

Wilkes Booth Mystery Is Recalled by Niece

Strange Call at Enid and London Episode Told by Blanche de Bar.

The narrator of the following reminiscences, known on the American stage for many years as Blanche De Bar, is a daughter of Junius Brutus Booth 2d by an early marriage. Miss De Bar was born in Philadelphia in 1874. Her mother was Clementina De Bar, an English actress.

"Last Sunday's instalment described the assassination of President Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth, an uncle of the writer. This concluding instalment takes up the narrative at that point.

By Blanche De Bar Booth.

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn., Jan. 17.—It was during that time that my uncle, Edwin Booth, the great tragedian, wrote me a letter that I have cherished all my life. In it he wrote:

"I would have you, Blanche, if you can believe me true and worthy of some share of your affection, to open your heart to me when care oppresses you, to confide in me as your dear friend and loving uncle, and you will find me happy to prove that I am such.

"If there is the slightest thing I can do to serve you let me know at once. I am most anxious to show my dear little niece that old Uncle Ned has the same soft heart beneath his shirt frill that he had before the world had sorrowed him, though his head is so much harder.

"Some thoughtful friend of mine has sent me a few articles sadly needed. God bless her for that. Was it you? I must bring this chapter to a close. Regards to Uncle Ben and friends. God bless you.

"UNCLE EDWIN."

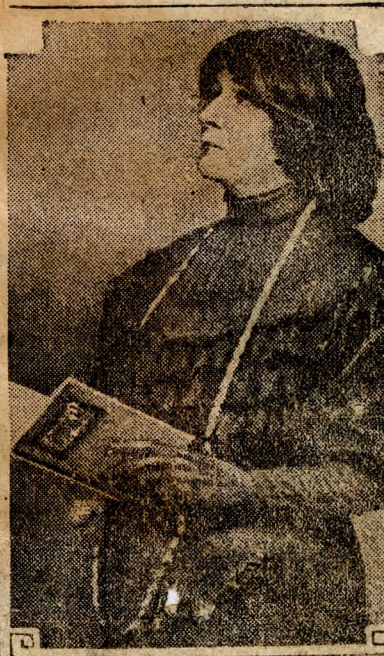
It was during that week of despair that the hunt for John Wilkes Booth was brought home to us. I was talking to my uncle when the maid came running to me again, this time excited.

"Miss Blanche," she cried as before, "the Yankee soldiers are surrounding the house."

We looked out, and all around the house and the theatre, next door were soldiers. They had come to arrest us, we believed, and I think that that was their purpose.

However, we were not brought to such straits.

I had a letter, a very private letter containing family matters, which I wanted to keep from the prying eyes of the soldiers who filled the house. I caught up a portfolio, an old-fashioned leather case, and jammed the letter hard down into the folds of it.



BLANCHE DE BAR BOOTH
IN 1912

Overlooked the Letter.

"While they were searching, going through my uncle's effects, through the letters and papers of the servants and searching my room, a young soldier picked up the portfolio, shaking it.

I thought my letter would be found, but it remained in the fold of the leather, and the soldier tossed the case carelessly upon the floor in a corner.

We were taken, my uncle, myself and the servants, to a building where we were searched and cross-examined several hours. My uncle proved his innocence, and I was nothing more than a frightened young girl.

When we were allowed to return to our home, I remember, I danced with glee over the saving of my letter.

I cannot describe, even now, those terrible days, but they passed. Gradually we faced our friends, and I began to think again of my debut. My uncle's theatre had been reopened. It had seemed at first that any attempt for me to go on the stage would be a failure. My uncle discussed it with Judge Lord, both in New Orleans and in our home in St. Louis, where he was a frequent guest.

Finally it was decided I should open as a member of my uncle's company in St. Louis. The name of Booth had been a great asset until the assassination. Now even my uncle Edwin was in retirement. Judge Lord chose my stage name. He argued that I never would be received by the people as a Booth, and I appeared in my first performance as Blanche De Bar.

Booth Returns to Stage.

Less than a year later a Booth was on the stage again, my uncle Edwin having yielded to the pleadings of his friends.

My first part was Kate Hardcastle in "She Stoops to Conquer." We played an afterpiece, "The Honeymoon," also.

George De Vere, an actor known then, but whose name, perhaps, means little to present day audiences, if anything at all, was the leading man. My uncle, Ben De Bar, played the leading comedy role and another member of the company, a great actress, was Mary Maddern. She was an aunt of the famous Minnie Maddern Fiske.

When I had played for months, and was making my debut in New York in my uncle Edwin's company, I was a mere novice, at least in Shakespearean roles.

My next engagement was with a stock company managed by John T. Ford, playing in Ford's Theatre in Baltimore. The Ford Theatre in Washington, in which John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln, also was owned by Mr. Ford.

I went to Baltimore, ambitious to do something greater. I had a part in "Foul Play," I remember. There were many others, the leads in all the plays we presented. I closed that season a better actress, but I lacked still that skill which I attained under my uncle Edwin.

Joins Booth's Company.

Then came my opportunity to join my uncle, now back on the stage, and in his own theatre, Booth's, just opened at 23d Street and Sixth Avenue, New York.

My uncle Edwin had been playing, with Mary McVicker as his leading woman, for a season before I arrived in New York. She was the daughter of a Chicago manager. I think McVicker's Theatre in Chicago dates from the time.

