

The True Story of Boston Corbett

A Lincoln Assassination Mystery, Fifty Years After

By Francis E. Leupp

MONDAY next will be the forty-eighth anniversary of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. The tragedy was projected against a background and surrounded by a setting which would have suggested the dramatic training of its perpetrator even if he had not been recognized by his fellow actors as he crossed the stage after the shooting. All the conventional scenic effects had been as well arranged, and the accessories as carefully chosen, as for the third act in "Julius Cæsar." The only accident which marred its perfection from the player's point of view was the breaking of Booth's leg as he leaped from the President's box, since in his crippled condition he could not carry out fully his plan of escape. As it was, he succeeded in reaching the stage door, mounting his waiting horse and galloping off into Maryland, where he obtained the first aid services of a country surgeon, enabling him to cross over into Virginia on his way toward the heart of the late Confederacy.

In spite of the handicap of his lameness, which not only prevented rapid progress, but made him the more conspicuous and easy to trace, he did elude his pursuers for several days. Meanwhile some of his fellow conspirators had been arrested at the house of Mrs. Surratt, their habitual place of meeting. How much they actually knew of Booth's whereabouts, and what the detectives contrived to draw from them by indirection, will never be assured; but, although detentions of innocent persons under suspicion were continually occurring, ten days elapsed before Colonel Lafayette C. Baker, provost marshal of the War Department, struck a trail which seemed fresh enough to promise definite results.

First Clew to the Culprits

Two companies of the Sixteenth New York Cavalry, who had served as an escort of honor while Mr. Lincoln's body remained in Washington, had been kept there on patrol duty afterward. On the afternoon of April 24 their commander, Gen Sweitzer, received from General Hancock an order to "detail a reliable and discreet officer with twenty-five men well mounted," to report to Colonel Baker with three days' rations. Sweitzer selected for the officer Lieutenant Edward P. Doherty, who was somewhat acquainted with Booth and had met and conversed with him only a short time before the assassination. In order to show no favoritism in picking his followers, the lieutenant notified the men that some interesting duty was probably in store for those who wanted it, sounded "boots and saddles," and then accepted the first twenty-five who swung into line before him. One of the promptest was a trooper named Corbett, a naturalized Englishman, thirty-three years old, a hatter by trade, who had enlisted in the volunteer army at the outbreak of the war, and, notwithstanding a rather eccentric turn of mind, had risen by brave service to the rank of sergeant.

Nobody knew what first name Corbett's

parents had given him. He had never been baptized till, as an adult, he had become a convert during a religious revival, and then made his baptism the occasion of his christening. As he had experienced his change of heart in Boston, he had adopted the name of that city for his own, and was everywhere known as Boston Corbett. A story used to be afloat among his comrades that, his eccentricities having caused the clergyman to whom he applied for baptism to advise his waiting a little, he administered the rite to himself. Whether this was true or not, it is certain that he was considered the oddest genius in the regiment, and that, cherishing a notion that heaven had specially endowed him as an exhorter, he undertook a good deal of evangelizing work while in the army. He was of only medium height, rather light-framed, and had an almost effeminate face, this characteristic being emphasized by the way he wore his hair, hanging long against the collar of his uniform.

Tracking Them Down

Doherty was told that Booth and some of his associates were hiding in Fredericksburg, Va., and started for that city; but early the next morning news reached him that a regiment of cavalry had gone to Fredericksburg during the night, so he abandoned that destination and switched his route of march toward Port Conway, where, accompanied by one orderly, he spent the early evening in scouting. From this point the stories told by various actors in the incident differ in some details, even under oath on the witness stand; but the narrative as given in these columns is substantially one which fell from Doherty's own lips years afterward, when he had retired to private life and there was no longer any rivalry between him and his companions on the expedition, and some of the Government records throw a confirmatory light on his statements in places where they appear to differ from those of other witnesses.

At Port Conway there was a flat-boat which was used to transport horses and vehicles across the Rappahannock. Mr. Rollins, the ferryman, was absent, and Doherty entered into conversation with the women of the family, representing that he was trying to overtake a few friends who had forged ahead of him on a cross-country trip. To make his quest clearer, he drew from his pocket three photographs with which he had provided himself in Washington. They were those of Booth, Herold and Surratt. Mrs. Rollins recognized the portraits of Booth and Herold, evidently without the least suspicion of who they really were. They had come along the night before, she said, in a wagon, and hired her husband to ferry them over the river, as they were on their way to a hotel in Bowling Green under the convoy of a young Confederate officer formerly of Mosby's command.

