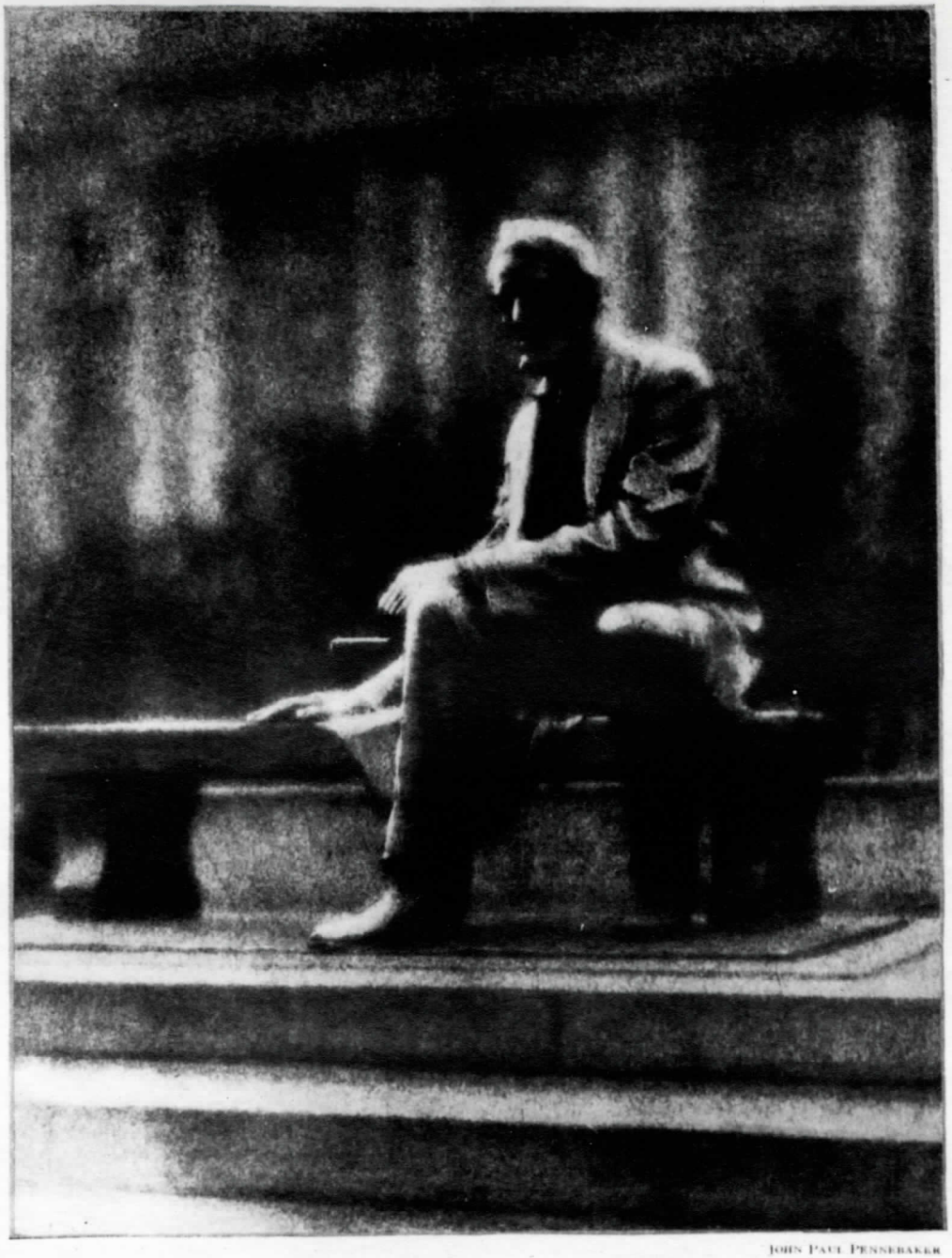

JOHN PAUL PENNEBAKER

The famous Borglum statue of Lincoln in City Hall Park, at Newark

THE STORY OF APRIL 14TH RETOLD

That Night in 1865 When Comedy Turned To Tragedy, As Told by Mrs. Nelson Todd

SIXTY-THREE years ago Lincoln was assassinated. Yet as each February comes around and the birthday of the great man is celebrated, some there must be who can still recall the scene in Ford's theatre. The re-telling of the tragic end can add nothing to Lincoln's glory, but may serve to recall vividly for us that great personality which even in times of heroic airplane flights, giant buildings and tunnels, stands for the greatest achievement of all time.

No one knows exactly what happened at the moment Lincoln was shot and directly after. Authentic histories differ, as is to be expected in the recounting of a time of intense amazement and horror. One moment the playgoers were entranced with the gay sallies of the play, the next paralyzed with the tragic shooting.

