

By James N. Wilkerson

THE TRAGEDY AT THE BURNING BARN.

Reasons for the persistent contention that John Wilks Booth was not the victim of the madness of Boston Corbett.

In order that unanimity in public opinion may prevail relative to facts and circumstances surrounding great sensational events in crime, the facts must be indisputable. If any element of uncertainty, or taint of mystery attach to the event the public is bound to arrive at its own conclusions in different ways, with the inevitable consequence of divergence breeding controversy.

If after controversy arises, a fixed opinion arrived at by a respectable number persists throughout an extended period and takes on the ghostly attributes of the Banquo spirit which refused to down, then there is bound to be a reason for the origin of the belief, and that reason is sure to be worthy of being chronicled, and in all human justice ought to be in the interest of neglected truth, and the statement should be as nearly as may be from first sources, free of controversial spirit, and dispassionate.

Perhaps there never has been any one idea more controversially maintained about any great event in American history that has persisted and does persist than the contention that John Wilks Booth never met retribution for his great crime, and that the victim of the bullet fired at the burning barn on the Garrett homestead in Virginia, did vicarious atonement.

Violent disputation raged over the subject for years, and even now there persists discussion on the subject, some acrimony and much misinformation.

It shall not be the purpose of this article to renew the discussion, nor to engage in any effort to settle the question, but only to show historically authentic first source reasons for the matter having

in the first instance so shaped itself as to give rise and currency to the report, and lend sufficient credence to give it the appearance of respectable support.

In order to clarify the situation and to silence in advance those controversial spirits who never will brook opposition of opinion I shall state emphatically that there is no propoganda nor opinion to enter the telling of the story as it is revealed in the record. I speak by the record. Every fact stated is backed up and sustained by the transcript of the evidence adduced before the military tribunal which sat in judgment upon the alleged conspirators and co workers in crime with John Wilks Booth the actual assassin. This record is a respectable one. It is the evidence taken down and transcribed by Isaac Pitman that great authority in stenography. It is also certified to by the Judge Advocate General and the members of the Court martial who constituted that tribunal. From this source the following facts are attested.

Although Richmond at the very gates of Washington had just fallen, and the leaders of the Confederacy were desperate, and no treaty of peace even begun, and a real state of war fare still in existence, on the night of the assassination the martyred President sat alone and unguarded in his box at Ford's play house. Alone so far as protection went. Not a single solitary secret service man, not a soldier, and not a vigil of any nature to protect him. Previously he had been surrounded at all times by dragoons of soldiers. Major Rathbone was the only man apparently in the entire assemblage who had even side arms on his person, and the assassin was allowed to escape handicapped as he was by a fractured leg. All because in the panic there was no one charged with responsibility and all save Major Rathbone lost their heads, and he

was quickly disabled by a thrust from a dagger in the hands of the fleeing fanatic who had fired the fatal shot. It is also an indisputable fact that the army was guarding the city, and that sentries occupied vantage positions over all roads and outlets leading to and from the city. It is also in the record that for some unknown reason the sentry at the Potomac bridge had received instructions during that day to modify the rigor of the challenges against those who would pass out in the night. It is likewise in the record that when Booth arrived at the barrier he was not required to give the pass word, but was permitted to pass, as was also young Herold his ~~brother~~ foolish young devotee who came riding hot foot after him. But when the livery man whose horse had been purloined by Herold arrived a short time after and before the furore started even, he was denied permission to pass.

Now to the night at the barn. The nation of course went into convulsions over the tragedy, and a reward of one hundred thousand dollars was posted wherewith to recompense the captors of John Wilks Booth. The war department took charge of the search for the assassin. Two weeks past without any news as to the whereabouts of Booth. Meantime the Virginia side of the Potomac valley was being combed as with a comb of fine teeth. At two O'clock in the night there appeared at the residence of old man Garrett in Virginia a short distance from Washington a cordon of soldiers. They halloed. Mr Garrett dazed and frightened went to the door. He was asked where the two men were that he was harboring. He denied that he was entertaining strangers. They threatened to hang him up by the thumbs if he did not out with it. Young Garrett fearing for the safety of his aged father arose and called out to the men in the night to not hurt father, and that he would

lead them to the men they were seeking. He took the soldiers ten in all to an abandoned tobacco barn on the premises. None of the soldiers dared enter. But they looking through the cracks saw two men inside, whose surrender they demanded. The men inside refused to come out, but did not fire upon the invaders. Parley resulted, some rash heads set fire to the barn, as the glare of the flames went up two men could be seen wildly rushing around inside, one called out that there was a young man inside who wished to surrender, and came near to the side of the barn which was occupied by Sergeant Boston Corbett. Without provocation and without excuse Corbett fired at the older of the two, and he fell. The doors were thrown open and the wounded man dragged from the flames and young Herold was seized and bound.

