

John Wilkes Booth -- New York World - May, 1865

JOHN WILKES BOOTH

INTERESTING SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF THE ASSASSIN

COMPILED FROM STATEMENTS OF HIS PERSONAL FRIENDS AND COMPANIONS

From the New York World.

Justice is satisfied, though blinder vengeance may not be. While the illustrious murdered is on the way to the shrine, the stark corpse of his murderer lies in the shambles. The one died quietly, like his life; the other died fighting, like his crime. And now that over all of them the darkness and the dew have descended, the populace, which may not be all satisfied, may perhaps be calmed. No triumphal mourning can add to the President's glory; no further execration can disturb the assassin's slumbers. They have gone for what they were into history, into tradition, into the hereafter both of men and spirits; and what they were may be in part concluded. Mr. Lincoln's career passes, in extent, gravity, and eventful association, the province of newspaper biography; but Booth is the hero of a single deed, and the delineation of him may begin and be exhausted in a single article. I have been at pains, since the day of the President's obsequies, to collect all valid information on the subject of his assassin, in anticipation of the latter's capture and death. Now that these have been consummated, I shall print this biography.

PARENTAGE AND PARENTS OF BOOTH

The elder Booth in every land was a sojourner, as all his fathers were.

*Scrap Book - Lincolniana - Congressional Library, Washington D.C.*  
*John Wilkes Booth P 54, 55, 56*  
*may be last couple days in April*

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Of Hebrew descent, and by a line of actors, he united in himself that strong Jewish physiognomy which, in its nobler phases, makes all that is dark and beautiful, and the combined vagrancy of all men of genius and all men of the stage. Fitful, powerful, passionate, his life was a succession of vices and triumphs. He mastered the intricate characters of dramatic literature by intuition rather than by study, and produced them with a vigor and vividness which almost passed the depicting of real life. The stage on which he raved and fought became as historic as the actual decks of battleships, and his small and brawny figure comes down to us in those paroxysms of delirious art, like that of Harold, or Richard, or Prince Rupert. He drank to excess, was profligate but not generous, required but not reliable, and licentious to the bounds of cruelty. He threw off the wife of his bosom to fly from England with a flower-girl, and, settling in Baltimore, dwelt with his younger companion, and brought up many children, while his first possessed went down to a drunken and broken-hearted death. He himself, wandering westward, died on the way, errant and feverish, even in the closing moments. His widow, too conscious of her predecessor's wrongs, and often taunted with them, lived apart, frugal and discreet, and brought her six children up to honorable maturity. These were Junius Brutus, Edwin Forrest, (though he drops the Forrest for professional considerations) John Wilkes, Joseph, and the girls. All of the boys are known to more or less of fame; none of them in his art has reached the renown of the father; but one has sent his name as far as that of the great playwright to whom they were pupils. Wherever Shakespeare is quoted, John Wilkes Booth will be named, and



infamously, like that Hubert in "King John", who would have murdered the gentle Prince Arthur.

MOTHER, BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF BOOTH

It may not be a digression here to ask what has become of the children of the weird genius I have sketched above. Mrs. Booth, against whom calumny has no word to say, now resides with her daughters, in Nineteenth street, New York. John S Clarke dwells in princely style in Philadelphia, with the daughter whom he married; he is the business partner of Edwin Booth, and they are likely to become as powerful managers as they have been successful "stars". Edwin Booth, who is said to have the most perfect physical head in America, and whom the ladies call the beau ideal of the melancholy Dane, dwells also on Nineteenth street. He has acquired a fortune, and is without doubt, a frankly loyal gentleman. He could not well be otherwise, from his membership in the Century Club, where literature and loyalty are never dissolved. Correct and pleasing, without being powerful or brilliant, he has led a plain and appreciated career, and, latterly, to his honor, has been awakening among dramatic authors some emulation by offering handsome compensations for original plays. Julius Brutus Booth, the oldest of them all, mostly resembles in feature his wild and wayward father; he is not as good an actor as was Wilkes, and kept in the West, that border civilization of the drama; he now lies, on a serious charge of complicity, in Capitol Hill jail. Joseph Booth tried the stage as a utility actor and promptly failed. The best part he ever had to play was Orson in the "Iron Chest", and his discomfiture was signal; then he

studied medicine, but grew discouraged, and is now in California in an office of some sort.

A son of Booth by his first wife became a first-class lawyer in Boston. He never recognized the rest of the family. Wilkes Booth, the third son, was shot dead on Wednesday for attempting to escape from the consequences of murder. Such are the people to whom one of the greatest actors of our time gave his name and lineaments. But I have anticipated the story.

