MYSTERY OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH'S BURIAL BARED AFTER FIFTY YEARS

No More Need Romeos Rave of Starlike Eyes and Lily Hands When the Poetry of Feminine Footwear Calls

Hutchinson Commander

AT midnight of April 27, 1865, the guard at the little summer house of the Washington Arsenal grounds, which overlooked the Potomac and was used by officers as a landing place, challenged sharply as by the light of a lantern he saw approaching a small squad of men and made out the dim outlines of a team. The outfit halted and a man, an officer, detaching himself from his companions, came forward with the countersign.

The guard saluted, there was a whispered conversation, then the officer called to the squad, who advanced, one man leading the horses. By the dim lantern light the officer made out a bundle in one corner of the summer house and issued a command. The men picked up the bundle and placed it in the cart. The sentinel stood mystified as the detachment then disappeared down the broad avenue in the darkness.

The mystified guard would have been even more amazed at the proceedings had he known that the bundle wrapped in a gunnysack contained the body of John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln, and that the officer was Dr. George Loring Porter, an assistant United States army surgeon, who had been designated to dispose of it.

Dr. Porter is still alive and resides at Bridgeport, Conn. Aside from Capt. Christian Rath he is the only person alive so far as the writer knows who had anything of importance to do with the body of Booth, the execution of four of the Lincoln conspirators and the imprisonment at Fort Jefferson, Dry Tortugas, of four others.

The Bridgeport physician is the last of a trio of men who told the writer of what was done with Booth's body and of the execution of Mrs. Mary E. Surratt, David E. Herold, Lewis Payne (Powell) and George A. Atzerodt, and the incarceration of Dr. Mudd, O'Laughlin, Spangler and Arnold at Fort Jefferson.

Fate played strange tricks in the narration of the story, for it is a matter of more than a quarter of a century since former Commander Hutchinson, U. S. N., was met at Manitou Springs, Col. The fact that members of the writer's family have been officers in the United States navy since 1804 and that Commander Hutchinson had been shipmate with the writer's father during the civil war probably accounts for the willingness of Commander Hutchinson to tell of the part he played in the final scenes of the great tragedy.

Some years later in a mail car of a train running between Grand Rapids, Mich., and Detroit the writer made the acquaintance of Capt. Christian Rath, then a clerk in the railway postal service, but in 1865 provost marshal of the District of Columbia, the man who with his own hands made the nooses used and who executed the four Lincoln conspirators. From him was learned the part he played in the great drama's finale.

About a score of years later, at Bridgeport, in many chats, Dr. Porter described his connection with the Lincoln conspirators and his secreting of the body of Booth.

Late one summer night in 1889, seated on the veranda of the old Cliff House at Manitou Springs, Col., the writer was chatting with Commander Hutchinson. The conversation drifted lightly along from one topic to another until it finally touched on the navy. Suddenly the Commander said:

"Ever know I was the executive officer of the old monitor Montauk and was on duty the night the body of John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin, was placed aboard?"

Without waiting for a reply the former naval officer started to relieve his mind and the manner in which he denounced the army officers who rode over naval etiquette and tradition at the time referred to would have delighted the hearts of any officer who ever trod a quarterdeck of Uncle Sam's. After twenty-five years the conduct of the army officers still rankled.

It was not such a difficult matter to visualize the scene Commander Hutchinson described. One could picture the grim monitor Montauk dropping down from the navy yard at Washington to an anchorage in the east branch of the Anacostia, just above the monitor Saugus, on which were the prisoners, Mrs. Surratt, Arnold, Payne and Mudd. No person aboard knew why the ship's berth had been changed. There was an air of mystery and suppressed excitement among crew and officers. The hour was nearly midnight.

When the sulphurous remarks of the officer ceased he took up the thread of his yarn in this fashion:

"The news which Lieut.-Col. C. J. Conger brought to Washington at 5 o'clock on the afternoon of April 26 that Booth had been shot and had died three hours later at the Garrett farm and that Herold was a prisoner spread with the rapidity of a Colorado prairie fire. It did not take long to reach the navy yard and come aboard the old Montauk.

