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## RECOLLECTIONS *of* JOHN WILKES BOOTH

*Distinguished Actor Discusses His Early Associations with the  
Ill-Starred Genius Who Assassinated  
Abraham Lincoln*



Sir Charles  
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BY SIR  
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**S**IR CHARLES WYNDHAM, stage and civil war veteran and one of the most distinguished and interesting figures in the Anglo-American dramatic world, during an interview a few days ago, passed back through the years in recounting his experiences until he came to the name of John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of Lincoln, with whom he once was closely associated. And then, as the recollections of one whom he had known, admired and pitied crowded to his speech, he said:—

"As an actor the natural endowment of John Wilkes Booth was of the highest. His original gift was greater than that of his wonderful brother, Edwin."

In explanation Sir Charles said that Booth, to his mind, had suffered from progressive insanity, culminating in the murder of the President.

Few are those surviving who can recall more than vaguely that brilliant but sinister personality. Sir Charles is the only one whose relations with Wilkes Booth were such as to bring some understanding of his characteristics and who is qualified to speak of a man who must always have a dark but vital interest in history.

For two months they played in the same company in Washington. From that engagement the Englishman went out to do his part toward the defence of the Union, while Booth, the American born, left it to enter upon the plot destined to surround him with tragic significance throughout the ages.

Sir Charles Wyndham stands in the front rank of his profession, among the greatest of contemporary comedians. Possessed of fortune and title, manager of three successful London theatres, accorded universal applause, fêted and lionized, he has remained delightfully simple and democratic, free from pose or affectation. His seventy-two years sit lightly upon him. In conversation his expression is vivid, his gestures free and unstudied as he gathers the subject between his expressive hands. His face retains only those lines that add character and dignity.

Genuine, kindly, smiling, taking quiet pleasure in the play of his keen intelligence, he is one of those whom chance acquaintance or friend cherishes in warm regard.

He met his interviewer in morning negligee, fresh from the razor. A velvet smoking jacket gave upon a snowy shirt bosom and a collar with high out turned corners, where the folds of his chin settled, after the manner of statesmen of the fifties. He was guiltless of a necktie and comfortable slippers encased his feet. His first action was to offer a box of gold tipped cigarettes and his next was to slip into an armchair. The shyest of reporters must feel the genial effects of a reception like this, and introductory remarks led to reminiscence and thence to John Wilkes Booth.

### He Was a Genius.

"A marvellous man," said Sir Charles. "He was one of the few to whom that ill used term of genius might be applied with perfect truth. He was a genius, and a most unfortunate one. His dramatic powers were of the best. They were untutored, untrajned. He lacked the quality of the student that Edwin possessed, but the artist was there.

"Seldom has the stage seen a more impressive or a more handsome or a more impassioned actor. Picture to yourself Adonis, with high forehead, ascetic face corrected by rather full lips, sweeping black hair, a figure of perfect youthful proportions and the most wonderful black eyes in the world. Such was John Wilkes Booth.

"At all times his eyes were his striking feature, but when his emotions were aroused they were like living jewels. Flames shot from them. His one physical defect, the one flaw in his appearance, which might have proved a drawback in certain rôles, was his height. He was a trifle too short, but he made up for the lack by his extraordinary presence and magnetism. He shared his short stature with his father, who used to declare that he could never essay Coriolanus because he could not look like a giant warrior.



"It always seemed to me that John Wilkes had more of his father in him in all things, more of the eccentricity that led the earlier actor into inexplicable vagaries and extravagances. 'Great wit to madness surely is allied.' Junius Brutus Booth, the elder, suffered periodic departures from the normal and was always of most peculiar temperament. Here, I think, is the underlying explanation for the criminal act of his son. Edwin inherited a melancholy and sensitive cast of mind, but in the younger brother the eccentric traits of the father became accentuated and more pronounced. Difficult though it may be to draw the line of sanity in the course of the development of such a brain, I believe the assassin had become a madman before conceiving and carrying out the murder at Ford's Theatre.

"While perhaps more spontaneous, possessing a higher degree of inborn inspiration than Edwin, John Wilkes, as I say, lacked the other's finish and cultivation. His was not a nature to submit to discipline, adversity or a long routine of study. What he had he could use, but he never brought his gift into flower, because, it may be, his race was destined to be quickly run. When he achieved some notable triumph in his art it was a divine flash, a combustion of the elements within him. Amazing material, mind you, but somewhat crude, and dependent upon what he had been given, not what he acquired."

"How did you come to meet him first?"

"He was at the head of the company with which I made my first professional appearance."

"Do you mind describing how that came about?"

Sir Charles ran his fingers through his tangle of gray hair and cast back into days dead this half century with a facility that the more ordinary of us would find difficult concerning the events of last week.