When Rollins returned home, Doherty placed him under arrest, and compelled him not only to take the party across the river but to act as their guide to Bowling Green. At the hotel in that town, where they arrived about midnight, they ascertained that two men answering the description of the fugitives had been left at the house of a farmer named Garrett. The party pressed a native guide into their service and reached the farm about four in the morning of the 26th. After a rapid reconnaissance, they surrounded the house and aroused the inmates. Farmer Garrett himself came to the door, and Doherty proceeded to question him; but a moment

later one of the troopers advanced with a young man whom he had discovered in the corn-crib. The prisoner proved to be the farmer's son. Before he had fairly time to get his wits together, Doherty had drawn from him, at the point of a pistol, an admission that two men, one of them a cripple, were in the barn. The lieutenant summoned Corbett. "Dismount your men," said he, "detail a few to watch the house, and follow me to the barn with the rest."

The barn was quickly surrounded, and another young Garrett who was found in hiding near by was made to hand over the key. The lieutenant unlocked the door, and called to the occupants to come out at once and surrender. There was no answer. Doherty walked around the building, and one of the soldiers in his cordon told him that the whispering of two persons inside was distinctly audible. Doherty therefore raised his voice to a little higher pitch and called: "If you don't come out, I'll fire the building and burn you out!" As there was still no response, he ordered one of his suite to pile up some dry rubbish against the back of the barn and set fire to it. A first instalment of shavings and hay was laid in place, and the man was going off for more, when a voice which was very clearly Booth's sounded from within: "If you come back, I'll put a bullet through you!"

The Trapped Booth

This was what Doherty was waiting for, and he seized upon it as an opening for a parley of some length with Booth, whom he again commanded to surrender. His chief desire being to capture Booth alive and take him to Washington for trial, he ordered the suspension of the preparations for a fire. Booth, however, refused to entertain any proposal looking to his surrender, but held another whispered colloquy with Herold, who seemed already beginning to weaken. Presently Booth resumed the interrupted parley, and made one last attempt to bring his tragedy to a theatrical climax.

"I am crippled and alone," he shouted. "Give me a chance for my life. If you will draw your men up at twenty-five paces, I will come out."

"I didn't come here to fight," answered Doherty, instantly. "I came here to take you prisoner. I have fifty men with me, and I can do it."

There followed another pause of some minutes in the parley, while Booth and Herold engaged in more whispering. At last Booth's voice was heard again, this time ringing with a note of supreme scorn.

"Oh, captain," said he, "there's a man in here who is awfully anxious to surrender!"

"Very well," replied Doherty, "he may do so. You had better do the same thing, and come out."

"No," jeered Booth, "I haven't made up my mind yet to do that!"

Doherty pushed the door a little further ajar.

"Let your friend hand out his arms," he called.

"He has none," answered Booth.

"I know exactly what arms you have," persisted Doherty. "Let him hand them out at once."

Booth remained defiant. "I own all the arms," said he, "and I shall probably need them all to use on you gentlemen."

But Herold's nerve had deserted him entirely, and the sound of his feet was

heard on the barn floor as he approached the door.

"Put out your hands," commanded Doherty.

Herold's bare and empty hands appeared through the opening. The lieutenant seized them, and Herold was drawn out and turned over to the custody of one of the troopers.

While all this was passing, two civilian detectives whom Colonel Baker had ordered to accompany the expedition had become impatient, and had slipped around to the rear and set fire to the barn. The flames, as they leaped into the air, illumined the whole scene. Booth, driven by the fire from his first position near the back of the building, moved to the centre of the floor, facing the door. With a crude crutch still under his armpit on the side of his useless leg, he clutched a carbine, which he raised and aimed, with such precision as he could, straight at Doherty and Herold, who were in line in front of him.

Corbett's Part

Corbett had been standing guard at a small opening on one side of the barn. Through this, by the light of the blazing timbers, he espied the movement which in another instant might have caused the death of his superior officer. Instinctively—or by divine inspiration, as he always afterward declared—he thrust the muzzle of his cocked revolver through the aperture and with a quick sight pulled the trigger. He had been accounted a dead shot, and his purpose was to hit the assassin's arm which was nearest him. But for once his skill failed him. The bullet entered Booth's neck at the base of the skull; his carbine remained undischarged; his crutch slipped from under the arm it was supporting, his head drooped, and his whole body fell forward toward the floor.

Doherty, who had heard the shot and seen Booth drop the crutch and sway, assumed that the actor had committed suicide, and, rushing into the building, caught him in his arms and dragged him outside, stretching the body on the grass. But the heat from the burning barn was too intense to permit anyone to stay near it, so the wounded man was carried to the verandah of the Garrett house, and soldiers were despatched in all directions for medical assistance. It was an hour before the only doctor who could be found reached the spot. He probed the wound and pronounced it mortal, the bullet having ploughed its way to a vital part.

Booth was shot at about five in the morning. He died at seven. Many versions of his last words have appeared, but Doherty's recollection, which was very distinct on this point, was that he spoke but once during the interval. That was just before six o'clock, when he said faintly to the lieutenant who was bending over him: "Hands." Guessing at his meaning, Doherty lifted the dying man's hands. Booth looked at them wearily, murmured, "Useless! Useless!" and sank gradually into complete unconsciousness, from which he never rallied.