#### CHILDHOOD AND BOYHOOD OF WILKES BOOTH

Although her family was large, it was not so hard sailing with Mrs. Rosalie Booth as may be inferred. Her husband's gains had been variably great, and they owned a farm of some value near Baltimore. The boys had plain but not sufficient schooling, though by the time John Wilkes grew up Edwin and Junius were making some little money and helping the family. So Wilkes was sent to a better school than they, where he made some eventful acquaintances. One of these won his admiration as much in the playground as in subsequent life upon the field of battle; this was Fitzhugh Lee, son of the great rebel chieftain. I have not heard that Lee ever had any friendship for young Wilkes, but his port and name were enough to excite a less ardent imagination -- the son of a soldier already great, and a descendant of Washington. Wilkes Booth has often spoken of the memory of the young man, envied his success, and, perhaps, boasted of more intimacy than he ever had. The exemplars of young Wilkes, it was soon seen, were anything but literary. He hated school and pent-up life, and loved the open air. He used to stroll off to fish, though that sort of amusement was too sedentary for his nature, but went on fowling jaunts with enthusiasm. In



these latter he manifested that fine nerve, and certain eye, which was the talk of all his associates; but his greatest love was the stable. He learned to ride with his first pair of boots, and hung around the grooms to beg permission to take the nags to water. He grew in later life to be both an indurated and a graceful horseman. Toward his mother and sisters he was affectionate without being obedient. Of all the sons, Wilkes was the most headstrong in-doors, and the most contented away from home. He had a fitful gentleness which won him forgiveness, and of one of his sisters he was particularly fond; but none had influence over him. He was seldom contentious, but obstinately bent, and what he willed he did in silence, seeming to discard sympathy or confidence. As a boy he was never bright, except in a boy's sense; that is, he could run and leap well, fight when challenged, and generally fell in with the sentiment of the crowd. He therefore made many companions, and his early days all passed between Baltimore city and the adjacent farm.

I have heard it said, as the only evidence of Booth's ferocity in those early times, that he was always shooting cats, and killed off almost the entire breed in his own neighborhood. But, on more than one occasion, he ran away from both school and home, and once made the trip of the Chesapeake to the oyster fisheries without advising anybody of his family.

#### BOOTH BECOMES AN ACTOR

While yet very young, Wilkes Booth became an habitue at the theatre. His traditions and tastes were all in that direction. His blood was of the stage, like that of the Keans, the Kembles, and the Wallacks. He would not commence at the bottom of the

ladder, and climb from round to round, not take part in more than a few Thespian efforts. One night, however, a young actor, who was to have a benefit and wished to fill the house, resolved, for the latter purpose, to give Wilkes a chance. He announced that a son of the great Booth of tradition would enact the part of Richmond, and the announcement was enough. Before a crowded house, Booth played so badly that he was hissed. Still holding to his gossamer hopes and high conceit Wilkes induced John S. Clarke, who was then addressing his sister, to obtain him a position in the company of the Arch-street Theatre in Philadelphia.

#### BOOTH IN "UTILITY BUSINESS"

For eight dollars a week, Wilkes Booth, at the age of twenty-two, contracted with William Wheatley to play in any piece or part for which he might be cast, and to appear every day at rehearsal. He had to play the Courier in Sheridan Knowles's "Wife" on his first night, with five or ten little speeches to make; but such was his nervousness that he blundered continually, and quite balked the piece. Soon afterward he undertook the part of one of the Venetian comrades in Hugo's "Lucretia Borgia," and was to have said in his turn--

"Madame, I am Petruchio Pandolfo;" instead of which he exclaimed:

"Madame, I am Pondolfio Pet--, Pedolfio Pat--, Pantuchio Ped--; Dammit!

what am I?"

The audience roared, and Booth, though full of chagrin, was compelled to laugh with them.



The very next night he was to play Dawson, an important part in Moore's tragedy of "The Gamester." He had bought a new dress to wear on this night, and made abundant preparation to do himself honor. He therefore invited a lady whom he knew to visit the theatre, and witness his triumph. But at the instant of his appearance on the stage, the audience, remembering the Petruchio Pandolfo of the previous night, burst into laughter, hisses and mock applause, so that he was struck dumb, and stood rigid, with nothing whatever to say. Mr. John Dolman, to whose Stukely he played, was compelled, therefore, to strike Dawson entirely out of the piece.