Mary McVicker was a clever actress, but she lacked the talent for the roles my uncle gave her. She retired from the stage early in that year, 1870, and in June was married to my Uncle Edwin. She never played again.

I followed Mary McVicker, my uncle Edwin's leading woman, but during that summer I supported the famous Edwin Adams in a long run of "Enoch Arden." I played Anna Lee. Mr. Adams had a great following then in New York.

Through my uncle Edwin's coaching and thoughtful care I progressed and was ready for the part of Ophelia when Edwin opened the season of 1871. I supported Joseph Jefferson, playing the daughter, Minna, in the Booth theatre production of "Rip Van Winkle" of that time.

I was in the bills as Blanche DeBar, and as Blanche DeBar I remained to the end of my stage days. My uncle Edwin was a kindly man, considerate of members of his company, no matter what their parts. I suppose I was what would be called a star today, but then we were members of the Booth Stock Company. That was honor enough.

I remember many kindly things my uncle said to me. One remark was an effort to correct a rather grievous fault. He had stopped a rehearsal and addressed me rather sharply. I thought at the time, but now I know it was a kindness.

"Blanche," he said, "you strike a good attitude, but before the audience appreciates it you lose it. You are like a chambermaid. You drop a curtsy, instead of giving it grace, as in the ballet. Your reading is all right. You have as good an education as I, perhaps a better one. I find no fault with your reading, but you must cultivate grace."

There were many happy experiences, which showed the good nature of my uncle.

Booth Loses His Shoe.

At a performance of "A Fool's Revenge," in which my uncle made a success in the part of Petruccio, I was playing Fiadellia in his support, the daughter whose honor he avenges. Petruccio, as you know, was a court jester, and he wore long, jointed shoes, with the toes turned up.

During this performance one of Petruccio's shoes became broken at the end, and it flapped rather embarrassingly. As we made an exit and were in the wings, my uncle held up this toe, and danced about on the other foot.

"Blanche," he cried, "I am a ripe tomato!"

The shoe was a bright red, by the way.

"I supported my uncle that season in "A Fool's Revenge" and many other plays. I played Pauline to my uncle's Claude Melnotte in "The Lady of Lyons," which we did at matinees. There followed work on tour, in which I played in the South.

Then I received a message from an old manager in Chicago, Jack Languish. We played on the west side of the city. Johnny Mortimer was the leading man. Mrs. Stonewall played mother parts.

My next engagement was in leads with the Shakespeare Club of New Orleans, where I met many of my old friends.

A year later I was at liberty. My mother was dead, my father estranged to me. He had married Agnes Perry, widow of an actor on the Pacific Coast, and there was another daughter, my half-sister.

I received an offer as leading woman from Mrs. John Drew, then manager of the famous Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia. All the players of my family had appeared there years before. I joined the company at Philadelphia and played there one season. Mrs. Drew, the widow of the famous manager, was the grandmother of the Barrymores of to-day.

Plays With Frank Mayo.

It was during that season the elder Frank Mayo created the part of Davy Crockett, in the premiere of that well known play. I played the leading woman part.

I returned to St. Louis after the Philadelphia engagement and played again in my uncle Ben DeBar's theatre, and later again in New Orleans. I was no longer the young girl who had made her debut there under such trying circumstances. Acting had become my livelihood, as it was all my life later.

We played throughout the South and West, and during that tour I was brought home once more to the scenes following the Civil War.

Recalls "Enid Legend."

At Enid, Okla., we had arrived late at the theatre after a hard jump, and I went to my dressing room worn out. I had decided to get a little rest before it was time to go on, when there was a knock at the door.

I was told a man was asking if "I wanted to see John."

There never entered my mind at that time a question of the death of John Wilkes Booth in the manner in which it had been reported. His body, or what had been accepted as his body, lay in the family lot at Baltimore, and he was but a memory to me.

I told the man at the door, whoever it was, that I could see no one, and thought that ended it. A few minutes later there was another knock and I was handed a slip of paper with the name "John Wilkes Booth" written upon it.

I was determined to get some rest and believed some member of the company was playing a joke upon me. At any rate, I tossed the paper upon a table and forgot it.

Afterward I heard of the "Enid legend." Before we left Enid I talked with people who believed John Wilkes Booth was alive and living in Oklahoma under the name of E. L. George.

The Stranger in London.

Not long ago I received a visit from Wilfred Clarke, son of my uncle, John S. Clarke, and my aunt, Asia Booth, and we discussed this legend. He told me of an incident in London several years after the Civil War. He said he was in a carriage with my uncle Edwin, John McCullough, my aunt Asia and my grandmother Booth. He was a mere child. A man approached the carriage, was recognized by my grandmother, my uncle and, he thinks, by my aunt.

My grandmother screamed and he heard my uncle Edwin cry out:

"My God, it is John!"

My grandmother tried to get out of the carriage, but was restrained by Mr. McCullough, but my uncle Edwin got out and talked in a low tone to the stranger. The man walked away and my uncle returned. That is all he knows of it.

I place little credence in either incident, so far as they have to do with the solving of this mystery, if mystery it is. But I know this: If I had had an inkling of the supposed escape of John Wilkes Booth, I could have settled the controversy that day in Enid.

If the man posing as John Wilkes Booth was he, I could have asked him questions about our childhood days, and his answers would have proved or disproved his claims.

I always regretted my impatience that day, but the opportunity was gone before I had realized its importance.