

JUNIUS BRUTUS BOOTH.

Anecdotes and Traits of the Great Tragedian.

His Desire to Be a Lighthouse Keeper.

The Famous Walk to Providence--Stage Combats, Etc.

The memory of a great actor never dies. So long as the traditions of the stage last, so long will the remembrances of the artist be kept green, and the transmission of his fame, from one generation to another, will be handed down to the last syllable of recorded time. At this remote period of the world's history, we do not forget when Roscius was an actor in Rome; and there can be no doubt that the name of Junius Brutus Booth the elder will dwell in the minds of men as long as that of the great Roman player. It is beyond a peradventure that Mr. Booth was one of the greatest geniuses and most scholarly actors who ever illuminated the annals of the English or American stage. Born at St. Pancras, London, on the 1st of May, 1796, he made his first appearance on the American stage at Richmond, Va., on the 6th of July, 1821, in the character of Richard III., and he died on board the steamer J. S. Chenoweth, on the Mississippi river, on Tuesday, Nov. 30, 1852. It is just a generation ago since his decease, and, although he was unknown to the present generation of play-goers, yet are there multitudes still alive who remember him in the maturity of his powers, while there can be no doubt there are still some in existence who can almost call to mind his first appearance among us. He was a scholar, and a ripe one; a man, most erratic in his nature, and it is beyond a question that there was a vein of insanity running through his composition. The anecdotes of Booth—authentic an unauthentic—are numerous, and as the writer knows of no continuous thread of them, it is his desire to supply the loss for the benefit of the readers of the HERALD. And first let us touch on what were undoubtedly

His Freaks of Insanity.

At the very outset of his career in this country, he gave evidence that there was a screw loose somewhere. As old Tony Weller desired to "keep a pike," so Booth desired to relinquish his career on the stage for the purpose of keeping a lighthouse. There can be no doubt about this, as will be seen from the following memorandum of his, dated Feb. 12, 1822: "Spoke to Mr. Blount, collector of customs, and one of the passengers, about Cape Hatteras lighthouse. He offered it to me, with the dwelling house and 20 acres of land attached, and a salary of \$300 per annum for keeping the light—government providing oil and cotton—a quart of oil per diem. Grapes, watermelons, cabbages, potatoes, carrots and onions grow in abundance there. Rain water the only drink, a cistern on the premises for that purpose. Abundance of fish and wild fowl; pigs, cows and horses find good pasturage. Soil too light for wheat or corn. Flour bought for \$4 or \$5 a barrel. The office is for life, and only taken away

through misbehavior. Lighthouse 75 feet high; light requires trimming every night at 12 o'clock. No taxes whatever. Firewood is procured from the pieces of wreck found on the shoals. One dollar a day is the charge for men who assist in cases of wreck. Straw-barries, current bushes and apple trees should be taken there; also a plough, spades and chest of carpenter's tools. Fine tables the best. Mr. Blount is to write me word if the office can be given me in April next, from his seat at Washington, North Carolina." This freak reached the ears of various theatrical managers, who put their heads together, and the result was that Booth did not become a lighthouse keeper, and so was preserved to the stage.

Burying the Pigeons.

In the Atlantic Monthly for September, 1861, Rev. James Freeman Clarke relates a strange adventure with the tragedian. Mr. Clarke in his young days was pastor of a church in one of the western cities. He was sitting one evening in his room, when a negro boy presented him with a note, of which the following is a copy:

UNITED STATES HOTEL,

Jan. 4, 1834.