Among the spectators that fateful night sat a young woman, twenty-five years old. She and her husband were

visitors in Washington, from Newark. Now, at the age of eighty-eight she can still recall the last sight of Lincoln, and the scene within the theatre, when the joy of the gay holiday gathering turned to horror. This little old lady is Mrs. Nelson Todd, a bit out of history herself for she has seen nearly a century pass in review. "Birthdays," she says, "are celebrations for the living. I never look back, I am a Columbus; I believe in sailing on." But her story of April 14, 1865 she tells us, since it is the spirit of the living Lincoln we celebrate, the man who "belongs to the ages."

So close did Mrs. Todd sit to the box occupied by the President that she feels that no details escaped her of those few minutes in which Lincoln was shot and Booth jumped to the stage twelve feet below, and fled.

Imagine yourself, then, at a benefit and last night performance of Laura Keene in "Our American Cousin." "The theatre was draped in dark red," says Mrs. Todd, "with a fabric like brocatelle." The festoons of the drapery on the box were almost hidden by the flags especially erected in honor of the presence of Lincoln. Just at this point, it is interesting to note that it was on these draperies, and not the flags, that Mrs. Todd claims Booth caught his spur and thus caused his dreadful fall. As we know, the President's box was to the right of and next to the stage. The President sat in an old fashioned rocking chair, next to him Mrs. Lincoln, then Miss Harris and Major Rathborne, the only guests that evening, for while it had been announced earlier in the day that General and Mrs. Grant would be in the box, they had unexpectedly made their way North that afternoon. Thus, seated near both the box and the stage Mrs. Todd was a very close eyewitness of the scene.

A strange circumstance influenced Mrs. Todd's recollection of what she now saw. John Booth and all his family were dear friends of the Todds. "No finer young man ever came to such a bad end. It was all due to bad company," says Mrs. Todd. Naturally her interest was very closely centered on Booth when she saw him fall on the stage. Moreover it is doubtful if any one saw the assassinator appear in the President's box or were eye-witnesses of Booth's struggle there with Major Rathborne.

The curtain went up on the second act. "I saw Booth jump to the stage. He was hurt dreadfully, and my concern was all for him. I did not know Lincoln had been shot, I thought Booth had committed suicide." In these few words Mrs. Todd relates her story of the death of Lincoln, probably all that the majority saw of the actual shooting. It was all over in an instant, some say thirty seconds.

At several little points here in her story our eye-witness differs from the historians. So astounded was she at seeing her friend, Booth, on the stage, so paralyzed (and this is a vivid memory to her) at the look of pain and horror on his face, that she could not take her eyes from him, even when the cry was heard from the President's box. Laura Keene, who is thought to have been behind the scenes at the time of the shooting, Mrs. Todd claims leaned over and patted Booth on the head. Just here, according to historians, he ran from the stage to join his accomplices behind the scenes. But Mrs. Todd saw him, she says, drawn behind with a rope which his helpers threw to him, for his left leg had doubled under him and was broken in the fall, and he could not move.

Booth had shot Lincoln from the back. There was not a sound to be heard in that packed house. No one recognized the man on the stage as Booth; no one at first realized that the man who had jumped and fallen from the box, then escaped from the stage to his horse in the alley was the assassinator of the country's beloved leader. Thus many valuable minutes were lost in giving chase to the daring murderer. Only the few who were at once admitted to the box knew in reality what followed there. But all saw the President lifted tenderly from the theatre, and we have the little house across the street standing to tell the tale of the backroom where Lincoln died the next morning, at 7:22, April 15, 1865. The young clerk whose room it was at the time had hung pictures of his family on the walls. Today these pictures accept gracefully their unexpected place in history and still smile serenely down on those who enter. In their faces one may read little of the tragedy of that spring morning.

In the confusion and uproar that followed that moment of amazement in the theatre, Mr. and Mrs. Todd determined to return at once to Newark. They hurried to the station, terrified by the angry mob that was filling the streets. Forcing their way on to a cattle train they arrived at Newark in the early dawn next morning, just as all the country learned and mourned that "Lincoln is dead."



MRS. NELSON TODD, who tells us this story, needs no introduction to CHARM Readers. But to review the outstanding events of any life that has seen eighty-eight years of changes, is to make one wonder at the idea of modern thrills and dangers.

It was where the State House steps now stand in Albany, that Mrs. Todd was born in 1840, the daughter of the late Aron M. Rodwell and Elizabeth Craig Gerthwaite. She attended St. Mary's School at Burlington, New Jersey, and tells a delightful story of those early days there. Mrs. Todd heard Jenny Lind at Castle Garden, and rode in one of the first horseless carriages. It goes without saying that the name of this representative of a fine old Newark family is outstanding in the membership list of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Colonial Dames.

During the Civil War she cut up her own wedding garments to make children's clothes. At the end of another war, life is still an amazing adventure to the youthful spirit that makes one of our grand old ladies.