"We were much excited and elated, the latter because Booth was dead, the former because below deck, under guard, double ironed and heavily hooded, were O'Loughlin, Atzerodt and Spangler.

"Lord," ejaculated Commander Hutchinson, after he had succeeded in making a cigar burn to his satisfaction, "it doesn't seem nearly a quarter of a century ago that I was talking with Capt. Montgomery, in command of the Montauk, when an order came from Secretary of the Navy Welles for the monitor to drop down from the yard to the east branch of the Anacostia and come to anchor above the Saugus, and to clear the ship for action at midnight.

"As ordered, the ship took her new berth and promptly at 8 bells (midnight) all hands were piped to their stations and the ship cleared for action. A picked marine guard, armed with rifles and cutlasses, was ordered to fire upon any boat which attempted to come alongside without hailing.

"Three bells had struck about fifteen minutes before, when suddenly we were hailed from the darkness. The speaker said he was Col. L. C. Baker, then head of the secret service, with an order from Secretary of War Stanton to the commandant of the Washington Navy Yard to permit him to come alongside to transfer one or more prisoners. Baker was on the forward deck of a tug, and I ordered him to lay alongside.

"When the tug was made fast over the rail came four men, carrying a body sewed up in a blanket—one of the gray army blankets. This I directed to be carried forward and placed on a carpenter's bench on the deck. I placed a guard over the body with instructions to permit no person to approach it. The guard had no idea at that time, nor did I, whose body it was, and no one was permitted to ask any questions.

"Going aft I found that Herold had been placed aboard and was standing on deck while double irons were fitted to him. It came to me like a flash of lightning that the body in the blanket must be that of President Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth.

"Later I learned that Booth's body had been sewn in the blanket by Lieut. Edward P. Doherty, who was in command of the cavalry which pursued Booth and Herold. (Doherty died in New York April 3, 1897, while serving as general inspector of street paving.) After Lieut.-Col. Conger had reported to Secretary of War Stanton the facts of the shooting and death of Booth and the capture of Herold the Secretary ordered Col. Baker to take a tug, go to Alexandria and meet the steamer John S. Ide, Capt. Wilson, which was coming up the river, and take charge of the body of Booth and of the prisoner Herold. This transfer was made at 10:40 o'clock that night, as the Secretary of War had ordered. All of which explains why the old Montauk shifted her berth so hurriedly.

"About six bells (11 o'clock) that morning hell started to pop on the quarter deck of the Montauk. Surgeon-General Barnes and a party of officers and civilians came aboard and without a word to a soul marched forward and started to undo the lashings about the blanket covered body of the assassin. Their high handedness and utter disregard of the courtesy due from one officer to another came within an ace of causing them to be shot by the guard."

(Follows the report made by Lieutenant-Commander Hutchinson to Commodore Montgomery and by him transmitted to the Secretary of the Navy: "About 11 o'clock A. M. Surgeon-General Barnes came on board and without asking for the captain of the guard or the commanding officer of the vessel or showing any written authority or informing any officer who he was or seeming to pay the slightest attention to military etiquette due to one officer from another, walks up to the corpse and commences to cut adrift the wrapping. He was stopped by inquiry as to his authority for so doing. He replied, 'By orders of the Secretaries of War and Navy.' And afterward Major Eckert produced the written order.")

"Herold had his chance to cheat the gallows just before the sort of military coroner's jury was convened to establish officially the identity of Booth's remains, but was too much of a coward to grasp it," went on Commander Hutchinson. "Personally I had an awful scare, but it has always been a question to my mind if he ever realized his opportunity.

"Herold was brought on deck to be photographed. He came from below through the forward hatch slowly and moved forward with the sentries. He wore handcuffs and to his leg irons were attached a chain and a thirty-two pound shot, which was carried by one of the guards.

