EDWIN BOOTH AND LINCOLN

WITH AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER BY EDWIN BOOTH

The Century Magazine, April, 1909

AT the time of the assassination of Lincoln, Edwin Booth was in Boston. The writer had it from Joseph Jefferson that Edwin Booth told him that when his servant came into his room in the morning, before he was up, and told him his brother had shot the President, his mind accepted the fact at once; for he thought to himself that his brother was capable of just such a wild and foolish action. Booth added: "It was just as if I was struck on the forehead by a hammer."

As is well known, the great actor was nearly crushed by this experience; but the affection of his friends sustained him, and after nearly a year he was compelled by public appeal to return to the stage.

We are permitted to print below, with slight omissions, a letter of Edwin Booth's, written immediately upon the death of Lincoln, to General Adam Badeau, his close friend, who was one of the witnesses at Edwin's first marriage. Badeau was wounded in May, 1863, and in July, just before the riot, was taken to New York and carried to Booth's house, being borne to his bed by the brothers, Edwin and John Wilkes. Early in 1865, Badeau was taken to New York after an attack of camp fever, and John Wilkes was again at his brother's house. But, as a matter of fact, John Wilkes and Edwin were not very intimate, and did not see a great deal of each other. It was well understood between them, and in the family, that they held widely different views concerning the war. (See "Edwin Booth," page 227, edited by Edwina Booth Grossman.)

Edwin Booth's regard for the Southern people was most sincere, but he was a strong Unionist and was a great admirer of Lincoln. No one can read this letter without the deepest sympathy with, and renewed admiration for, the great actor and large-hearted man, who rose up after a staggering blow to continue bravely his career as the leading tragedian of his time. This tragic letter seems to us one of the most important personal documents in our history:

Letter of Edwin Booth to Col. Adam Badeau. Written in Boston, Sunday, April 16 (1865), mailed in New York, April 17 (1865).

Envelop addressed: "Col. A Badeau Lieut Genl Grants Hdqrs Washington D C"

Lead pencil indorsement, not in Booth's writing, "Care Gen Ord Richmond Va"

The original letter is now owned by William H. Lambert, Philadelphia.

Sunday April 16th

MY DEAR AD

For the first time since the damnable intelligence stunned me * * * * * * * * * am I able to write and hasten to acquaint you of my existence as it has been so long a time since I last wrote you, making me afraid [*sic*] my silence. You know Ad, how I have labored since dear Mary was called from me to establish a name that my child and all my friends wd be proud of; you know how I have always toiled for the comfort & welfare of my family—though in vain, as well you know how loyal I have been from the first moment of this damned rebellion, and you must feel deeply the agony I bear in being thus blasted in all my hopes * * * * * * * * *

Alas! how frightful is the spectacle, what shall become of me * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * Poor Mother! I go to New York to day—expecting to find her either dead or dying. I 've remained here

thus long at the advice of friends who thought it necessary that I shd be set right before the public of Boston to whom I owe so much of all that is dear to me— You know our friends who loved & appreciated my Mary so well and as many who have ever been—even in this most awful hour my firm and staunch friends. Abraham Lincoln was my President for in pure admiration of his noble career & Christian principles I did what I never did before—I *voted* & FOR HIM! I was two days ago one of the happiest men alive—Grant's magnificent work accomplished, * * * & sweet Peace turning her radiant face again upon our country— Now what am I? Oh! how little did I dream my boy, when on Friday night I was as Sir Edward Mortimer exclaiming "Where is my honor now?" "Mountains of shame are piled upon me!" that I was not acting but uttering the fearful truth. I have a great deal to tell you of myself & the beautiful plans I had for the future—all blasted now, but must wait until my mind is more settled. I am half crazy now— You will be pleased to know that the deepest sympathy is expressed for me here—and by none more sincerely than dear old Gov. Andrew.

God bless you,

Ned—

In the charming volume of recollections and letters of her father, published by Edwina Booth Grossman, there is a letter of Edwin's of November 11, 1860, in which he cheerfully remarks: "I voted (for Lincoln) t' other day—the first vote I ever cast; and I suppose I am now an American citizen all over, as I have ever been in heart." And, writing in 1881, he refers to having also "voted for Lincoln's reelection."

Mr. William Bispham, writing in THE CENTURY for November, 1893, tells the story, which Edwin Booth himself told him, of his saving the life of President Lincoln's eldest son early in the war: "He had started for Philadelphia from New York, and while he was standing on the platform of a car, still in the Pennsylvania railroad station at Jersey City, and just as the train was about to move, a young lad, going from one car to another, stumbled, and would have fallen between them, had not Edwin caught him by the collar of the coat and landed him in safety by his side. The boy, whom Edwin had never seen before, evidently recognized him, and holding out his hand said to him, 'That was a narrow escape, Mr. Booth,' and thanked him warmly. Two weeks later Edwin received a letter from General Adam Badeau in which the latter mentioned that Robert Lincoln had told him that it was his life that had thus been saved."

Asked recently if he recollected the incident, Mr. Robert T. Lincoln replied:

"The account is essentially correct, but it is not accurate in its details. . . . The incident occurred while a group of passengers were late at night purchasing their sleeping-car places from the conductor, who stood on the station platform at the entrance of the car. The platform was about the height of the car floor, and there was of course a narrow space between the platform and the car body. There was some crowding, and I happened to be pressed by it against the car body while waiting my turn. In this situation the train began to move, and by the motion I was twisted off my feet, and had dropped somewhat, with feet downward, into the open space, and was personally helpless, when my coat collar was vigorously seized, and I was quickly pulled up and out to a secure footing on the platform. Upon turning to thank my rescuer, I saw it was Edwin Booth, whose face was of course well known to me, and I expressed my gratitude to him, and, in doing so, called him by name."

WE are authorized to correct the statement, recently made in print, that Edwin Booth went to Washington to identify the body of his brother John Wilkes when it was delivered to the family. For the sake of privacy, his own face being so familiar to the public, Edwin sent his brother Joseph, a physician, on that sad errand. After the tragedy, Edwin Booth never set foot in Washington except on the one occasion when he was summoned, and testified as to his absolute lack of knowledge of the crime. He was treated with great courtesy and detained only a short time.—THE EDITOR.

Century
April 1909