"JOHN WILKES BOOTH'S" ROMANCE AND FLIGHT TOLD BY HIS STEPSON

Tennessean, Confident Lincoln's Slayer Married His Mother, Adds Chapter to Story of Actor Assassination.

By ROBERT HUNT

The shot that was fired at Concord, precipitating the American Revolution, was not the only shot that has been "heard around the world."

From his place of concealment behind a box-portiere in Ford's theater in Washington, John Wilkes Booth, an eminent actor of the American stage, pulled the trigger of his revolver and released a bullet that killed Abraham Lincoln, great Emancipator of slaves and Civil War president, whose echo will still be heard until all the evidence in the murderer's subsequent career has been bought in. And while that process is going on, public interest in the man of mystery and his flashingly dramatic life revives with every fresh bit of information relating to the probability of his having escaped and lived in the South after the murder of Lincoln, contrary to the theory that at first obtained to the effect that Booth was killed by Federal officers at the Garrett home in Virginia.

Staunch Adherents

One of the staunchest adherents of the theory that Booth escaped to the South is McCager W. Payne, 62-year- old guard at the Elk Cotton mills at Fayetteville,, who told The Tennessean last week the absorbing story of a man whom he believes to have been Booth, who married his mother on February 25, 1872. A license for the marriage of Mrs. Louisa J. Price Payne, Mr. Payne's mother, and one John W. Booth is on record in the county court clerk's office at Winchester, county seat of Franklin county.

Blue-eyed vision stretching as far away as that cold mid-winter day on Cumberland mountain, shone in the eyes of the white-haired Tennessean as he prepared to tell the story again. He was still for a minute, thinking; and then the words began to pour like a great herd of cattle through one little gate. They stumbled over each other and dates references to late nineteenth century history and family records flew thick and fast. He had prepared his case like an able lawyer, and he was eloquent and picturesque in presenting it.

Daughter of Minister

Louisa J. Price, so the story goes, was the daughter of a Cumberland Presbyterian minister, Wilson Price, and his wife, Martha Price, and was born about 18 miles from the head of Elk river. A stern upbringing in a godly household did not quell all of the young girl's turbulent desires to see the fine, colorful world whose faint rim gleamed at dusk on the horizon.

Miss Louisa's first step, then, toward achieving that world, which she was afterwards to find so drab and so tragic, was to marry a young man just going to the field of action in the Civil War.

Z. C. Payne, before the conflict between North and South broke out, was a grocer in Pelham and Wartrace. Four years of service for his native state and the ill-starred Confederacy behind him, Payne returned to Pelham and set of the spot where the bridegroom is said to have first laid eyes on his bride. Louisa, reared in the strict atmosphere of a Presbyterian home, was gently bewildered at the idea of being married by an officer of the law instead of by a minister of the gospel; but the air of the season, the swashbuckling romance of being carried off her feet by this handsome and mysterious stranger, whose sense of the dramatic moved always so near to the surface of his emotions allayed her religious scruples, and Mrs. Payne became Mrs. Booth.

At this point in his story, Mr. Payne interpolated a description of Booth. He was of medium size," said Mr. Payne, 'black-hired, with hair of the kind that curls easily if allowed to grow to any length; very dark eyes and a black mustache, slightly curled at the tips. He appeared to weight about 145 pounds, and was always well dressed and good looking. He was as distinctly a theatrical man as he was a painter and cabinet maker." Asked if Booth would have fallen under the class of "pretty boy" nowadays. Mr. Payne said he thought he would.

Urged to pick up the thread of history before he set out on another tack, Mr. Payne told of the early married life of the young couple. It soon developed that the personable Mr. Booth was a gentleman of parts, requiring the most amazing amount of attention and petting, so that life for Louisa Booth became even harder than during the round with needle and thread. But a glance, a gesture from her husband repaid her, and besides Booth was making good money at his trade, for which his dainty hands seemed eminently disqualified.

Forgot About Pair

Sleepy little post bellum Sewanee settled back in its warm living rooms and forgot about the unusual pair, except when Booth appeared before the university students in exhibitions of sleight-of-hand and readings from plays. Saturday night was the favorite time for the magic shows, when students from far and near would gather to watch the agile stranger perform his tricks of wonder. Booth loved the center of the stage, actually and figuratively, according to Mr. Payne, and sometimes he would become most temperamental and moody, reading from tragedies which Mr.Payne cannot identify. Louisa, being a thrifty soul, wondered quietly why Booth should not receive pay for his shows; but the ruffled performer would only disagree vehemently and smother his anger in long walks Louisa represented the practical, Booth the ideal; they could not come to terms on why art should not sell like cabinets.