#### Career of the Actor.

"My father was a surgeon and originally I was intended for the ministry, if that is imaginable. Having pursued my studies in this direction in Germany for some time I discovered that my private inclination was toward the player folk and that very wicked institution, the stage. When I expressed a dislike of the ways to which my feet had been set my father changed his plans and entered me in training for a surgeon. Surgery appealed to me scarcely more than the ministry and I am afraid I wasted much valuable time about the theatres that should have been employed in the dissecting room and other more cheerful places.

"Finally my father called me into some solemn conference. I knew what was coming.

"I wish you would tell me what you really prefer to make of yourself," he said.

"I answered, with some hesitation, that I was strongly attracted toward the profession of an actor. He threw his hands above his head.

"An actor!" he cried. "Why not taller? Why not bring your ambition to look a little higher? It is scarcely necessary to explain that the stage was not held in any very high regard at that time.

"We finally came to a compromise. He said if I would agree to finish my studies and take my degree in surgery I should then be free to choose my life as I could contrive it. I made the promise and accordingly he took me to Dublin, where I might be out of the way of distractions. I resumed my studies there. The value of his precautions was somewhat lessened by the fact that before he left Dublin he himself had introduced me to all the actors and actresses of note in that city.

"However, I held to my bargain and was graduated as a surgeon. That was just at the outbreak of the Civil War. Like many young men of my acquaintance I had strong Abolitionist sympathies. The prospect of aiding the Northern cause together with the strong appeal that a life of action and danger offered decided me to take a part, such as it might be, in the struggle.

"I shipped to New York and through General Banks received my appointment as a military surgeon. The army medical service was not in good shape and anyone with a European degree in his grip was a find. I was sent out to St. Louis and placed at the head of an examining board out there. Soon afterward I received word that there had been an unannounced change in family plans at home and that my wife had come to New York expecting to find me. I could not obtain a transfer to the East, but I was able to resign temporarily, making an arrangement that would leave me free to re-enter government employ. I came on to New York and joined my wife.

"Grover, of Grover's Theatre, Washington, had heard of some amateur work I had done at home and learned that I was without occupation for the time being. He sent me an offer, which I accepted, and I proceeded to the capital. The stock company then playing at Grover's Theatre in repertoire was headed by John Wilkes Booth.

"Booth was a year younger than myself. He had made his debut as Richmond in 'Richard III,' but a few years before he had been introduced as a star at Wallack's Theatre, in 1862. It was in 1863 that I met him. His rôles were chosen from among those played by his father and by Edwin—Richard III, Hamlet, Sir Giles Overreach, Pescara and others. Edwin left the Southern cities to him and was appearing elsewhere. Although John Wilkes had not been before the public long, he met with great success and was pointed out by the observing as the probable successor to his father.

#### On the Stage With Booth.

"My first part was Osric, in 'Hamlet.' During my introductory rehearsal I wandered about the stage and finally chose an advantageous position at a little table where I could command a good view of the proceedings. John Wilkes noticed me there and smiled. A few minutes later the stage manager caught sight of me and rushed up in a great state of mind. It seemed that I had been sitting at the star's table, whereas my proper place was far back in the wings. I apologized, of course, but Booth didn't seem to mind.



He spoke pleasantly to me and we spent some minutes in conversation.

"I was strongly attracted to him in the first place by his effective, thrilling presentation of Hamlet. Edwin's was a reflective Hamlet. As John Wilkes played it the Danish prince was unmistakably mad throughout. Edwin's conception of the part was that of uneven and unbalanced genius, and wonderfully he portrayed it. But John Wilkes leaned toward the other view of the character, as was in keeping with his own bent of mind. His Hamlet was insane, and his interpretation was fiery, convincing and artistic.

"The courtesy and kindness shown me by John Wilkes made way for friendship between us, and we frequently were together after the play. He was a most charming fellow, off the stage as well as on, a man of flashing wit and magnetic manner. He was one of the best raconteurs to whom I ever have listened. As he talked he threw himself into his words, brilliant, ready, enthusiastic. He could hold a group spellbound by the hour at the force and fire and beauty of him. He was unusually fluent. And yet throughout the spell he wove upon his listeners there were startling breaks, abrupt contrasts, when his eccentricity and peculiarity cropped to the surface. He was the idol of women. His conquest embraced the sex, and with no effort. They would rave of him, his voice, his hair, his eyes. Small wonder, for he was fascinating."

"Did you ever hear him uphold the cause of the Confederacy in those days, Sir Charles?" asked the interviewer.