The commander of the troop testified under oath that he violently denounced Corbett for his hasty conduct in firing, and then and there threatened him with Court Martial. He never was however even reprimanded by those in authority.

The wounded man was taken to the porch of the Garrett residence. He never did regain consciousness, and never made any statements or admissions as to his identity. Not one of his captors nor his executioner knew Booth. About daylight the wounded sufferer expired. Immediately his body was sewed up in an army blanket and hurried away to the Potomac and taken into Washington on a gunboat.

John Wilks Booth was better known by sight to the people of Washington than was perhaps his illustrious victim. He had played hundreds of times at the theater in the City, and was a favorite almost as much idolized locally as are some movie celebrities of today.

Physicians, professional men, of all walks of life, and national officials knew him well. But none who knew him were ever permitted to gaze upon the remains of the dead man brought from Virginia. It was the biggest news

this country ever had known up to that time. No newspaper representative was permitted a look to give assurance to the people that Booth had come back to his beloved City in a blanket shroud. The public were not ever permitted even to know what disposition was made of the remains, and the place of interment, has never ceased to be a matter of controversy and speculation even to this day.

Naturally the people reverted in their minds to the fact that one hundred thousand dollars was the stake for which the jugglers of the scenes might profit by their course of concealment and mystery. Naturally too division of opinion even so early as then began to be rife, and after developments tended not in the least to put an end to them.

The trial of the conspirators came on. The question of Booth's identity with that of the mystery corpse was not satisfactorily disposed at this trial. The only witness who was placed upon the stand to swear to the identity was Surgeon General Wyman of the U.S. General Wyman testified that he personally never knew Booth but that he examined the remains and identified them as Booth by a certain scar which Doctor May told him would be found on the back of the neck if the remains were really those of the actor. Doctor May was available, and was not permitted to see the remains, although he was the personal surgeon of Booth, and put the scar on his neck. Doctor May was called to testify, but his testimony was only to the effect that he knew that the scar existed and that he had told General Wyman of its existence, and from doctor May we gain the history of the scar. He testified that about a year prior to the tragedy John Wilks Booth came to his office one Sunday morning to consult him about a cold tumour on the back of his neck. Doctor May said that he examined it and told Booth that an office

operation to remove it would be effective, and ^{might} be safely done. Booth asked the doctor if he might continue to act while the wound was healing. Doctor May told him that if he would be careful and indulge in no violent exercise he might safely go right along with his nightly performances on the stage. Doctor May further testified that Booth was playing at that time opposite Charlotte Cushman who was a very strong woman, and an actress of violent emotion. In the play she was due to embrace Booth which she did with such force and fervor as to cause a rupture of the operation wound, resulting in bad healing and leaving a large scar. He told General Wyman of the existence of this mark of identification.

And while on the subject of identification it is a notable fact that none of the Garrett family from Virginia where Booth had been staying nursing his crippled leg were ever called to testify as to identity, none of them ever quoted as having told the military men on the night of the raid on the barn and the mad act of the impetuous young sergeant, that they had actually killed Booth. Neither were any of the Garretts ever molested or accused for having harbored the assassin, while poor Doctor Mudd was sentenced to terrible term of penal servitude at Dry Tortugas for having given first aid to his leg, and this in the face of no proof that he knew his patient.

Boston Corbett testified that he shot Booth, and that the bullet entered behind one ear and came out behind the other. Others of the captors corroborated this testimony as to the location of the fatal wound inflicted with such palpable needlessness.

Naturally the question must have arisen why so slim an identification as the presence of one scar which might easily have at least been examined by the man who not only knew of its existence, but who was responsible for it. Nothing more natural than the eternal query of why among the thousands in Washington personally acquainted with John Wilks Booth the actor and the tragedian diabolic, might not have been permitted to pass upon the identity in which the public had such a vested right, and which question the future history of the nation had such legitimate claim upon.

These are fragmentary reasons from the record of why the question became a moot one, and why the controversy began which has not been settled, and perhaps never will be definitely. To say the least of the matter the people have long resented the fact that a question which might have had such an easy solution was permitted to become so baffling, and why.