"As Herold approached the turret the gangway narrowed and here was

his one chance to cheat the gallows, for his feet fell on the deck a short distance above the water. A sudden rush to the right and he would have gone over the unrailed deck of the Montauk; the impetus of the dash would have carried the shot, if not the guard, after him. Two minutes later the last breath of Herold would have appeared as bubbles on the surface from where his body lay anchored in the mud three fathoms below.

"His chance was gone in an instant. But the possibilities flashed through my brain as I ran forward to where Herold and his guards were.

"After Herold had been removed below Surgeon-General Barnes and his assistant started the autopsy on the deck forward of the turret, which Herold had passed but a few minutes before; the commission or coroner's inquest being held in the commanding officer's cabin at the same time. Several persons had recognized the remains as those of John Wilkes Booth and had so testified. Charles Dawson, chief clerk of the National Hotel, positively identified the body by the initials 'J. W. B.' which had been tattooed in India ink on the right hand between the thumb and forefinger.

"Another witness whose identification was beyond cavil or question was Dr. J. Frederick May, who had Booth as a patient a couple of years before, when he removed a small tumor from the assassin's neck, on the left side, three inches below the ear.

"I accompanied the commission on deck, where the body was examined and the scar found as described by Dr. May. This ended the identification testimony. Soon after Surgeon-General Barnes and his party, save Col. Baker, left the ship.

"For what followed I was severely reprimanded," declared Commander Hutchinson, "and it was not my fault, it was wholly due to the high handed manner in which the army and secret service men handled things. The body of Booth was bent double and wrapped in a blanket, then in gunny sacking, firmly lashed into place.

"Col. Baker of the secret service called away a small rowboat and with two men placed the body in it and rowed down the river. That is the last I ever saw of the remains of the assassin. Baker never even waited for the box for the remains, as ordered by the department. Everything was done with a rush and with the greatest secrecy. I made a report on the matter, which Commodore Montgomery included in his and forwarded it to the department."

A score of years later at Bridgeport, in the study of his home, surrounded by books, valuable manuscripts and priceless Lincolniana, Dr. George Loring Porter in a number of chats told the writer of his stumbling on the corpse of the assassin, and how he later secreted it, acting under orders from the Government. For four years the public never knew where the body was, although many Government inspired reports as to its disposal had been printed in various publications. It is a matter of record that in 1869 President Johnson gave Edwin Booth permission to remove the remains to Baltimore for interment and that they are buried in Greenmount Cemetery.

Dr. Porter at the time of the closing scenes of the great drama was an assistant surgeon in the United States army, stationed at the Washington arsenal and was in medical charge of the Lincoln conspirators. It was probably due to this fact and his superb war record that he was chosen for the task of securely hiding the body of the President's assassin. Dr. Porter related his connection with the affair in this manner:

"On Thursday afternoon, April 27, 1865, Mrs. Porter and I took a boat ride down the Potomac, returning to the officers' landing at the arsenal grounds.

"We had to pass through the summer house to reach the land, and as we did I noticed in one corner some bundle securely wrapped in gunnysacking, but had no idea what it was, nor did I ask. The mere fact of a sentry's being posted at such an unusual place excited wonderment, but in those unsettled times we knew better than to ask questions.

"Later I learned that, acting under orders, Col. Baker had the body taken from the Montauk at 3 o'clock that afternoon by two men in a boat, who rowed down the eastern branch and to the landing on the west side of the arsenal grounds, where it was placed under guard. The landing ended at the summer house, and the bundle seen in the corner by Mrs. Porter and myself as we passed through, after being halted by the sentry, was the body of Booth.

"Sentries all about the reservation were calling the hour of midnight from their various posts when the military storekeeper of the arsenal, J. M. Stebbins, four enlisted men, one of them leading a team attached to a cart, another carrying a lantern, and myself, the only commissioned officer present, met at the little summer house, where a sentry stood guard over the thing in the gunnysack. The four enlisted men were members of the Ordnance Corps and were picked for their reliability and discretion. They were sworn to secrecy regarding the happenings of the night.