Sir: I hope you will excuse the liberty of a stranger addressing you on a subject he feels great interest in. It is to acquire a place of interment for his friend [s] in the churchyard, and also the expense attendant on the purchase of such place of temporary repose. Your communication on this matter will greatly oblige, sir, your respectful and obedient servant,

J. B. BOOTH.

In compliance with the terms of the note, Mr. Clarke called on Mr. Booth at his hotel, and found him and another gentleman in a private parlor, seated at a table, with wine and cigars between them. After some time passed together, during which Mr. Booth read a number of extracts from various writers, the tragedian suddenly exclaimed, "Would you like to look at the remains?" Mr. Clarke assented, and, being led into an adjoining room where he expected to see a corpse, saw instead, spread out upon a large sheet, about a bushel of dead wild pigeons! Booth knelt down by the side of the birds, and, with every evidence of sincere affliction, began to mourn over them, taking them up tenderly in his hands and pressing them to his heart. "You see," said Booth, "these innocent victims of man's barbarity. I wish to testify in some public way against this wanton destruction of life. And I wish you to help me. Will you?" To this Mr. Clarke dissented, urging that he did not expect to be called to assist at the funeral solemnities of birds. "Nor did I," answered Booth, "I merely wrote to ask about the lot in the graveyard, but, now you are here, why not help me? Do you fear the laugh of man?" The gist of Mr. Clarke's reply was that, while he respected the convictions of the actor, he did not share them. Booth then said: "My intention was to purchase a place in the burial ground and have them put into a coffin and carried in a hearse. I might do it without any one knowing that it was not a human body. Would you assist me then?" To this Mr. Clarke urged that, if no one knew it, it would not be a public testimony against the destruction of life. Shortly after the conversation was brought to a close, and Mr. Clarke heard in the course of a day or two that Booth had actually purchased a lot in the cemetery, two or three miles below the city, that he had a coffin made, hired a hearse and carriage, and had gone through all the solemnity of a regular funeral. For several days he continued to visit the grave of his little friends, and mourned over them with a grief which did not seem at all theatrical. Mr. Clarke goes on to say: "In a week or less

The Tendency to Derangement

in Booth became more developed. One night, when he was to act, he did not appear, nor could he be found at his lodgings. He did not come home that night. Next morning he was found in the woods, several miles from the city, wandering through the snow. He was taken care of. His derangement proved to be temporary, and his reason returned in a few days." It might be said here that Mr. Clarke contributed these facts originally to the Boston Pearl, published in this city in 1834,

and they were subsequently amplified for the Atlantic.

The late Isaac C. Pray relates another instance. He says: "In Boston, during the stage management of Mr. William H. Smith, Mr. Booth was announced to follow a short season of comedy, by performing in some of his most effective tragic plays. 'Evadne' was selected for the first performance. The house was crowded. At the precise moment when Ludovico should enter, Mr. Booth promptly appeared and the immense audience gave him an immense reception. He did not heed the plaudits, but moved forward, and turning abruptly up the stage, found on a door a knocker. It had been used the night before in a comedy. This noisy property seemed at the time more important to Mr. Booth than the play of 'Evadne,' or the people who had come to witness it. He seized it, and gave it a London gentleman's well-known rat-tat-tat, surprising every one familiar with the scene on which he had entered. A pause ensued, when Mr. Booth came toward the footlights, and said with imperturbable coolness: 'Ladies and gentlemen, it appears that there is nobody at home.' Murmurs filled the house, which were soon turned into a general conversation and the stage manager came forward and seized Mr. Booth by the collar. The tragedian was taken from the stage. What ensued behind the scenes has never been publicly stated. Mr. Smith took Mr. Booth into the green room and told him that he would punish him severely if he did not proceed with the business of the evening. The threat had a good effect. The curtain was taken up a second time, and Mr. Booth again appeared. No one who was present that evening will forget the brilliant manner in which

Mr. Booth Performed Ludovico.

We doubt if he ever surpassed that personation. The character was sustained without the slightest flaw or speck, and such was the brilliancy of the performance that the whole audience, particularly during the last act, held spellbound by the great actor's art, remained in mute and breathless admiration of the scene. Had Mr. Booth not been persuaded to personate Ludovico on the evening to which we have referred, it might have been said that he was intoxicated, as was frequently said when he exhibited similar aberrations of mind. The perfection of his acting showed that he was under no alcoholic influence, for no man can place himself before the public upon the stage, even in a slight, intoxicated condition, without being betrayed by his eyes, if not by his general appearance." Mr. Pray then goes on to say: "Another occurrence of the like nature took place at the Chatham Street Theatre, New York, under Mr. Charles Thorne's management in 1830. Mr. Booth exhibited at that time such an indifference in the opening scenes of 'Othello' that he was hissed most emphatically. He resented the treatment by beginning to act in his best manner from the close of the senate scene till the end of the play. During that engagement he drank neither wine nor spirits, but he smoked cigars constantly, and with a bad result, for he was unable to remember the text of 'Richard III.,' and frequently called to the prompter for the 'word.'"

