ONLY MAN NOW LIVING WHO SAW BOOTH DIE TELLS THE STORY OF HIS LAST HOURS

His Narrative Gives an Interesting Sidelight on How Soldiers of the Los Cause Regarded the Slayer of Abraham Lincoln

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The Rev. Dr. Richard B. Garrett is the only person living who witnessed the death of John Wilkes Booth, assassin of President Lincoln. Dr. Garrett now lives in Portsmouth, Va. He was 11 years old when Booth was captured in his father's tobacco barn.

By the Rev. Dr. R. B. GARRETT.

ABOUT 3 o'clock on Monday afternoon, April 24, 1865, my father and I were sitting on the front porch of our Virginia farm house when we saw four men ride up to the gate and halt. I was then 11 years of age and the happenings were of such a startling nature that they were indelibly impressed upon my memory.

"Good evenin'," was their greeting. We always say "evening" after the noon hour. My father returned the greeting and we sauntered down to the gate. One of the men, dressed as a Confederate captain, said:

"Mr. Garrett, I suppose you hardly remember me."

"No, sir; I cannot recall you," replied my father.

"Well, my name is Jett, son of your old friend Jett of Westmoreland county."

My father remembered a man of the name of Jett, but had no recollection of his son. However, he welcomed this man, who turned to his companions and introduced them.

"Lieut. Ruggles and Lieut. Daugherty, Confederate officers," he said. Then, turning to the fourth man, he made more of a ceremony of the introduction.

"This," said the man who called himself Jett, "is my dear friend James Boyd, a Confederate soldier who was wounded at the battle of Petersburg. He is trying to get to his home in Maryland. Can you take care of him for a few days until his wound is healed sufficiently to permit him to travel?"

My father was known for miles and miles around for his hospitality. He had shared it with the Federal as well as the Confederate wayfarers. Our home was two and a half miles south of Port Royal, on the Rappahannock River and on the road that led directly to Bowling Green, sixteen miles south. Naturally many travellers from both sides of the great conflict passed our home and many were entertained.

My father promptly offered to care for the four, but the first three thanked him and declared they must go on. They helped Boyd down from his horse and handed him a crutch. The three waved a farewell to him and left, while he limped into the house. I followed him in and placed a chair for him. Then I brought him some fresh water and asked him if the wound still pained him.

"Yes," answered Boyd, "it was not properly cared for and riding has jarred it so that it gives me great pain."

My father and I washed and bandaged the wound and he went out on the cool porch, where he slept in a chair for several hours. I was greatly interested in him. He was a handsome man with clear cut features and a head crowned with a shock of beautiful black hair. I distinctly remember how I longed to take his opera glasses. He had two pairs attached to a belt.

As we discussed the news of the day at the supper table that night Boyd was rather quiet. We were all charmed with the evident culture and refinement of the man and he was assigned to my brother Jack's room and Jack slept with me. Jack had just come home from the war after serving as a Confederate soldier. The next morning Jack went off early to Port Conway to fish and he came home in great excitement about 1 o'clock in the afternoon.

"Lincoln has been assassinated," he exclaimed, "and there is great excitement over at the Port!"

"It was a reckless man who did it!" declared my father.

"You think so?" Boyd asked with considerable energy.

"Yes, indeed. No good will come of it," my father insisted.

"What makes you hold that opinion?" Boyd asked.

"Because Lincoln made a better President than many people realize and I am sure he would have been far more lenient with the South than any successor will be."

"What reward is offered?" asked Boyd.

"One hundred thousand dollars," Jack told him.

"Only a hundred thousand!" exclaimed Boyd, with a surprised expression. "Why, I expected—I should expect it would be at least half a million. I think they'd give that much, too, to get the man."

"He'd better not cross my path," said my brother. "I'd behead him for my share of that money."

"Would you?" demanded Boyd.

"No," said my brother, laughing, "but it would be a big temptation to a poor Southern soldier home from war without a cent in his pocket. But I wouldn't harm a hair of his head. I'm tired of fighting and have shouldered my gun for the last time."

Boyd smiled in a most engaging manner.

"I did not take you to be a bloodthirsty sort of a young man," he said.

After we left the table my mother offered to dress his wound, but he declined, saying: "No, madam, I thank you. Though it does give me pain, there are other things I have to think of more than my wounds."

That afternoon — Tuesday, after 5 o'clock—we saw a heavy cloud of dust down the road, and presently three men rode up to the front gate. Two of them were Jett and Ruggles, the third a stranger.

"There's one of our men now!" exclaimed Boyd with interest, arising.

"What do you mean by 'our men'?" demanded my big brother.

