

## EDWIN BOOTH'S EARLY HOME

MARYLAND FARM WHERE HE  
AND HIS BROTHERS LIVED

Now in Other Hands and Used as a Summer  
Boarding House—County Owns a Por-  
trait He Gave It—Stories Told of  
Junius Brutus Booth and of His Sons.

"The revival recently of the timeworn yarn about John Wilkes Booth still being alive—this time, I believe, in Brazil—reminded me of a day replete with reminiscences of the Booths that I passed down in Maryland last summer," observed a man who got's about a good bit.

"I had some business with a lawyer in Belair, Md. Belair is the county seat of Harford county. Belair is an old, slumbersome little town that is reached from Baltimore—something like twenty-five miles distant—by very snaky, haphazard sort of a narrow gauge railroad that runs from Baltimore to York, Pa.

"They're rather proud of their new brick court house in Belair, and when we'd finished our business my lawyer friend took me through the building. The best room in the building is the county court room. Its walls are graced by many portraits in oil—there are half a hundred of them, I should say—of persons who were born in Harford county and who went forth into the world and did something notable. Finally we came to a remarkably well executed portrait that was hung directly to the right of the Judge's seat. After one glance at this portrait I gave a start. My lawyer friend saw me start, and he smiled.

"You know, of course, who that is?" he said to me.

"I had been an anchorite if those lineaments were not familiar to me. It was unquestionably the best portrait in oil of Edwin Booth that I had ever come upon, and I have seen many portraits of the great actor. It shows Booth as an old man, grave, melancholy, almost morbid, but it is a marvellous, speaking likeness of the man as he was in his final years; and I know, because I saw him often in those years.

"Booth gave the county that picture a couple of years before his death," my lawyer friend explained. "It was painted by a Baltimore artist of note.

"This county, you know," went on my lawyer friend a bit reprovingly, seeing me puzzled, "was the home of the Booths."

"So it was! I remembered then, but vaguely. But I was not prepared for the heap of Booth memories that followed.

"You see," my lawyer friend went on, "Edwin Booth had a great regard throughout his life for Belair, and particularly for the county court house. Just about where you are standing now, or near it, Edwin Booth as a stripling made his very first appearance upon any stage. This was in the old county court house building, that was torn down a few years ago. Booth—this was away back early in the '40s—then lived with his people at the Booth homestead three or four miles up the county, not far from Fountain Green. They were giving some amateur theatricals during the holiday season.

"Young Edwin—a mere boy then—was asked to play one of the good parts in the performance. There was no hall in town large enough to accommodate a crowd of the size that was sure to turn out to see a son of Junius Brutus Booth perform on the stage. So the county authorities permitted the affair to be held in the main hall of the old county court house—and that hall was right upon the spot where we are standing.

"Edwin Booth—a boy of fifteen or sixteen, as I say—then made his first public appearance as an actor. I wish I could remember the name of the piece in which he played on that occasion, but I can't. My father had a handbill of the performance, but it disappeared long years ago. My father was present on that occasion. He used often to tell us of Edwin Booth's strange, pallid beauty as a boy, of how he was the best and the quietest and the most self-contained of the Booth boys, and so on. He said that it was apparent to all of the older heads who attended that performance that the fires of genius burned in the boy's melancholy eyes, and they predicted greater things for him than had ever been attained by his father, Junius Brutus, who, big hearted man that he was, left a wild name in these parts."

"All of this was so interesting that I engaged a rig and with my lawyer friend drove out from Belair to the old Booth homestead. It would be difficult to imagine a more gloomy place than this old homestead. It stands far back from a narrow side road and is entirely screened from the view of passers by on the road by a thick forest. Woods, in fact, surround the clearing of perhaps thirty acres upon which the homestead, a rambling affair, is built. The house is rambling, because Junius Brutus Booth kept tacking little additions on to it, as new members of his family made their appearance in the world. The homestead is now occupied by an agreeable family with an exceedingly Irish name. The farm itself is not of sufficient richness to furnish these present tenants with a livelihood, and so they eke out by taking summer boarders into the old Booth homestead.

"The summer boarders that I met there did not appear to be very conscious of the fact that they were lounging about on ground that was associated with the upbringing of a remarkable family. The tenants themselves, in fact, had no very keen appreciation of the fact. There were no relics of any sort of the Booths about the place. It seemed difficult to imagine how the elder Junius Brutus Booth could ever have been content to rear his family upon such a remote and, all told, dismal patch of ground.

"This did not seem so singular, however, after I had heard the Harford county view, of the elder Junius Brutus. It seems that, even if he were highly regarded there for his talents, his devotion to his family and many other fine qualities which he possessed, he was never looked upon as entirely a sane man. They tell some strange stories about him.