These occurrences nettled Booth, who protested that he studied faithfully, but that his want of confidence ruined him. Mr. Fredericks, the stage manager, made constant complaints of Booth, who, by the way, did not play under his full name, but as Mr. J Wilkes, and he bore the general reputation of having no promise, and being a careless fellow. He associated freely with such of the subordinate actors as he liked, but being, through Clarke, then a rising favorite, of better connections, might, had he chosen, have advanced himself socially, if not artistically. Clarke was to have a benefit one evening, and to enact among other things, a mock Richard III, to which he allowed Wilkes Booth to play a real Richmond. On this occasion, for the first time, Booth showed some energy, and obtained some applause; but, in general, he was stumbling and worthless. I myself remember, on three consecutive nights, hearing him trip up and receive suppressed hisses. He lacked enterprise. Other young actors, instead of waiting to be given better parts, committed them to memory, in the

hope that their real interpreter might not come to hand. Among these, I recall John McCullough, who afterward became quite a celebrated actor. He was getting, if I correctly remember, only six dollars a week, while Booth obtained eight. Yet Wilkes Booth seemed to slow or indifferent to get on the weather-side of such chances. He still held to the part of third walking gentleman, and the third is always the first to be walked off in case of strait, as was Wilkes Booth. He did not survive forty weeks' engagement, nor make above three hundred dollars in all that time. The Kellers arrived; they cut down the company, and they dispensed with Wilkes Booth. He is remembered in Philadelphia by his failure as in the world by his crime.

#### BOOTH AT RICHMOND.

About this time a manager named Kunkle gave Booth a salary of twenty dollars a week to go to the Richmond theatre. There he played a higher order of parts, and played them better, winning applause from the easy provincial cities, and taking, as everywhere, the ladies by storm. I have never wondered why many actors were strongly pre-disposed toward the South. There their social status is nine times as big as with us. The hospitable, lounging, buzzing character of the Southerners is entirely consonant with the cosmopolitanism of the stage, and that easy "hang-up-your-hat-ativeness" which is the rule and the demand in Thespianism. We place actors outside of society, and execrate them because they are there. The South took them into affable fellowship, and was not ruined by it, but beloved by the fraternity. Booth played two seasons in Richmond, and left in some esteem.



BOOTH AT THE JOHN BROWN RAID.

When the John Brown raid occurred, Booth left the Richmond theatre for the scene of strife in a picked company with which he had affiliated for some time. From his connection with the militia on this occasion he was wont to trace his fealty to Virginia. He was a non-commissioned officer, and remained at Charlestown till after the execution, visiting the old pikeman in jail, and his company was selected to form guard around the scaffold when John Brown went, white-haired, to his account. There may be in this a consolation for the canonizers of the first arm-bearer between the sections, that one who swelled the host to crush out that brave old life, took from the scene inspiration enough to slay a merciful President in his unsuspecting leisure. Booth never referred to John Brown's death in bravado; possibly at that gallows began some such terrible purpose as he afterward consummated.

BOOTH GOES OUT AS A STAR

It was close upon the beginning of the war when Booth resolved to transform himself from a stock actor to a "star". As many will read this who do not understand such distinctions, let me preface it by explaining that a "star" is an actor who belongs to no one theatre, but travels from each to all, playing a few weeks at a time, and sustained in his chief character by the regular or stock actors. A stock actor is a good actor, and a poor fool. A star is an advertisement in tights, who grows rich and corrupts the public taste. Booth was a star, and, being so, had an agent. The agent is the trumpeter who goes on before, writing the impartial notices which you see in the editorial columns of country

papers, and counting noses at the theatre doors. Booth's agent was one Matthew Canning, an exploded Philadelphia lawyer, who took to managing by passing the bar; and J Wilkes no longer, but our country's rising tragedian J. Wilkes Booth, opened in Montgomery, Alabama, in his father's consecrated part of Richard III. It was a very different work between receiving eight dollars a week and getting half the gross proceeds of every performance. Booth kept northward when his engagement was done, playing in many cities such parts as Romeo, the Corsican Brothers, and Raphael, in the "Marble Heart;" in all of these he gained applause, and his journey eastward, ending in eastern cities like Providence, Portland, and Boston, was a long success, in part deserved. In Boston he received special commendation for his enactment of Richard.

I have looked over this play, his best and favorite one, to see how closely the career of the crookback he so often delineated resembled his own.

How like that fearful night of Richard on Bosworth field must have been Booth's sleep in the barn at Port Royal, tortured by ghosts of victims, all repeating:

When I was mortal my anointed body

By thee was pinched full of deadly holes:

Think on the Tower and me! Despair and die!