Col. William W. Clapp, in his "Record of the Boston Stage," gives

An Entirely Different Version

of the above affair. He writes: "Mr. Booth's first entrance on the stage denoted something unusual. He was careless and hesitating in his delivery, and his countenance had none of its customary expression. He would falter in his discourse, jumble scraps of other plays in his dialogue, run to the prompter's side of the stage and lean against the wings, while the prompter endeavored to help him forward in the play, by speaking out the language of his part loud enough to be heard in the galleries. In this manner he made a shift to get through with the first two acts of the tragedy. Those familiar with the theatre saw very plainly that something was rotten in the State of Denmark, but a great proportion of the audience, not knowing much of his manner of acting, did not comprehend the business, but only looked on, and

wondered that an actor of so much celebrity could play with so little spirit, some even doubting his identity.

"Still the play progressed; and in the early part of the third act, while he was engaged in patience with the King of Naples, the audience were surprised by his suddenly breaking off from the measured, heroic dignity of his stage tone, and, with a comical simper, falling at once into a colloquial, gossiping sort of chatter with his majesty, thus: 'Upon my word, sir, I didn't know, sir, etc.' For a moment all was silence, when Mr. Booth, turning round and facing the spectators, began to address them in this manner: 'Ladies and gentlemen, I really don't know this part. I studied it only once before, much against my inclination. I will read the part, and the play shall go on. By your leave the play shall go on, and Mr. Wilson will read the part for me.' Here an overpowering burst of hissing and exclamations rose from all parts of the house, while Mr. Booth continued to face the audience with a grinning look, which at length broke out into an open laugh. Mr. Smith then came from behind the scenes and led him off, Mr. Booth exclaiming: 'I can't read; I'm a charity boy' (in reference, probably, to his part in the afterpiece of 'Amateurs and Actors,' in which he was to appear that night). 'I can't read; take me to the lunatic asylum!' Here the drop curtain fell, amid the murmurs and hisses of the spectators.

"Mr. Smith then appeared in front and explained to the audience that Mr. Booth was subject to fits of temporary insanity, and that such was his condition at present, assuring them that his indisposition could not be attributed to the effects of liquor, as his attendants, who had been with him through the day, averred that he had tasted nothing of a spirituous kind.

"Mr. Booth was immediately carried to his lodgings, and, his disorder having increased, it was on Wednesday deemed advisable to obtain a consultation as to the propriety of placing him in the lunatic asylum. But on repairing to his room he was not to be found."

The above incident occurred on the night of Monday, the 7th of December, 1829, at the Tremont Theatre.

And now occurred

The Famous Walk to Providence.

As we have said, search was made for Booth, but without effect, and the only information obtainable was that he had made application at the Marlboro Hotel for a seat in the stage coach to Providence, and it was not until the arrival of a stage from Providence that intelligence was afforded by the driver that on Wednesday he met Mr. Booth between Dedham and Walpole, on foot, bearing toward Providence, without his outside garments, and without any extra clothing whatever. He reached Providence on Thursday, and it was supposed slept in the woods on Wednesday night. From Blake's "History of the Providence Stage" it is ascertained that immediately after his arrival in Providence he proceeded to Deming's sailor boarding house, at the junction of South Main and Wichenden street, which he reached in his stocking feet, having thrown away his shoes. It was soon noised over the town that Booth, in miserable plight, had got there; and the news, coming to the ears of his friend Col. Josiah Jones, he at once hastened to the place. On entering he met Booth, who gave him a kindly greeting and asked him to take off his boots, in order that he (Booth) might try them on. Col. Jones complied with the strange request, and was surprised to see him, after putting them on, leave the house without a word. Col. Jones borrowed a pair of shoes from Mr. Deming, and overtook Mr. Booth, whom he found hurrying along the street in a highly excited manner. He at once took him in charge and led him to his own residence on Aborn street. In a few days Mr. Booth's fit passed away, and a rational frame of mind ensued, although he did not immediately regain his old vigor of mind. He had some lucid intervals, and then aberrations of intellect would succeed, continuing so long that sometimes it was feared that his reason was completely destroyed. He at length so far recovered that it was deemed safe to allow his return to his family. He