"Never. Apparently his opinions, if so they could be called, concerning the national issue were carefully concealed. I knew of but one instance when his impetuosity brought them to the surface. The incident was a sure indication of the warp that had come in his brain. To my mind it offers proof of his latent but essential insanity.

"Soon after the beginning of the war he was journeying on a railway train in company with his brother-in-law, John S. Clarke, well-known actor and manager, who was a very close friend of mine. In the course of casual conversation Clarke began to discuss some bit of news from the front. John Wilkes made no reply, but sat opposite with a frown on his face and drumming on the seat with his fingers. Finally Clarke made some disparaging remark about Jefferson Davis.

"As the words were uttered Booth sprang up and hurled himself upon Clarke in a wild tempest of fury, catching him by the throat. Other passengers tried to interfere, but Booth held his hold, to all appearance bent upon strangling his brother-in-law. He swung Clarke from side to side with maniac strength while his grip tightened. His face was drawn and twisted with rage.

"Slowly his anger left him and his hold relaxed, none too soon for Clarke. Clarke hardly knew what had happened and looked at his assailant in amazement, gasping for breath. Booth stood over him with a dramatic gesture.

#### The Threat of Booth.

"'Never, if you value your life,' he said, tensely, 'never speak in that way to me again of a man and a cause I hold sacred.'

"Clarke was aware of the uneven disposition of his brother-in-law and passed the matter off as a harmless temporary aberration. It was known only to a few friends, who recalled it with painful interest a few years later. Actors were not supposed to be politicians or required to be partisans. The fact that John Wilkes Booth held or seemed to hold a decided conviction as to the war was not regarded as any one's affair. How could it seem to have a significance? No one pretended to have an understanding of the strange man. It was just another queer prank such as his father used to play.

"Edwin's sympathies, as I need hardly say, were with the North. As some indication of the fact that John Wilkes made no display of his sentiments was the fact that the brothers remained warmly attached to each other throughout the war. They were together occasionally.

"I remained in the company with John Wilkes for about eight weeks and then played for a time with Mrs. John Wood in New York. The stage began to appear rather hopeless so far as I was concerned and I returned to my position as army surgeon, serving in the Red River and other campaigns. In November, 1864, there was a remarkable performance of 'Julius Caesar' at the Winter Garden in New York, in which the three Booth brothers appeared as the stars. Junius Brutus Booth, Jr., was the eldest of the three. Edwin was five years older than John Wilkes. On that occasion John Wilkes played Mark Anthony, and it was said that he gave an admirable presentation of the part, showing great promise, as indeed he must have. His last appearance on the stage, as I recall, was as Pescara in 'The Apostate,' given at a benefit for John McCullough.

"I remember how I first received word of the assassination of Lincoln. I had returned to London and was following with interest the news concerning the closing acts of the gigantic war drama as the steamships brought in despatches. There came one day a meagre rag of a rumor that the President had been shot and killed. With this came word that the murderer was one J. W. Booth.

#### First News of the Tragedy.

"I turned the name over and over in my mind, horrible suspicion of the truth creeping upon me. Could this mean John Wilkes Booth? The thing seemed impossible in one view, yet calling to mind the extraordinary man as I had known him I could conceive of his committing some such desperate, mad act in one of his frenzied moments. I went into the streets. Crowds were gathered about the newspaper offices



waiting for further announcements. Some hours later the contents of the despatches which had arrived in London eleven days after the event were known in some detail and I received confirmation of my fear. It was John Wilkes Booth. My horror and detestation of his crime were mingled with pity for the fall of that brilliant, wayward intellect. I felt a sorrow that no other among the excited crowds about me could know as I went sadly back to my home.

"I have no doubt that in his seething brain, where reason finally had been quite overthrown, the man thought in some vague way he was committing a heroic deed, one that would cause his name to be handed down as that of a national deliverer. Once his insanity had come to hinge on this idea I can imagine how he threw himself into his terrible work, I can see the theatric manner in which he performed it, 'Sic semper tyrannis!' he cried, and the madman had not overborne the actor in his gesture as he pronounced his exultation over the frightful crime."

"Did you see Edwin Booth in later years?"

"Many times, and talked with him on many subjects. But his brother was never mentioned. It was understood among all who approached Edwin that this was one of the subjects that must not be even distantly hinted at. He never recovered from the shock, I think. His was a sensitive, shrinking soul, and the blow had been cruel. When it fell he abandoned the stage, announcing that he would not return to it. It was long before he was overpersuaded, and the manner in which his reappearance was received must have convinced him that there was no tinge of real public feeling against him for a matter with which he had had no more to do than the babe new born."

"Have you heard the various rumors from time to time that John Wilkes was not killed by his pursuers, as was supposed, but escaped?" Sir Charles was asked.