Or this, from some of Booth's female victims:

Let me sit heavy on thy soul tomorrow!

I that was washed to death with fulsome wine;



Poor Clarence, by thy guile betrayed to death:

Tomorrow in the battle think on me. Despair and die!

These terrible conjurations must have recalled how aptly the scene so often rehearsed by Booth, sword in hand where, leaping from his bed, he cries in horror.

Give me another horse! bind up my wounds!

Have mercy, Jesu! Sof! I did but dream

Oh! coward conscience, how thou dost afflict me!

The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight!

Cold, flareful drops stand on my trembling flesh.

What do I fear? Myself? There is none else by;

Is there a murderer here? No! -- Yes! -- I am!

Then fly -- What? from myself!

\* \* \* \* \*

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,

And every tongue brings in a several tale,

And every tale condemns me for a villian!

Perjury, perjury in the highest degree:

Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree:

All several sins, all used in each degree,

Throng to the bar, crying all, Guilty! Guilty!

By these starring engagements, Booth made incredible sums. His

cash-book, for one single season, showed earnings deposited in bank of twenty-two thousand odd dollars. In New York he did not get a hearing, except at a benefit or two, where he played parts not of his selection. In Philadelphia his earlier failure predisposed the people to discard him, and they did. But he had made enough, and resolved to invest his winnings. The oil fever had just begun; he hired an agent, sent him to the western districts and gave him discretionary power; his investments all turned out profitable.

#### BOOTH AS A MAN OF BUSINESS

Booth died, as far as understood, without debts. The day before the murder he paid an old friend a hundred dollars which he had borrowed two days previously. He banked at Jay Cooke's, in Washington, generally; but turned most of his funds into stock and other matters. He gave eighty dollars eight months ago for a part investment with others in a piece of western oil land. The certificate for this land he gave to his sister. Just before he died his agent informed him that the share was worth fifteen thousand dollars. Booth kept his accounts latterly with great regularity, and was lavish as ever, but took note of all expenditures, however irregular. He was one of those men whom the possession of money seems to have energized; his life, so purposeless long before, grew by good fortune to a strict computation with the world. Yet what availed sudden reformation, and of what use was the gaining of wealth, to throw one's life so soon away, and leap from competence to hunted infamy?



BOOTH'S LITERARY PRODUCTIONS

Booth's paper "To Whom it may Concern" was not his only attempt at influential composition. He sometimes persuaded himself that he had literary ability; but his orthography and pronunciation were worse than his syntax. The paper deposited with J.S. Clarke was useful as showing his power to entertain a deliberate purpose. It has one or two smart passages in it -- as this:

"Our once bright red stripes look like bloody gashes on the face of heaven."

In the passages following there is common sense and lunacy:

"I know how foolish I shall be deemed for undertaking such a step as this, where, on the one side, I have many friends and everything to make me happy, where my profession alone has gained me an income of more than twenty thousand dollars a year, and where my great personal ambition in my profession has such a great field for labor. On the other hand, the South have never bestowed upon me one kind word; a place now where I have no friends, except beneath the sod; a place where I must either become a private soldier or a beggar. To give up all of the former for the latter, besides my mother and sisters, whom I love so dearly (although they so widely differ with me in opinion) seems insane; but God is my judge."

Now, read the beginning of the manifesto, and see how prophetic were his words of his coming infamy. If he expected so much for capturing the President merely, what of our execration at slaying him?

"Right or wrong, God judge me, not man. For be my motive good or bad, of one thing I am sure, the lasting condemnation of the North.

"I love peace more than life. Have loved the Union beyond expression. For four years have I waited, hoped and prayed for the dark clouds to break, and for a restoration of our former sunshine. To wait longer would be a crime. All hope for peace is dead. My prayers have proved as idle as my hopes. God's will be done. I go to see and share the bitter end."

To wait longer would be a crime. Oh! what was the crime not to wait? Had he only shared the bitter end, then, in the common trench, his memory might have been hidden. The end had come when he appeared to make of benignant victory a quenchless revenge. One more selection from his apostrophe will do. It suggests the manner of his death:

"They say that the South has found that 'last ditch' which the North has so long derided. Should I reach her in safety, and find it true, I will proudly beg permission to triumph or die in that same 'ditch' by her side." The swamp near which he died may be called, without unseemly pun -- a truth, not a bon mot -- the last ditch of the rebellion.