was received in New York by Edwin Forrest, and, after a little rest, proceeded to his destination.

Playing an engagement in Providence in 1840, Booth indulged in

More of His Vagaries.

He lodged at the City Hotel, and his strange demeanor was a constant source of amazement to proprietor and guests. One night he did not make his appearance at the theatre in season to begin the performance, and Mr. Adams, the manager, guided by one of the clerks of the hotel, went to his room and found it locked. To their calls and knocks there was no response, but as it was possible that he had fallen asleep, the clerk climbed upon the roof of an adjoining piazza, and peered through the window. The room was apparently empty. Then the corridors and offices were visited without success, and the manager was about to go away in disappointment, when the clerk, to make assurance doubly sure, again scaled the piazza, entered the window, and looked under the bed. There lay the missing tragedian, calm and sober, quietly meeting the gaze of the intruder with his own. He at once consented to proceed to the theatre, and, after a few preparations, followed the manager, who, relying on his promise, had hastened back to his post. The clerk, unperceived, followed Booth, and saw him, in his progress by the route he had often before walked, accost every person he met, and asked to be directed to the Providence Theatre. When he reached his dressing room he lost no time, but was soon upon the stage, hailed with rapturous delight by the audience, whose patience he had so severely tried. Another time he evaded the watchful eyes of his friends, and, after an ineffectual search in the various bar-rooms of the city, was found sitting on Peck's wharf, with a parcel of crackers from which he was feeding a number of dogs.

Thomas R. Gould, in his book, "The Tragedian," says that Booth possessed neither the faculty of

Dancing nor Singing.

and relates this anecdote: "After a splendid success in tragedy he stood at the wing (as at other times on going behind the scenes, we have seen him stand) with folded arms, in the dress of the character he had just personated, and listening intently to an excellent singer then before the audience. Unable to congratulate him at the time, Booth sought and found the singer, later in the night, at a refreshment room, in company with other actors. Booth entered the room, silently stretched himself at full length upon the sanded floor, took one of the singer's feet, placed it upon his own neck, held it so a few moments, then rose and departed without a word."

The present writer calls to mind the fact that during one or more of the many engagements which Booth played in Boston toward the end of his career, he took lodgings at the Ben Franklin, in Morton place, kept by Thomas Morgan, and where his eldest son, Junius, who was then connected with the National Theatre, in Palby's days as manager, lived. Every Saturday night, there was held at the house an old-fashioned "free-and-easy," the presiding genius of which was an old weakened and withered shoemaker by the name of Bryan, who was possessed of a great fund of song and anecdote. He almost worshipped Booth, whom he knew, and had, indeed, been a supernumerary at Covent Garden Theatre at the time of the great Kean and Booth riot. One night the festivity was at full height—the room was full of tobacco smoke, and the cries for cocked hats were becoming fast and furious—when Booth was seen standing in the doorway. He advanced to where Bryan was presiding, and, using the quotation from King Lear,

"I'll talk a word with this same learned Theban," seated himself by his side. He listened intently to the singing of a song, at the close of which he rose and made a gesture with his hand. In a moment everything was hushed, and the great actor, assuming an attitude of profound devotion, rendered the Lord's prayer with marvellous effect, and then, like Hamlet:

"With his head over his shoulder turned, He seemed to find his way without his eyes, For out of the doors he went without their help."