One night, Booth was putting on a clean suit of underwear, preparatory to giving a show for a group of students. The glamor of the stage, be it in a barn or on Broadway must have gripped him even before he left the sordid earth to assume the color and fire of a Shakespearean character, for he turned to his wife and indicating some scars on his leg, he said, "Miss Lou, do you know what made those knots?. I got them in a fall on the stage of Ford's theater when I killed Abraham Lincoln." Booth's manner was dramatic and perhaps the sense of a great scene filled Louisa's mind when she failed to allow her Puritan complex full play

ful days passed and Louisa's fears were almost melted away by Booth's attention and hopefulness when the black shadow of patroling men began to fall across the Booth lintel again. Booth seemingly was terrified; he was dramatic, tragic, intense. They returned to the first quarters. No one should skin "the dirty skunk" while he had his feet to carry him.

Frayed edges on Booth's cuffs and impossible holes in McCager's trousers pointed to the imperativeness of securing the waiting fortune. Louisa began to wish herself back in Sewanee. The polished skyline of her dreams began to rust. And then the break came

Booth disappeared. One night when he didn't come home, Louisa went to the company officers. Yes, he had left just after receiving his pay check. Standing at the cashier's window, he was approached by two gentlemen who bowed and tipped their caps to the right with elaborate manners. Booth responded.

Louisa Proves Brave.

Perhaps his mother had never hoped for anything better, Mr. Payne says, for she was brave and uncomplaining and set about at once to rebuild her shattered house of dreams and to provide for her son and herself. Four hundred miles from home, without money and without friends, she sold her belongings and started preparations for going home. An Episcopal parish came to her aid, and the mother and son returned to Sewanee.

There Louisa started a steam laundry, later carrying on the same business at Monteagle. Still later, she became housekeeper for the late Col. A. M. Shook at Tracy City. When McCager was 14 years old, she died at Pelham, Tenn., having seen intimately what is beyond the horizon and having rebuilt her house after its hard tumble.

McCager's half-sister was born during his mother's residence at Sewanee. She was named Laura Ida Elizabeth Booth, after a sister of Booth and a sister of her mother. Should the child have been a boy, Louisa revealed just before her death, he would have been called John Wilkes Booth, Jr., according to the terms of an agreement made with her husband before he disappeared.

Lived With Her Aunt.

Ida Booth lived with her aunt and brother until he was 14 years old. At that age she was making her home with McCager Payne at Tullahoma when John Robertson's circus came to town. The old ancestral call of the stand, the ring, the stage was coursing through her veins at a hot-blood rate, and she went with the show, to learn to be a trapeze performer. Returning to Tullahoma five months later, she reported that she was making $35 a week at the show game. She took the principal part in the first play in Ford's theater in Huntsville, Ala. Married first to Charles Levine with whom she went to England, on his death she married Artman Driver, known on the stage as Art Norman. Ida had a son who also followed the footlights.

Mr. Payne's confident belief in the story shows in his face. His speech is intense; he is as interested in his story as his listener.

A fortune ranging between $100,000 and $200,000 hinges upon his relationship with Booth, Mr. Payne believes. In 1903 Jerome F. Payne, an uncle of McCager Payne, wrote him that a man who had lived for 32 years in El Reno and Enid under the name of David E. George died in the Grand hotel in Enid as a result of poison administered by his own hands. On his death-bed, he made the identical confession, referring to the scars on his leg and to other points of proof that he made to Louisa Booth at Sewanee. Failing at an attempt at suicide by pistol at El Reno, the so-called George crawled out of bed there and made his way to Enid, where he successfully administered poison to himself.

Will Is Opened

Jerome Payne at once wrote

up in the grocery business. Disease contracted in the filthy trenches before Richmond, however, were fatal to him, and he died, leaving Louisa J. Price Payne to make her own way toward that dim ideal that she had seen in the horizon since childhood, with the added impediment of an 8-year-old boy, McCager.

The training Louisa had received when she turned her elder brothers' out-grown pants into garments for the smaller boys served her in good stead, though, and she found it possible to make a living with her needle among the students at the University of the South at Sewanee, where she moved on her husband's death.

Work As Dressmaker.