"Two of the men picked up the gunnysacked bundle, grunting at its unexpected weight, and placed it in the body of the cart. At a word the man leading the team started down the avenue. Men marched on each side of the cart, Stebbins brought up the rear and I marched ahead with the man carrying the lantern, the flickering rays of which cast weird and fantastic shadows on the broad avenue. Not a member of the party spoke. The only sounds to break the stillness were the crunching of the cart wheels, the shuffling of our feet and the fall of the horses' hoofs on the gravel road.

"We marched down the avenue to the west side of the penitentiary, repeatedly challenged by the sentries as we approached their posts. The series of buildings known as the penitentiary was about 250 feet long.

"Between the administration and jail ends of the penitentiary was a middle section, which had been used as a storage place for fixed ammunition at the outbreak of the war and later as a general storage place. It was a large room about 50 by 40 feet, with stout supporting columns of cedar. There were two enormous doors in it sufficiently large to admit a wagon, opening on the north and south sides.

"The cart was led to one of the doors, which Military Storekeeper Stebbins unlocked. Once we were inside the apartment the door was carefully locked and the cart led to the extreme southwest corner of the storeroom. By the flickering light of the lantern we saw a shallow hole before us. Whether there was a box in it I do not know. A pile of dry earth was on one side of the excavation. Grotesque shadows were cast by the lantern light falling on the gun boxes and packing cases.

"Two of the men picked up the body of Booth, still in its wrapping of gunnysacking and enshrouded in an army blanket, and deposited it in the shallow hole, which could not be dignified by the term grave. This was quickly filled with earth, packed down and the surface smoothed off. The surplus dirt was thrown into the cart and taken away. As the room had a dirt floor there was little trouble in concealing the fact that a hole had been dug, an object placed in it, then filled up and the surface restored to its usual condition.

"When the main part of the old penitentiary building was torn down in 1867, necessitating the removal of the remains of Booth, the key of the apartment could not be found and there is said to have been a lively time at the War Department, for the key had been in the care of Mr. Stanton, Secretary of War. Finally it was found, the door unlocked and in the presence of a large number of officers the body of Booth was removed from the place where we had secreted it to one of the large storehouses situated on the eastern side of the arsenal grounds. There it reposed until 1869, when President Johnson gave Edwin Booth permission to have it removed to the Booth lot in Greenmount Cemetery, Baltimore, where it was interred.

"When Booth's body was taken from the place where we had concealed it the remains of the four executed conspirators, Mrs. Surratt, Payne, Herold and Atzerodt, were disinterred from the penitentiary yard and buried near the body of Booth. All of the buildings which were standing forty-five years ago on the night of the so-called burial of Booth have been razed, so far as I know, to give place to the War College and officers' quarters."

Swaying with the motion of the car and working his mail, Capt. Christian Rath, who executed the Lincoln conspirators, told the writer of his part in the drama on several trips between Grand Rapids, Mich., and Detroit and return. Capt. Rath was of German extraction and was chivalrous to a degree and averred that Mrs. Surratt should not have been hanged; hanging was not for women; rather imprisonment would have met the ends of justice. Said the former Provost Marshal:

"Yes, I hanged Mrs. Surratt, Powell, who was known as Payne; Herold and Atzerodt. The latter two were whimpering cowards. Payne was the bravest man I ever saw or knew. If he had not been so brave and fearless and braced himself like a man to meet death in its most disgraceful form his neck would have been broken by the fall of the drop; instead he strangled to death.

"I saw the gallows built and secured the rope, which was three-ply Boston hemp, from the navy yard. I made the nooses and placed them on the beam, saw them adjusted on the victims, then stepped aside and gave the signal to the men underneath the gallows to spring the traps."