There was no more free-and-easy that night for there could be no more levity after that wondrous recital.

In her monograph on her father, Mrs. Alice Booth Clarke relates this incident, which took place in Philadelphia: "In the course of this engagement my father was announced as Shylock, in 'The Merchant of Venice.' He arrived at the theatre unusually early, and immediately prepared for the part. At the close of the overture the curtain rose, but Shylock, who had been previously observed by persons about the scenes, was

Nowhere to Be Found.

Mr. Fredericks, the stage manager, was in great perplexity, and everything became confusion and anxiety. It was determined that the play should commence and continue uninterrupted to the time of Shylock's entrance, which does not occur until nearly the close of the first act. Meanwhile every effort should be employed to discover the wandering Jew, and, if unavailable, in due time, the stage manager's favorite walking gentleman and general apologist should address the audience and expose Mr. Booth's unprincipled conduct."

"The much dreaded time arrived, and Shylock had not appeared. Messengers had been dispatched to various localities, and the theatre had undergone a thorough search. Mr. Fredericks was in a most unenviable state of excitement, and the prime apologist was ready with his speech, when at the exact point of time the door of a dark scene closet was quietly opened from the interior, and Shylock mysteriously emerged therefrom, gently pushed Mr. Fredericks aside, and walked slowly and in deep reflection upon the stage."

Mr. William B. Wood, in his "Personal Recollections of the Stage," would give us to understand that Booth was a species of Hamlet, and that he "put an antick disposition on." Indeed, speaking of Booth in 1821, Wood says: "His affected eccentricities and his assumed insanity did not occur in the early years in America, at any rate." But as has been expressed above there was madness in his blood, and the unhappy career of his son, John Wilkes Booth, would seem to confirm that opinion. Many of Booth's follies must be set down to

The Invisible Spirit of Wine.

which for a time takes the reason prisoner, and when in his cups he would do most strange things. In fact, managers were in variably on their guard against Booth's propensity for strong drinks. Drake, in his "Old Landmarks of Boston," relates that "On one occasion, while playing at the Howard, Tom Ford, the manager, stipulated that Booth should submit to be locked in his room by a certain hour, in order that the actor might not be in a condition to disappoint the audience, as was sometimes the case. The chagrin of the manager may be imagined at finding the tragedian intoxicated when he came to fetch him to the theatre. Booth had bribed a waiter to his door, where successive glasses were emptied by means of a straw through the keyhole."

Stone, in his "Reminiscences," relates a story of Booth being found drunk in the 'Hole in the Wall' in Trotters' alley, Albany, one night, when he was expected to play, and in order to guard against a repetition of the debauch, he was taken in a cartilage to the old Howard street jail, now the Albany hospital, and there locked up in the debtor's room to get sober and keep so. In the morning he was found drunker than ever, having induced one Boardman, who did chores at the jail, to buy a pint of brandy and a long Shaker pipe, through which the prisoner obtained the liquor from a cup outside the grating.

In Providence one evening he was to have played Iago, but was missing at the hour when the play was to begin. The audience was unusually large, and every effort was made to find Booth. A gentleman who was seated in one of the boxes was an intimate friend of the actor, and knew all his haunts. To him, in his dilemma, the manager appealed. The gentleman procured a carriage,

and proceeding to Morris Deming's sailor boarding house, found Booth, a little the worse for his potatoes.

Carousing with His Host,

whom he designated "a learned Theban—a sage philosopher." He was taken to the theatre and acted his part superbly.

One morning before sunrise, late in the autumn of 1839, two gentlemen started for Seekonk to hunt rabbits. As they approached India Point bridge, they observed that the door of a small bar-room, kept in that vicinity by one Rawson stood open at that unusually early hour, and they entered for the purpose of procuring some cigars. As they passed in an unexpected sight presented itself. Before a picture of Gen. Washington a small boy was kneeling with hands joined, and by his side was the tragedian Booth engaged in teaching the boy the Lord's Prayer; solemnly dictating each separate petition, and so intent upon his occupation that he did not observe the entrance of the spectators. The actor was haggard in appearance, and evidently in the midst of a protracted revelry.

