THAT FATAL NIGHT

By William Child, M. D.

[Surgeon of the Fifth New Hampshire Volunteers, U. S. A., Regiment Historian.]

At the earnest request of my daughter, I dictate to her the following account of the most awful event I ever witnessed—the assassination of President Lincoln, thinking it may be of interest to my children and my children's children, when I shall be no more, as well as to the public generally.

At first it seems like a half-forgotten fantastic dream, but, as I allow my mind to dwell upon the past, the mists of fifty years gradually roll away and the tragical deeds of that most terrible night in all our nation's history, stand forth as plainly as if they had happened but yesterday.

In the summer of 1864, the Fifth New Hampshire Regiment, of which I was the assistant surgeon, was ordered to the support of the troops then besieging Petersburg. Colonel Cross having fallen the previous year, while gallantly leading his men at Gettysburg, and Colonel Hapgood being severely wounded in August of this same year (1864), the command of the regiment fell upon Lieutenant-Colonel Larkin. In October, Lieutenant-Colonel Crafts was given charge of the regiment and at the same time I received my commission as full surgeon with the rank of major. We remained in this vicinity until the next spring, most of the time on active duty. It was a hard winter for both officers and men. In March, 1865, being tired out with the winter's work, I was allowed a short furlough and permission to visit my home in northern New Hampshire. About the first of April, however, I was ordered to rejoin the regiment at Burkeville, a few miles out from Petersburg. So on the 10th, I started for the front, accompanied by my wife as far as Concord, when I bade her farewell.

The letters which I wrote her during the next few days, and which have been carefully preserved for half a century, will tell the rest of the story better than I now can:

(Exact copy of letters of William Child to his wife, Carrie Lang Child.)

WASHINGTON, D. C.,
April 14th, 1865.

My dear Wife:

Wild dreams and sober facts are but brothers. This night I have seen the murder of the President of the United States.

Early in the evening I went to Ford's Theatre. After a little time the President entered—was greeted with cheers. The play went on for about an hour. Just at the close of an interesting scene, the sharp, quick report of a pistol was heard and instantly a man jumped from the box in which sat the President, to the stage, and, rushing across the stage, made his escape.

This I saw and heard. I was in the theatre and sat directly opposite the President's box. The assassin exclaimed as he leaped "*Sic semper tyrannis*"—Thus always to tyrants.

I never saw such a wild scene as followed; I have no words to describe it.

Sec. Seward was also wounded by a knife about the same minute.

The city is now wild with excitement. The affair occurred only an hour since.

Are we living in the days of the French Revolution? Will peace ever come again to our dear land, or shall we rush on to wild ruin?—

It seems all a dream—a wild dream. I cannot realize it though I know I saw it only an hour since.

W. C.

April, 15.

My dear Wife:

The President is dead. I send you a paper giving a correct account of the whole affair. It is supposed that an actor by the name of Booth was the assassin.

I could not sleep last night. The wild scene which I witnessed will never be forgotten by me. I shall remember the fiendlike expression of the assassin's face while I live.

I leave for the front today. I am well. Write to me at once.

Kiss my little ones.

W.

Granite Monthly
Volume XLVII
1915
pp 119-120

CAMP NEAR BURKEVILLE, VA.
April 19, 1865.

My dear Carrie:

It is now evening. I have been here about 24 hours.

It seems hard to return again to army fare, but I shall soon become accustomed to it. We have nothing but hard bread and salt pork with sugar and coffee.

Soon after leaving you at Concord I was on my way to Boston, where I arrived at 5½ (the 11th).

Found brother Parker—went to the Museum. Next day heard the great organ and at 5½ left for New York, via Sound. Arrived at Jersey Ferry in time for the first train and reached Washington at 8 P. M. the 13th.

Washington was in grand illumination, celebrating Lee's surrender, with bands, fireworks, etc. It was the grandest sight I ever saw.

Next day (the 14th) saw all our friends in Washington and several of the officers of the Reg. Also saw Genl. Grant. His pictures do not do him justice. You see the *man* only when he is in earnest conversation.

Went to the theatre that night and witnessed the greatest event of the last 200 years.

Next day, 15th left W. for City Point. We were obliged to "lay to" near Pt. Lookout until next day at dark. Then left for Fort Monroe, and just after daylight, the 17th, arrived at City Point.

At 11 A. M. took cars for Burkeville, via Petersburg. Took dinner at Petersburg,—then all night on a train in a box car, and arrived next day, the 18th, just before dark at Burkeville.

Thus I was 8 days making a journey, full of thrilling events, some joyous, some awful. I surely had excitement to my heart's content.

While I live I shall never forget the events I have witnessed during the past ten days.

Will write more tomorrow. Please write me soon—at once. Kiss the children for me. Kisses for yourself.

May God bless and protect us all.

W.

Some further facts came to my mind later which I was too agitated to notice or write about at the time.

As Booth crossed the stage he held in his clenched fist a dagger, pointed downward. He did not "brandish" it, as has been sometimes stated, but held it in a position ready to strike, should he be intercepted. I distinctly heard him say—"There's revenge for the South."

As soon as I could make my way through the confused, excited and almost frantic crowd, I went around to the President's box, and, saying that I was a physician, asked if I could be of any assistance. The reply was—"No, as his own physician and others are already with him." The curtains at the entrance of the box were partly drawn and I could see the bleeding, lifeless form of our beloved President, stretched out in an easy chair, while his wife sobbing and fainting knelt on the floor by his side. One glance was enough. God grant I may never see such a sight again.

The above narrative was dictated to me by my father, William Child, M. D., in his eighty-second year, fifty years after the events themselves transpired.

His expressive countenance, his snowy hair, his eyes, now flashing with excitement, and now dimmed with the quick rushing tears, his voice so thrilling in its earnestnss, but trembling and choked with emotion as he read aloud to us those precious letters—all together made his recital most dramatic and affecting.

We have in our possession the original letters, with many others of great interest and value written by him while in the service—also his commission, his sword, sash, shoulder straps, etc.

It is needless to say that these priceless treasures—these precious relics—will ever be guarded with pride and cherished with affection by "his children and his children's children."

KATHERINE CHILD MEADER.

BATH, N. H., 1915.