"Oh, just some men who crossed the river with me," was Boyd's hasty reply. Then in great excitement he said: "Will you please go to my room and get my pistol which I left beneath my pillow?"

"What's the matter? Why are you so nervous?" demanded Jack.

"I feel safer when I am armed—been accustomed to it," murmured Boyd.

So Jack got his pistol, and although his large holster contained several weapons he crowded the pistol into it and hobbled down to the front gate, where he met the man who came with Jett and Ruggles and seemed to know him. They remained there talking while Jett and Ruggles rode on.

"He acts strange," I told my father.

"Just what I was thinking," declared my brother. In fact all of us had become rather suspicious, but we had not connected him with the assassination of the President.

While Boyd and the stranger were

talking at the gate and our family were becoming more and more nervous and suspicious Jett and Ruggles came dashing back in a cloud of dust, riding at full speed.

"Make your escape!" they shouted to Boyd. "The Federals are crossing the river at Port Royal!"

They rode into a thicket near by and hid, while Boyd, aided by the stranger, ran for some underbrush back of the barn and secreted himself.

It was not long before fifty United States cavalrymen appeared, riding fast along the road from Port Royal, and stopped to water their horses at a place nearly opposite our home owned by a negro, Ned Freeman. Then they went on two miles to a tavern called the Trap, where they took supper and rested a while before proceeding to Bowling Green.

Boyd and his companion came back to the house from their hiding place and offered my brother $10 to take them over to Guinea. When he asked them why they wished to go there Boyd said he wanted to go to Louisa Court House and join a Maryland battery that had not been disbanded. Jack refused. He said his horse had been working all day and was tired.

"I'll give you $150 for the horse," offered Boyd eagerly, but my brother, now thoroughly suspicious, declined. Jack was now convinced that something was decidely wrong and went to my father about it.

My father tried to persuade him that his suspicions were groundless, but Jack would not be persuaded.

"The war is over," he said, "and there must be something serious going on or United States soldiers would not be dashing through the country."

Then he went across the road to talk with the negro, Ned Freeman, who told him the soldiers had said they were hunting for two men, one of them lame. That settled it in Jack's mind, although even then he did not couple this with the assassination of Lincoln. He hurried back to the house and spoke to Boyd.

"Did you get into any trouble over in Maryland?" he asked.

"There was a little trouble, but it has blown over," was Boyd's careless rejoinder.

"Well, I must ask you to leave then, because my father is an old man and I do not want to distress him or have him distressed. He has been through enough trouble as it is," was Jack's demand. Young as I was I remember standing beside Jack, determined to help him if necessary.

They were sitting on the porch smoking. Boyd asked if he could not sleep on the porch, but my father told him the dogs were too savage, and asked him why he couldn't sleep upstairs as he had done the night before. Boyd didn't answer, but asked if he could sleep in the tobacco barn, not far off. When told that it was used for storing rubbish he said he wouldn't mind that at all.

For a while after supper he sat there smoking, the picture of despair. About 9 o'clock Jack got the key to the tobacco barn and took the two men out there to spend the night. Double doors were on all four sides and in the upper story were large windows. Bunches of tobacco hung from the rafters and hay and old furniture were piled about. Jack moved some furniture, piled up some hay for a bed and locked the men in for the night.

Jack was so suspicious that he asked me to stay with him that night in a nearby shed; he said he was afraid the men would steal our horses and get away.

Meanwhile, as we learned afterward, Capt. Jett had gone on past the tavern where the soldiers stopped to rest and reached Bowling Green ahead of them. They found him there asleep.

We also found out afterward that Jett had learned Monday morning that "Boyd" was in reality John Wilkes Booth. When Booth and his body servant, Herold, crossed the river from Port Conway to Port Royal Jett overheard Booth ask if any Confederate soldiers were around there. Jett introduced himself as Capt. Jett, and as they walked up the bank Herold told Jett that the lame man was Booth. Booth asked him to take him to a place of safety, and Jett procured horses and started, although Herold dropped behind somewhere on the road, and they were joined by Ruggles and Daugherty.

When the soldiers found Jett asleep at Bowling Green they ordered him at the point of a pistol to take them to Booth's hiding place, and in the dead of the night they arrived at our home excited and boisterous.

My father had retired early that night and had no idea that his guests were sleeping in the tobacco barn. He heard the noise, and came out and asked the men what they meant by such conduct at that time of night.

"What do you mean by harboring the murderer of President Lincoln?" they demanded of him.

"I know nothing of the President's assassin," my father honestly protested. "Two men asked to spend the night here, and as I never turn any one away I put them up and made no inquiries."