Once while playing Richard at the Park Theatre, New York, Booth was furious, whether from liquor or not the writer is unable to say, and sword in hand, chased the actor who was playing Richmond off the stage and into the street. It was in one of his drunken freaks in Charleston, S. C., in 1837, that

His Nose Was Broken

and his handsome face was marred forever. He had been playing Othello, and, after the performance, went to his hotel, where he roomed with Tom Flynn. They indulged in potatoes pottle deep, until Booth became beside himself. He imagined Flynn was Iago, and began rehearsing the famous scene beginning, "Villain, be sure you prove," etc., with such vehemence that Flynn, in self-defence, grasped the fire-poker and struck Booth over the nose with such effect that he flattened it upon his face.

Here is a letter of his, to be found in the collection of William D. Morange:

My Dear Sir: Please write to me in Boston on receipt of this, for I am told you've announced me, and I was so d—d drunk when we parted that I cannot recollect what was said or done by JUNIUS B. BOOTH.

New York, June 20, 1829.

A Severe Stage Combat.

Booth was a superb swordsman, but he once found his match in the person of William Duffy, the actor and manager. One night Booth was to play Richard, and he informed Duffy, who was the Richmond, to be on his guard, as he felt in fighting trim. The combat at length commenced, and a terrific one it was, Booth being worked up to a high degree of excitement. His thrusts, lunges and cuts were fearful. Duffy was cool and collected, parrying with consummate skill. Booth, finding finally that he had his match, resorted to his old dodge of playing down, or driving his adversary to the corner. Duffy was fully on his guard, and by making a feint, threw Booth off his guard, striking Booth's sword with great force, and hurling it several feet over his head. Booth, evidently chagrined at his discomfiture, storming and fretting like a caged tiger, quickly made vain attempts to regain his weapon, but, finding himself so much exhausted, made his last fall, thus ending one of the most severe stage combats ever seen.

At the Albany Fire.

Booth commenced an engagement in Albany on the 14th of August, 1848, and was to have played on the 17th, the night of the great fire, but failed to do so. He was stopping at the Eagle Hotel, and the members of engine company No. 9 rescued his wardrobe from the burning building. To show his gratitude, he put on a red shirt, fell in with the firemen, and worked like a hero all day. That night he went to the theatre and asked his way to the gas room, which was shown him. Soon after,

when the time to light up came, the gas pipe or metre was found so battered and disarranged that much delay was caused. Booth said there would be no light that night, and left the theatre.

Other Anecdotes.

Mrs. Clark says that when her father left San Francisco for home, he took passage on the Brother Jonathan, and on the morning of sailing, while anxiously superintending the transportation of his baggage to the boat, he was somewhat annoyed at the dilatory manner of a rough, surly seaman, who was executing the work. Booth kindly urged the man to show more alacrity, but, observing that he obstinately moved slower, and was disposed to be insolent, he inquired, sharply: "What are you employed for? Who are you?" The seaman, with a vicious look, gruffly replied: "I'm a thief!" To which Booth quickly replied: "Give me your hand, comrade, I'm a pirate!" The sailor looked abashed, and gave his hand in silence.

Booth had some queer notions when on the stage. Macready, in his "Reminiscences," makes a statement in reference to a piece of clap-trap resorted to by Booth, that any burlesque actor of the present day would scarcely descend to, to say nothing of a full-fledged tragedian. Speaking of Booth's performance of Sir Giles Overreach, Macready says: "One of the attendants who held him was furnished with a sponge filled with blood (rose pink makes the stage blood), which he, unseen by the audience, squeezed into his mouth to convey the idea of his having burst a blood vessel." He was accustomed to play Oronoko in Sothorn's tragedy of that name, in bare feet, insisting upon the absurdity of putting shoes upon a slave. At Philadelphia he once appeared on the stage in "Richard III." on the back of a white Surrey. Indeed, Booth was a man compounded of strange materials, but whether or no there was method in his madness, who shall say?