From the day he fired the fatal shot, Corbett believed he was a marked man, with Nemesis at his heels. Before he got back to Washington, his pistol, which he had intended to preserve as a relic, was stolen from him. He became a target for anonymous letters; self-styled "avengers of Booth" sprang up on all sides, and every avenger seemed resolved to begin his retributive mission by making his victim as uncomfortable as possible before dealing the coup de grace. Corbett was simple-minded enough to let these things worry him a good deal. He also suffered much vexation in the negotiations concerning the payment of certain rewards which had been offered for the capture of Booth. In an excess of patriotic zeal, or under the spell of horror which the assassination had wrought, several State and municipal authorities had promised handsome sums to encourage the pursuit of the conspirators, only to discover

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"On the evening the tragedy occurred, I was to achieve one of the greatest successes of my life. I had been in the army and on finding out that President Lincoln would attend the performance of the 'American Cousin' that evening, I composed a song in honor of the return of the soldiers, which I set to music and I obtained Laura Keane's consent to have it sung on the stage. A quartette was hired for the evening. I carefully drilled them and, on the night of the performance, had succeeded so admirably that I looked forward with pleasure to the end of the first act when my song should be sung.

"I remembered seeing the President when he entered his box that evening. He was one of the most unassuming of men and when he usually stepped into his box, he did not acknowledge the applause that his appearance provoked, but on this evening he acknowledged an unusually enthusiastic greeting by bowing to the people assembled.

"At the end of the first act my song was not rendered. A manager whispered down to me that it would have to wait over until the end of the next act. When the second act was over I was prepared to have the song sung but was told from the stage that it would be postponed until the end of the performance.

"I did not like the arrangement, and went up on the stage to remonstrate. When I stepped in the passageway near the President's box I found the man whose duty it was to shift the scenes, standing near the arrangement that controlled the gas lighting of the theatre. He had the lid of the box open and his hand on the crank which turned the flow on or off. I was surprised at seeing him there as he had no right to be in that part of the house, and I told him so. He walked away from the place and, in passing the box containing the mechanism, I closed the lid.

"I went to one of the managers and remonstrated with him for putting the matter off, but it was all to no purpose. As I was returning and was passing through the wings, I heard a shot and then a dead silence. I thought that it was the accidental discharge of a pistol by a property man.

"Just then I heard a noise, and looking up, I saw Wilkes Booth running down the narrow passageway in my direction. I will never forget the spectacle he presented. His coarse black hair seemed to stand on end and his eyes bulged out. An unearthly fire of passion seemed to gleam from them. The cords of his neck seemed to stand out from the flesh. He was running with his head down. His

name came involuntarily to my lips and when he reached me I uttered it. As I did so, he made a thrust at me with the keen-bladed, old-fashioned Roman dagger he carried in his hand. It entered my coat at the back and cut to the skin. He withdrew the knife and made a lunge at my neck. The sharp weapon pierced my coat collar and entered the flesh. I was dazed by the attack and fell to the floor. While I lay there a detective jumped over my body and the one that followed him picked me up and placed me under arrest. Outside I could hear the cries of the people. 'Lynch him!' 'Hang him!' 'Shoot the dog!'

"Being the only one under arrest and with my bloody clothes I seemed to excite the people. They demanded a victim, but I was spirited away from the theatre in safety, taken to the jail and locked up. Shortly after, the mayor of the city began to examine me. I told him my story and also told him that as I was returning to the orchestra, I saw Peanut John, the negro chore boy at the theatre, standing out in the alley holding a horse. I told them it was Wilkes Booth's horse and the man who ran past me was Wilkes Booth.

"On hearing this they all rushed to the alley and I was left practically alone. Fifteen minutes later they succeeded in finding Booth's dagger in the alley. I was released, but the feeling was so great that I had to remain practically hidden for a week.

"I testified at the trial and it was mainly on my testimony that the principals in the case were convicted. I was told afterward that the scene-shifter, before he died, confessed that my interference with his turning out the gas that night, saved a great many lives, and I think this was conclusive evidence that an extensive plot existed to assassinate other notable men in the theatre that night and all that prevented it was the fact that the lights were not turned out when Wilkes Booth fired the shot.

"It is currently accepted as a fact that Wilkes Booth, when he reached the stage, struck a dramatic pose and exclaimed 'Sic semper tyrannis.' Such is not a fact. I could have heard the slightest word uttered on the stage, but all was silent from the time of the report of the pistol shot, until the moment the people came to a realization of the awful crime that had been committed, and then began to raise the cry of revenge.

"Outside of those who were in the plot to murder the President no one in the theatre thought anything unusual would happen that night.

"Just before the performance started, I met Wilkes Booth and he invited me to take a drink with him. I accepted the invitation and while he was drinking he was the personification of coolness."