"If you don't tell where the murderer is hiding I will shoot you through the heart," declared a detective named Baker, putting his pistol against my father's breast.

"Don't shoot him; hang him!" exclaimed several of the soldiers.

Although my father still disclaimed any knowledge of the whereabouts of the men they put him under a guard of four soldiers, who crowded about him so closely that he could scarcely move. But all this awakened Jack and me, and we came out to learn the trouble. In the dark they grabbed us, then, learning who we were, asked us if we knew where the men were hiding. When they told us what they wanted Jack could not help exclaiming:

"There, I knew something was wrong!" and we promptly told them the men were in the old tobacco barn.

Almost as one man the soldiers and detectives made a rush for the barn and loudly ordered Booth to come out. That it was John Wilkes Booth, the man who shot Lincoln, whom we had been sheltering came as a great shock to all of our family.

When the soldiers ordered Booth to come out he answered with a thunderous "No!" Then he added, "If you will give me fifty steps I will make my escape," whereupon it was the turn of the soldiers to shout "No!" quite as thunderously. Then Booth saved my father's life, at least I shall always believe it, for he said:

"There is one man here who will surrender, but I never will. I want you all to know, however, that the gentleman with whom I am stopping doesn't know me nor what I have done."

When Herold, for whom Booth plainly had great contempt, stepped out the soldiers tied him to a tree where he could see all that was going on.

Then the soldiers made my brother pile hay about the barn and some brush and they set fire to it. From within Booth could see them as plain as by day, in the glare of the flames. He called out, through the blackness of the opening:

"Gentlemen, I could pick off all of you, but I don't wish to do it. I have accomplished all I want. I wouldn't hurt a hair of your heads."

At this the men put out the fire and, gathering some hay, ran into the barn. Col. Conger set fire to it and soon the building was in flames.

Then we saw Booth plainly. He stood as erect as possible, supported by his crutch. His face was set and deadly pale. As soon as the flames disclosed him Sergeant Boston Corbett took aim with his pistol and shot him through the throat. He fell instantly.

"Get his body out of those flames," the soldiers ordered my brother.

Why they should have made a young lad take the risk I never quite understood, but Jack was too good a soldier to disobey and he dashed in and with great difficulty dragged out the body. Then the soldiers took Booth to our porch and sent a messenger for Dr. Urquhart. We thought he was dead, but when some one attempted to place a pillow under his head he opened his eyes and said:

"No, no, let me lie here, let me die here."

Later when they tried to make him more comfortable he repeated this request and we did not disturb him, although a lady who was visiting with us wet a cloth and placed it to his dry lips. Under her gentle touch he opened his big, fascinating eyes and looked at her. He even tried to smile as he said:

"Tell mother I died for my country. I did what I thought was best."

We all stood about, every member of our family and the soldiers and others. I was so near to him that I could have touched him when he died. Once again he repeated the request that some one tell his mother he died for his country, and just as the sun of a new day was rising red in the East the curtain of his life went down.

The soldiers sewed the body of the strange, deluded man in an army blanket, put it in a spring wagon, with Herold as its companion, and drove to the river.

The rest of the story is better known. The body was taken to Washington and secretly buried; it remained in that grave two years and was then given up by President Johnson and finally buried in the family lot in Greenmount Cemetery, Baltimore.

Herold, as every history relates, was executed along with Lewis Payne, George Azterodt and Mary Surratt. It is not known whether Dr. Mudd, who set Booth's leg, really knew him. His brother says he did not, and he was strong in his denials. However, he was banished to the Dry Tortugas for life, but for services rendered during a yellow fever epidemic was pardoned by President Johnson.

Now to go away back to the five people in that box at the theatre when Booth shot Lincoln: The President had invited Gen. and Mrs. Grant to sit with them, but they were called out of the city unexpectedly. In their places the President invited the daughter of Senator Ira Harris of New York and his stepson, Major H. R. Rathbone. Tragedies were awaiting all five at the moment Booth fired the fatal shot. But let Nicolay and Hay, in their life of Lincoln, tell it:

"Quick death was to come to the central figures of that company. Over all the rest the blackest fates hovered menacingly—fates from which a mother might pray that kindly death would save her children in infancy. One was to wander with the stain of murder on his soul, with the curses of the world on his name, with a price set upon his head, in frightful physical pain, till he died a dog's death in a burning barn; the stricken wife was to pass the rest of her days in melancholy and madness; of these two young lovers one was to slay the other and then end his life a raving maniac."

Booth, however, did not die in the burning barn. Had he lain there his body would have been consumed by the flames which burned the building to a smouldering pile of ashes. He died on the front porch of my father's house at sunrise, and I stood within a few feet of him when the end came.