"I have heard such tales," was the answer. "But they were palpably false, according to my understanding of Booth. It has been said, I believe, that he lived under various assumed names in unfrequented places. For one thing, he was not that kind. It was not in him to remain quiescent anywhere. Then, he was no ordinary individual. He could not hide. Wherever he might be, there he was a marked man. All this is beside his insanity, which, being progressive, must have reduced him to a babbling maniac if he had lived."

"There was but one John Wilkes—sad, mad, bad John Wilkes. It is a waste of time to dwell upon what the world has lost through its possibilities gone astray, but one can scarce withhold an expression of regret over what went to pitiful wreck in John Wilkes Booth."



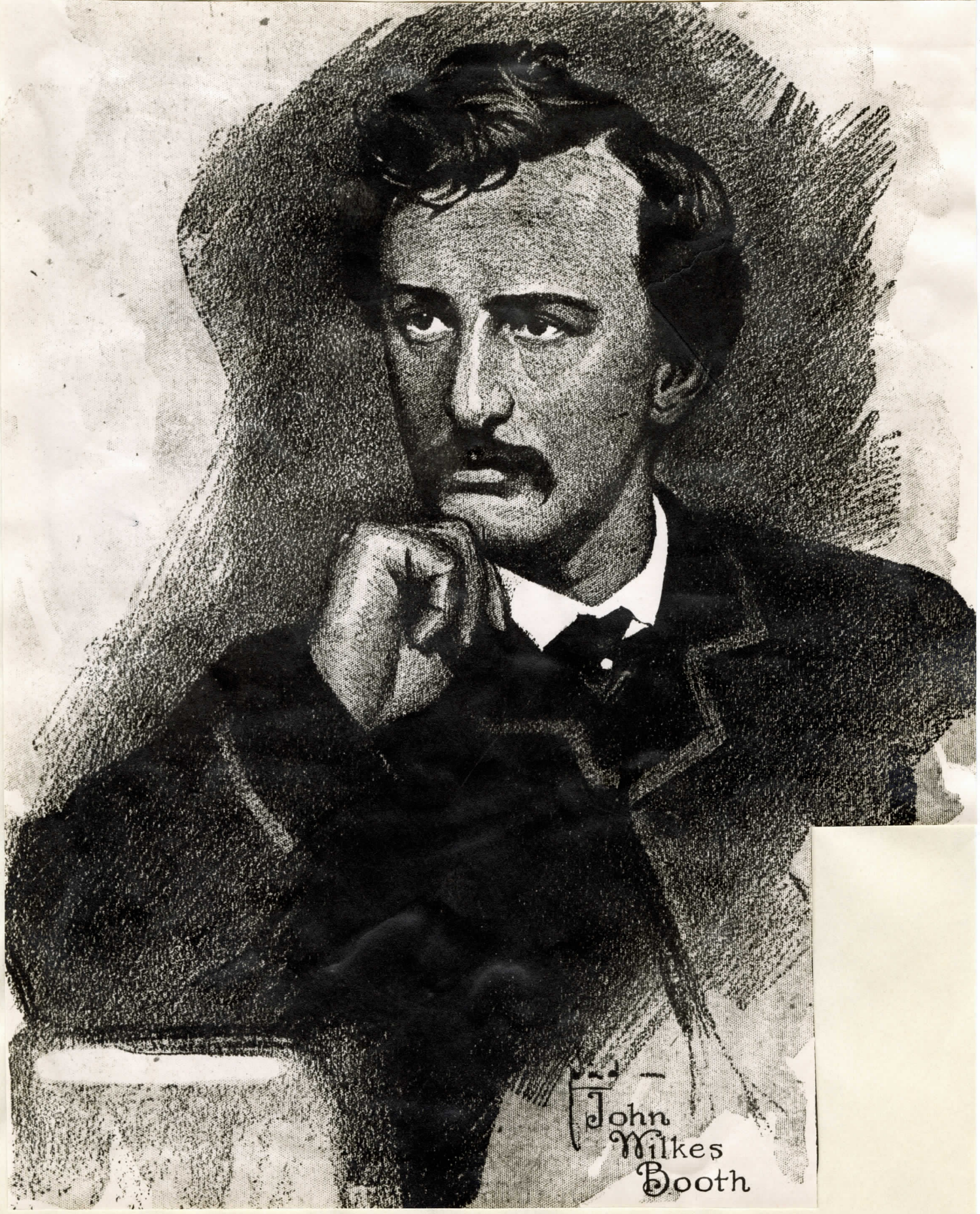
John Wilkes Booth Had A Greater  
Natural Gift Than His Brother  
Edwin"





"I Remember How I Received The First Word of Lincoln's Assassination"





John  
Wilkes  
Booth