

Written for The Sunday Republic.

A ST. LOUIS city official was a warm friend of John Wilkes Booth from the time he first saw that ill-fated actor on the boards in St. Louis until his tragic death.

The official was a stripling at the time of their meeting and had joyed in Booth's powerful presentation from the gallery. Then, as now, he was an enthusiast and a brace of elephants could not have drawn, nor a herd of tigers driven him from the theater until he had been presented to the star.

"I say, Mr. Booth, you're wonderful! you're great! That's what you are," blurted the admiring youth.

There was no mistaking the genuineness of this tribute and the actor was manifestly pleased. He looked gravely at his nervous, youthful admirer and took his mental and histrionic measure. "You should join the profession yourself," he said. "Comedy is in your line. You will never regret it."

But the young man had a different aim. The war was in its incipency then and he was ambitious to be stationed at Grant's headquarters, an ambition that he realized. He read of the glowing triumphs of his stage idol and rejoiced accordingly, but the thought of footlights and rouge and capers had no charms for him so far as he was personally concerned.

Having been honorably discharged a year before the close of the war, the young man discovered in himself some aspirations toward money-making and formed a working partnership with J. J. Henderson, an Illinois man who was a capitalist ever on the qui vive for opportunities for investment. The city official and Mr. Henderson proposed to operate a cotton plantation in Arkansas, not far from Memphis. They took a steamboat trip to Memphis for the purpose of consummating this investment. They separated, taking different conveyances uptown with the agreement that they should meet at Swab's restaurant at 6 o'clock. That hour came and passed and Henderson did not appear. The young man waited until 8 o'clock, then sought his hotel. The next morning he was awakened with the news that his partner had been murdered. Failing to keep his appointment with the young man, he drifted into another restaurant at 7 o'clock. A man sitting at an adjoining table caught sight of him. He looked sharply at him and moved nearer that he might see. Then he went back to his table, seized a carving knife that lay there, rushed upon Henderson and plunged the weapon into his throat. It was over in a moment. Henderson was laid low in the prime of his proud manhood. The murderer was the self-appointed avenger of a woman's alleged wrongs. He has suffered the penalty ere this and it were wise to let the curtain fall upon the dark drama.

The young man was leaving a letter with the captain of the steamer Platte Valley, informing Henderson's widow fully of the demise and asking her to instruct him as to the disposition of the remains, when he caught sight of a figure that had occupied a prominent place in his thoughts for

four years. It was an elegant figure, manly if not majestic. It was instinct with nervous energy. The poise of the head was peculiar. It was J. Wilkes Booth.

The young man accosted him with youthful ardor. A little jog of the actor's overcrowded memory and he recalled the face of the admirer, whom he had advised to become a comedian.

"Boy like, I told him the story of the tragedy the night before," says the narrator. I told him what a fine fellow Henderson was; how much I prized his friendship; how I had expected that a few years' association with him would make a millionaire of me; that he was gone now, and with him my prospects for wealth, and then there was the widow in Cairo. She was one of the sort of women who idolize their husbands. I guess the tears flowed a little when I told the story. Mr. Booth radiated sympathy just as he always did the quality we, for lack of a better name, call magnetism. He said very little, but I remember that I felt comforted. He diverted me from my troubles by telling of his remarkable trip across mountain and plain from San Francisco in a sleigh, and of the boy with the phenomenal singing voice, whom he had brought with him from California. He was on his way to New Orleans, where he was to play an engagement in the St. Charles Theater.

"We met Dr. Burke of one of the hospitals and he invited Mr. Booth, Major McGrath and myself to luncheon with him. We pursued our drive till we reached the undertaker's establishment, where poor Henderson's body lay.

"Will you come with me?" I asked him, as I went in to view the remains. He refused politely, but with firmness.

"It was hard for me to realize that my friend was dead. He lay in his casket, a superb specimen of manhood. His face was not distorted, and the horrible gash on his neck was hidden.

"I was overcome by the sight, and when I went back to the carriage my face bore evidence of it. I tried to apologize, but Booth stopped me.

"Never apologize for genuine grief," he said. 'It is manly. I can fully appreciate your feelings.' He said this in his gentle manner, and there was pity in his face. Then it changed more suddenly than it ever did on the stage. He shrunk into a corner of the carriage and his face grew dark. His features worked violently. His eyes took on a wild look. He raised his hands as though warding off a blow. He trembled with the intensity of his excitement.

"I cannot bear to see blood, nor a dead face," he whispered. 'They make me wild.'

"In an instant this mood changed. He was paler, but he smiled at his vehemence and made no reference to it.

"I bade him good-by when he left on his steamer that night. We corresponded irregularly after that. A letter I wrote him a month before his assassination of President Lincoln was forwarded to me after that terrible event by General Dodge, with a request to explain my relations with the unfortunate man. I did this to the General's satisfaction."