"I suspect that the well known inclination toward the bowl which was possessed by the elder Booth accounted for many of the eccentricities which so puzzled and startled the good Harford county folk of his day. He was an extravagant and thoroughly reckless man when in his cups, as everybody knows, and the traits which came out when he was in that condition could not have failed to arouse the wonderment of people who, certainly at that period, knew none other than the simple life.

"For example, the folks down there say that Junius Brutus the elder was forever making dramatic entrances into Belair when he was not in the least expected. When he was playing in Baltimore he would embark upon a bit of a spree, and while in that shape would be seized by a sudden longing to see those near and dear to him at the old Harford county homestead. So, quite regardless of the fact that he was booked to play in Baltimore on that night, he would hire the most fiery riding horse he could get and then gallop, full tilt, all the way from Baltimore to Belair, where he would pull up with a lather and dead fagged horse and stop at a tavern for an hour or so before proceeding out to the farm.

"He was a welcome figure, it seems, at the Belair tavern on these occasions, for he invariably spent money like water, treating all hands over and over again, and sending many a sedate farmer over the roads at the windup in a sadly fuddled condition. On such occasions Junius Brutus the elder would before starting from the tavern for the farm change a lot of bills into silver, and then after remounting his horse scatter the silver in the road to see the children scramble for it. Sometimes, I heard, he would throw away as much as a hundred dollars in silver in this way. Once he caught a grown man participating in the scramble for the silver

and he requested the man to stop it. The man didn't stop, and Junius Brutus leaped from his horse, grabbed the man, a husky one, too, and thrashed him soundly.

"Occasionally when he made these run-aways from his Baltimore engagement the manager of the Baltimore theatre would send hard riders scooting after him, and they'd ride up now and then when their man was enjoying himself in the tavern. They'd have to argue with him for a long time to get him to see the desirability of returning with them to Baltimore. Usually he'd consent to return with them if he could see his children. So they'd accompany him out to the homestead, and he'd play with the children for a bit and roll around with them on the grass and then he'd remount and hurry back along the long road to Baltimore with his virtual captors. Often, though, he lost nights at the Baltimore theatre through his habit of rushing off to Harford county.

"I don't know about another story that they told me of the elder Booth down there, and so I only repeat it for what it is worth.

"The story goes that while Junius Brutus the elder was at a considerable distance from Baltimore—somewhere in what was then considered the West—one of his younger children died at the homestead. The elder Booth could not get back to the homestead for several weeks after this bereavement, and he had heard nothing about it when he returned. When he asked for the child that was dead they had to tell him. His grief was so poignantly terrible that he was determined to open the grave in order to see the child's face again. He was so bent upon doing this that it required all the strength of several hands around the farm to restrain him. That story is vouched for and thoroughly believed by many well known people of the county, but, as I say, I am only repeating it with reserve, for it surely has an uncanny sound.

"The Booth boys all left Harford county in their very young manhood, but they are very well remembered by some very old folks still living in the county. I saw the ruins of the little old stone schoolhouse which all the Booth boys attended. This schoolhouse was on the Fountain Green road, and it was built, stone upon stone, by the hands of the father of an elderly farmer named Robert Hanna, who still cultivates a large farm near Fountain Green.

"Edwin was the boy who left the most agreeable memory of all of these Booth boys. He was quiet to the point of taciturnity, and the old folks say much the handsomer boy of the lot, although this distinction has been given to John Wilkes. John Wilkes, they recall, was not particularly handsome as a lad, being gawky and somewhat loutish. This boy too, they say, was a wild one from the very outset, unequalled among all the lads of his neighborhood as a wrestler and fighter, and fighting most of the time as if out of pure love of fighting. Several times when a mere boy, it seems, he tackled grown men, farm hands, and whipped them until they were ready to stop. The younger Junius Brutus Booth, according to these recollections, was far less clever than the other boys of the family and was in addition sullen, revengeful and difficult to get on with.

"John Wilkes when a mere lad, it appears, had a way of mounting a big vicious black riding horse and thundering along the road leading to Belair, and if there happened to be a little child on the road he'd ride perilously close, and leaning out of the saddle pick the young one up while going full tilt. He never hurt any of the children in doing this, but of course it was dangerous business, and he was told not to do it any more. I didn't hear whether he obeyed the mandate.

"When Lincoln was assassinated soldiers on horseback seemed to come out of the ground all over Harford county, but particularly around the old Booth homestead. They formed an immense cordon around the place on telegraphed orders, for it was supposed that the assassin, obeying a homing instinct, might attempt to get back to the old place. The sudden appearance of the soldiers caused many of the Harford county folks to imagine that the war had begun all over again."

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