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Captured Lincoln's Assassin

And Now He's a Porter in a Hotel at Budapest

By Dorothy Thompson

THE broken old man who takes your things in the cloakroom of the Bristol Hotel in Budapest will stop you if he recognizes you to be an American, and will tell you that he, too, was an American once. And if you greet him with more than a nod and a curt "So?" he will tell you the remarkable story of a Hungarian lad who enlisted in the Union army, fought throughout the Civil War and played an important role in one of the memorable events of American history—the capture of Wilkes Booth, the slayer of Lincoln. That event is more than fifty years in the cloakroom porter's past and most of the fifty years have been spent in Hungary, and are full of excitement and tragedy. But to the porter in the Bristol, that afternoon so long ago, when he and a squad of American soldiers penetrated into a cabin in Maryland and found there the slayer of Lincoln, is the great memory of his life. He recounts the story tenderly, as one refers to an old romance, every detail so picturesque and vivid that, listening, one can see the capture and feel the excitement.

"My name is J. H. Birnbaum, but in the days when I was a soldier in the Sixteenth New York Cavalry, Company K, they called me by the English version of that name—Peartree. I was only a little boy when my parents emigrated to America. They prospered there. We had a fine house then, in old New York, at 8 Washington place, but it was torn down long ago. My father would have educated me well, but when I was sixteen I ran away and joined the Union forces. That was in 1863.

"During the war our regiment was sent to defend the capital, and we were stationed in the Camp of Vienna, in Virginia, not far from Washington. The night that Lincoln was killed we were all called to the capital and our regiment was divided into scouting parties of various size, all under the command of Lieutenant Baker. The party to which I belonged had thirty-five men under Lieutenant Dougherty.



Wilkes Booth



"OUR party marched into Maryland the day after Lincoln was killed. The same night as we rode through the countryside we came upon a little forest. In the center was a clearing and a little farm, and there was a cabin with a light inside. We were tired and hungry, and the lieutenant said to me, 'Go and see whether that farmer will give you anything to eat.'

"Two or three others went with me. I remember it all so clearly. As we opened the door we saw a bearded old man, with a kindly, pious face, sitting and reading the Bible by candlelight. When we asked the old farmer for food, he said there was nothing in the house but a jug of milk, and that he could not give us because he needed it for a sick man who was housed out in his barn and was under his care. I asked if we might see the invalid in order to help him, but the farmer answered that it was not necessary because the doctor was coming in the morning. I asked what was wrong with the patient, and the old man replied, 'He has a broken leg.'

"It must have flashed over my companions in that instant, as it flashed over me, that the man in the barn was Wilkes Booth. We knew that Booth, in jumping from the box to the stage after he shot Lincoln, had injured his leg. I could see the faces of my comrades change. However, we said nothing, but hurried away to report to the lieutenant.

"You will wonder why the farmer who was harboring the assassin told us so much. It was because he thought we were Confederate soldiers. In those days in Maryland nearly all the Confederates were wearing blue uniforms.

"We reported to our lieutenant, and at midnight we surrounded the barn. We went quietly, for we wanted to capture Booth alive, without a fight. Boston Corbett, one of our company, was standing by my side. He peered through a chink in the wall and saw that Booth had heard us and risen as well as he could, and that he had a carbine and was ready to fire. Simultaneously Corbett cocked his own rifle.

"Dougherty cried out, 'Don't fire,' but too late. Corbett fired, hitting Booth behind the ear. We heard a low scream that was hardly more than a catch of the breath.

"He wasn't dead yet when we took him out—him and his accomplice Herold. Herold was all right and we bound him and laid him on the ground beside Booth. Booth's hair was in ribbons across his forehead and his eyes were glazed. Just before he died, though, they blazed up once. I stood at his feet, as close as I am to you, and as he died he called upon his mother, and he cried, 'I die for my country.'

"That is all. We carried him to a boat in the river nearby, and as we were putting the body on board the doctor who had been called to attend him came by, and so we arrested him also. Later I saw Herold hung. I do not like hangings," he concluded simply, "but I am proud that I helped bring to justice the men who murdered the greatest soul who ever lived. And I am proud that I was once a citizen of Lincoln's country."

HOW came an American citizen from a prosperous family to be serving out his years across the world as the porter of a Hungarian hotel? Here is the rest of the story.

"I came abroad in 1867. The war had told on me. I was not strong, and when I was demobilized I was quite ill. I went to take a job in New Orleans, and there I got yellow fever, and doctors ordered me to come abroad. So I did. I had no intention of coming back to Hungary, and many times since then—" his voice lowered a little—"I wish I hadn't. I was in England and France and Germany, and then I took it into my head that I would like to come back and see the city where I was born. Ah, Budapest in those days was a wicked city. It was full of exotic temptations to a young man with plenty of money and a taste for adventure. I stayed on—one month, two months, three months. And then suddenly I was conscripted into the Hungarian Army and ordered to join the army of occupation in Bosnia.

"Sometimes, I suppose, you get irritated with all the vises and documents you have to carry with you these days. But in those days there weren't any passports, and that fact caused me a greater inconvenience than you have ever suffered in all your life. I had no way to prove I was an American citizen. I was registered in the birth registry in Budapest. All I had with me was my discharge certificate from the army. There was then no American Consul in Budapest, and though Mr. Causer, who had an agency here, telegraphed about me to the Ambassador in Vienna, he seemed unable to do anything. They sent me to Bosnia. For twelve years I served in the Hungarian Army.

"Well, I married. I made my home here. I had children. I even enjoyed a certain prestige because I had been in the United States and could speak perfect English. Now it seems that every other person in Budapest speaks English, but it was not so in the 80s. The great professor, Armenius Vambery, the world's greatest orientalist, who was knighted by King Edward of England for his services to Britain in the East, who was the greatest linguist, perhaps, in the world, used to invite me to come and see him, to talk English with him. I was a member of a very exclusive colony.

"But bad luck has followed me always. I had three sons. I brought them up to love America, and the picture which they have of me in a Union uniform is the most treasured possession of our household. But they had to fight against the Allies in the war, and one of them was killed, one went insane and one had both arms and legs shot away.

"So now, in my old age, I must support my crippled son and my poor sick son, who are all I have left—for my wife died—like that—when she heard that our other boy was killed. And times are hard now—and I am old."

The guests from lunch were crowding the cloakroom, and anyhow, the old man had finished his story.