

Last of Wilkes

Booth. By John Deery

IN the years 1864-5 I kept the largest and finest billiard parlor in Washington. I had a magnificent room over the entrance to the National Theatre. Eleven tables and a bar stocked with the choicest wines and liquors. My place was on E street, between Twelfth and Thirteenth. Although I was but 25 years old I held the championship at billiards of America and later I added the championship of the world.

My skill at the game and the handsome establishment I kept caused my place to be frequented by the better classes of patrons, and so it happened that I numbered a good many of the notabilities of that time among my acquaintances and friends. Those were war times, and money in Washington always seemed to be plentiful.

The duty on foreign liquors was high and the current price of the usual small glass of brandy at the bar of my establishment was half a dollar. I had known John Wilkes Booth almost from his boyhood, and whenever he played in Washington, which he did several times during the war, he made my parlors a sort of familiar loafing place. Not that he ever played billiards. I never once saw him lift a cue. But the game had a real fascination for him, and he would often sit and watch me at practice or in one of the frequent incipient match games I played in by the hour of an afternoon. There was another attraction for Booth in my place—the bar—which, according to the custom of that time in billiard parlors, was well stocked with liquors. Booth's own particular tippie was brandy. I know that during his Western tours when he could not get brandy he drank whisky, but I never heard him call for anything but brandy in my place or in my company elsewhere. And as a rule he drank pretty freely. He seemed born to a taste for liquor, which he unquestionably inherited from his father, the Great Elder Booth, who was a notorious dram drinker.

In fact, it used to be a sort of open secret in those days that the Booth family loved liquor. Edwin Booth, whom I knew as intimately as his brother, once told me that the hardest fight he ever had in his life was when he had reached the age of thirty against his growing appetite for strong drink. He never wholly conquered it, as the world knows, although he always kept it under subjection. John Wilkes Booth never even tried to keep his appetite subdued, and I have always felt sure that drink would have carried him off to an early grave had not fate ordained his ending otherwise.

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of his glass, and one of the most charming of men. I think the most fascinating personality I have ever met in my long life. He was as handsome as a young god, with his clear pale olive complexion, classically regular features and hair and mustache literally black as night, but his appearance was not more seductive than his manners. In common intercourse he was utterly devoid of that artificiality and "staginess" so common to men of his profession. In his ways with his intimates he was as simple and affectionate as a child. John Wilkes Booth cast a spell over most men with whom he came in contact, and I believe all women without exception. At this time he and I boarded together in a house at Thirteenth and I streets, and while I was paying my court to our young landlady, Wilkes Booth had won her rather cold younger sister to a state of slavish admiration.

FEW men have known John Wilkes Booth better than I knew him, and despite his terrible crime and deplorable ending no man have I ever known who possessed a more winning personality. That

much at least in his favor can with truth be averred over his grave, dishonored as it is over that of any other American. In liquor, of which he could absorb an astonishing quantity and still retain the bearing of a gentleman, he would sometimes flash out an angry word, but it was a hard matter to provoke him to a quarrel. He seemed to be quite above anything in the nature of a brawl, and kept his highly strung temper in check even in his cups.

For a period of about ten days before the assassination of President Lincoln he visited my place every day, sometimes in the afternoon, sometimes in the evening. He was at this time out of an engagement and drinking quite freely, noticeably so even for him, I thought. At times he seemed a bit crazed, apparently on account of the frequency of his potations. But there was a deeper cause, as I was to know later. He was occasionally accompanied by a friend or two, and on the evening just before the assassination his sole companion was young Herold, who was afterward convicted in the trial for conspiracy. This was the first time I had seen Herold, whom Booth introduced by name. He seemed to me scarcely more than a big beardless boy, and his manner toward Booth had the air of a sort of body servant. He was backward and slow of speech, and I was rather surprised at his being in Booth's company.

My place was on the first floor above the entrance to the National Theatre on E street, then second only to Ford's as the leading place of amusement in Washington. On the evening in question—Thursday—Booth asked me about 7 o'clock if I would send down stairs to the box-office and secure him a private box for the performance of the following evening, at the same time pulling out some money. He asked me to let one of my boys employed about the tables go down stairs and get the box for him. Surprised at the request, for I knew well that he had the full freedom of any theatre in Washington, I said to him:

"Why do you want to pay for that box, John? You can have it by going to Len Grover."

Leonard Grover, who was long prominent in theatrical affairs, and is still alive, was the proprietor of the theatre. Booth's answer was simple and terse. "I don't care to accept any favors from the house just now," he said. That was all. I called one of my boys and Booth gave him an order to secure a box in a certain location and handed him the money for it—and added a tip for the boy himself. In a few moments the lad came back with the order for the box. Booth and Herold left soon after.

As was afterward shown at the trial of his co-conspirators, Booth had learned that Leonard Grover, who had been a personal friend of President Lincoln since 1860, had specially invited him to be present on the evening in question and had reserved for him the stage box next to the one Booth had purchased. The intention of Booth, had Lincoln attended the theatre, was to shoot him from the box which he had bought and paid for. Early in the day of the performance, Friday, Booth learned at the National Theatre that Lincoln had sent his regrets and he laid his plans accordingly. The box bought by Booth stood empty that evening, while the assassin pursued his victim to Ford's Theatre.