Louisa had a friend, one Miss Travis, who often recommended her as a dressmaker and who in turn directed boarders to Miss Travis' dining room, who was interested in her boarders as well as her friends. Perhaps it was through the conscious effort of the boarding house keeper that Louisa came into contact for the first time with the handsome, dark-haired cabinetmaker who was living at the Travis house. Perhaps the stranger was attracted to the fair Tennessean and followed her home to see if her house were any warmer than her thin clothing, for he had a kind heart, the story-teller indicates. A dozen possibilities might be conjectured as to how the two were drawn together. The fact remains that they were, and that Booth, for the stranger's name was John Wilkes Booth, he said, he being a distant cousin of that celebrated actor who struck down the great war-time American president, was to leave an indelible trace in the young widow's life.

Rapid Courtship Follows.

A rapid courtshit followed, and a license for the marriage of Mrs. Louisa J. Price Payne and John W. Booth was issued by the county court clerk at Winchester on Feb. 24, 1872. The next day the couple was married by C. C. Rose, a justice of the peace at Sewanee, in a house that stood within 100 yards in condemning her husband for his crime. Louisa did not protest, there were great prospects in Booth for catching a glimpse beyond the Cumberland mountain.

Cabinetmaking Loses Interest.

Cabinetmaking did not appeal to Boothe as a permanent profession. A fortune which he claimed was in keeping for him began to call him. One hundred thousand dollars was waiting for him to take possession of it as his reward put up for killing Lincoln by the group of conspirators who planned the deed. Could he but reach New Orleans or Little Rock, Ark., it would be his—and Louisa's. Booth's dramatic revelations began to increase. "Boy," said he, addressing McCager, "if you ever tell anything of what you've heard me say, I'll nip your throat from ear to ear."

Louisa was awed and believing. She consented to leave Sewanee for Memphis. They left on July 1.

In Memphis, Booth hired out as a laborer in a cottonseed oil factory and provided rooms for McCager and his mother in a hotel near the union station. The quarters were downstairs near the street, dingy and bare, but Booth was hopeful and happy and what more could Louisa wish?

Louisa had ears as sharp as a mule's and though bewildered by it all she was observant of extraordinary going-on. Some one of a group of men whom she learned to recognize was always slouching along the street in front of the hotel. There were conferences, words were said just out of her hearing as she peered from behind the curtains. But one day she heard what they said. It was, "That's where he lives, the dirty skunk."

"Run Tell Your Pa"

"Run tell your pa there's men here to kill him," she said, dispatching McCager to the factory. Informed of his danger, Booth told the boy to inform his mother that transportation would be awaiting here within the hour.

The new dwelling place was in Southwest Memphis in a private boarding house. Some few peace-

ager Payne, who corresponded with Mayor Hensley of El Reno. The Mayor reported that upon the opening of a sealed will addressed to whom it may concern, it was found that all insurance, personal properties and papers should go to one Smith, who immediately left for Halifax, never again to be heard from. F. L. Bates, of Memphis, attorney for Booth, accompanied by Ida Booth, visited Enid, and Bates identified the body, which was exhumed 11 times for examination.

McCager Payne was unable to press suit for the large tract of land that belonged to Booth or George after his sister refused to sue with him, her refusal being based on the grounds that a 50-50 attorney's fee was too high. Ida died in the spring of 1925.

Mr. Payne also points to the fact that Mr. Campbell, head of the Historical Society of Oklahoma, advertised for him in The Tennessean, The Tullahoma Guardian, and the Fayetteville Observer after the finding of the will.

Mr. Payne has not kept up with the property for a year and a half and does not know whether the government is keeping up the taxes on it or what has happened.

In accounting for the man who was taken for Booth and killed at the Garrett home in Virginia following President Lincoln's assassination, Mr. Payne said that Booth declared the man killed in Viginia was his cousin, mistaken for him. He hid in a log all night before attempting to start on his way South. Booth was an expert shot, Mr. Payne testifies, and as clever and tricky a hand with cards as ever shuffled a pack. He could place a pin in his mouth and stick it in the floor by bending over backwards, so agile was he.

F. I. Bates, of Memphis, published a volume on the life of Booth after the assassination that carries out the points of Mr. Payne's story almost in every detail, and be Booth dead or alive, a suicide or a living target for Federal officers, there's one Tennessean who will go to his death believing that he was the step-son of John Wilkes Booth.