On the afternoon of the fatal day I was in the company of three old friends who happened to be from Lincoln's own home town—Springfield, Ill. I had met these men in Springfield about a year before when I had played a match game and given some exhibitions there. They were little more than congenial acquaintances and their names

I cannot now recall, but I remember that one of them was a major in the army away on a short furlough. We spent the latter part of that afternoon and the early part of the evening together, and then decided to go to the theatre. Ford's was the house chosen, with very little conception of the terrible tragedy we were to see enacted there—a real life tragedy. In fact we had no knowledge that the President was going to attend.

THE seats we were assigned were in the second row of the orchestra, and the President's box, draped with the American flag, was almost over our heads. Had we remained in these seats we could not have witnessed so much of the tragedy as we did, but at the end

of the first act of "Our American Cousin" we left the theatre for the entrance, and getting back a little after the curtain had risen, remained standing at the back of the house.

Suddenly a pistol shot rang out, and the figure of a man leaped from the President's box to the stage and almost fell to the boards. Rising instantly, he waved an arm at the audience, shouted "the South is avenged," which we heard plainly enough where we were standing, and half limped, half ran partly across the stage and vanished in the flies. The apparition was not over sixty seconds in sight of the audience, but I had quickly recognized John Wilkes Booth.

There were two people on the stage at the time—Booth had unquestionably chosen this particular moment in the play—one of whom seemed to realize what had happened. This was Laura Keane, who was playing the leading female part. Although she divined what had been done and recognized John Wilkes Booth as the assassin—a member of her own profession and her personal friend—this courageous woman ran up stairs into the box, took the President's head into her own lap and did what she could for the first few awful moments to administer help and comfort. Meanwhile the other players had left the stage, the play was stopped and the audience was in a state of half daze, half panic.

Suddenly a giant form leaped to his feet, ran to the stage, sprung upon it and disappeared in the direction that Booth had just taken. This was Colonel Stewart, a well-known lawyer, who was said to be the tallest man in Washington. He was six feet six inches. Then the news that Lincoln had been actually wounded got to the audience, who rose and emptied the theatre as quickly as possible.

I got back to my billiard rooms to find that the news had already spread, and the men and boys from the second tier or balcony of the National Theatre, whose back windows faced my own, were pouring into my place through the windows. There was no sleep in Washington that night. The whole town arose and poured out on the streets, and it was a night of excitement, terror and confusion. Party spirit was still at its height, as it was just after the election which had made Lincoln President for the second time, and the populace could not disconnect the tragedy from political reasons.

I believe I am perfectly safe in saying that the life of an avowed Democrat—who insisted on proclaiming that fact—would not have been safe within the limits of Washington that night.

I had a practical opportunity to prove this. On my way home I found a mob in front of Williard's Hotel who were about to hang a man to a lamp post. Stopping, I recognized my old friend, Major O'Hara, of Wilson's Zouaves, a crack New York Regiment which had won laurels in the war. He was in a highly intoxicated condition, but

was charged with having made an offensive remark about Lincoln. This may have been true, for he was a Tammany Hall Democrat of the sternest type. But I had recognized several men of my acquaintance in the group besides the Major. I at once decided to take a hand. Stepping to the front I said simply and forcibly:

"Boys, he's drunk! A Union soldier! Stop!"

Fortunately the Major was in full uniform and my remonstrance turned the tide in his favor and he was set free. That night at a late hour and after I had retired a patrol of soldiers came to the boarding house where Booth and I lived and searched the premises for him. At the trial of the conspirators, which followed after Booth was shot by Boston Corbett—who himself told me that story in detail in Salt Lake City six years afterward—the testimony of the boy in my employ, who had gone after the box convicted the dead actor of conspiracy and intent to assassinate Lincoln. All through the days preceding the tragedy I never once heard Booth refer to the subject. Nor did he bring any of those who were afterward charged with conspiracy to my place with the exception of the single visit of Herold, which I have described.

THAT Booth was unquestionably laboring under some undue excitement was apparent to me for a week before the fatal shot was fired. As I now clearly recall, he seemed to be crazed by some stress of inward feeling, but only one who was very intimate with him could have told it. As I afterward often remarked to friends when speaking of that experience: "Booth was crazy, but he didn't show it." Still I had no real conception of the tumult that was working in his breast, for excepting in purely social matters John Wilkes Booth always kept his own counsel. He never even used to gossip about his professional work, nor boast of his stage career as is the general custom of actors. The particular thing that attracted my attention and what seemed most out of the ordinary was the amazing quantity of liquor he drank in my billiard parlors. He would sometimes call for a second glass of brandy and toss it off when he had barely drained the first one. This was far from his usual way. For while a steady drinker, I had always found Booth to respect the amenities and "drink square," as we used to say in those days. During that last week of his life in Washington he sometimes drank at my bar as much as a quart of brandy in the space of less than two hours of an evening. Of course I would wonder and worry about what this heavy drinking by my friend meant. It was more than a spree. I could see that, and yet Booth was not given to sprees. He was a steady dram drinker, and sometimes overstepped the bounds and got intoxicated, but he was a sober man the next day.

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I BELIEVE Booth was as much crazed by the liquor he drank that week as by any motive when he shot Lincoln. I have had but one life-long wish, and that was that his friends could but have known or guessed his purpose and kept the maddening cup from his hand. But it was a time when nearly everybody drank in Washington, and the majority of those who did, drank much more freely than drinking men do now. The nation had been encouraged to drink, for up to the breaking out of the war there was no tax on liquor whatever. Excellent whisky could be had for 5 cents a glass in hotels and bar-rooms, and French champagne retailed for \$2 a bottle. I need not recall the list of distinguished men of the war time who drank to excess.