#### BOOTH'S FACE, GAIT, AND DRESS

None of the printed pictures that I have seen do justice to Booth. Some of the cartes de visile get him very nearly. He had one of the finest vital heads I have ever seen. In fact, he was one of the best exponents of vital beauty I have ever met.



By this I refer to physical beauty in the Medician sense -- health, shapeliness, power in beautiful poise, and seemingly more powerful in repose than in energy. His hands and feet were sizable, not small, and his legs were stout and muscular, but inclined to bow like his father's. From the waist up he was a perfect man; his chest being full and broad, his shoulders gently sloping, and his arms as white as alabaster, but hard as marble. Over these, upon a neck which was its proper column, rose the cornice of a fine Doric face, spare at the jaws, and not anywhere over-ripe, but seemed with a nose of Roman model, the only relic of his half-Jewish parentage, which gave decision to the thoughtfully stern sweep of two direct, dark eyes, meaning to women snare, and to man a search-warrant; while the lofty square forehead and square brows were crowned with a weight of curling, jetty hair, like a rich Corinthian capital. His profile was eagleish, and afar his countenance was haughty. He seemed throat-full of introspection, ambitious self-examinings, eye-strides into the future, as if it withheld him something to which he had a right. I have since wondered whether this moody demeanor did not come of a guilty spirit; but all the Booths look so.

Wilkes spoke to me in Washington for the first time three weeks before the murder. His address was winning as a girl's, rising in effect not from what he said, but from how he said it. It was magnetic, and I can describe it therefore, by its effects alone. I seemed, when he had spoken, to lean toward this man. His attitude spoke to me; with as easy familiarity as I ever observed he drew near and conversed. The talk was on so trite things that it did not lie a second in the head, but when I left him it was with the feeling

that a most agreeable fellow had passed by.

The next time the name of Wilkes Booth recurred to me was like the pistol shot he had fired. The right hand I had shaken murdered the father of the country.

Booth was not graceful with his feet, although his ordinary walk was pleasant enough. But his arms were put to artistic uses; not the baser ones like boxing, but all sorts of fencing, manual practice, and the handling of weapons.

In his dress, he was neat without being particular. Almost any clothes could fit him; but he had nothing of the exquisite about him; his neck ties and all such matters were good without being gaudy. Nature had done much for him. In this beautiful palace an outlaw had builded his fire, and slept, and plotted, and dreamed.

#### BOOTH'S ALLEGED BRUTALITY ON THE STAGE

I have heard it said that Booth frequently cut his adversaries upon the stage in sheer wantonness or bloodthirstiness. This is a mistake, and is attributable to his father, the elder Booth, who had the madness of confounding himself with the character. Wilkes was too good a fencer to make ugly gashes; his pride was his skill, not his awkwardness. Once he was playing with John McCullough in the last act of "Richard". They were fighting desperately. Suddenly the cross-piece on the hilt of McCullough's sword flew off and cut the owner deeply in the forehead. Blood ran down McCullough's face, though they continued to struggle, and while, ostensibly, Booth was imitating a demon, he said in a half whisper: "Good God, John, did I hurt you?" And when they went off the stage, Booth was white with fear that he had gashed his friend.



CHARACTER OF BOOTH'S ACTING

As an actor, Booth was too energetic to be correct; his conception of Richard was vivid and original, one of the best that we have had, and he came nearer his father's rendering of the last act than anybody we have had. His combat scene was terrific. The statement that his voice had failed him has no valid foundation; it was as good when he challenged the cavalrymen to combat as in the best of his Thespian successes. In all acting that required delicate characterization, refined conception, or carefulness, Booth was at sea. But in strong physical parts, requiring fair reading and an abundance of spring and tension, he was much finer than hearsay would have us believe.

His Romeo was described a short time ago by the Washington Intelligencer as the most satisfactory of all renderings of that fine character. He played the Corsican Brothers three weeks on a run in Boston. He played Pescara at Ford's Theatre -- his last mock part in this world -- on tomorrow (Saturday) night, six weeks ago.

BOOTH'S POETIC APPRECIATION

He was fond of learning and reciting fugitive poems. His favorite piece was "The Beautiful Snow", comparing it to a lost purity. He has been known by gentlemen in this city to recite this poem with fine effect, and cry all the while. This was on the principle of "guilty people sitting at a play." His pocket-book was generally full of little selections picked up at random, and he had considerable delicacy of appreciation.

*George The New York World*

~~CLOSING SCENES~~

On the morning of the murder Booth breakfasted with Miss Carrie Bean, the daughter of a merchant, and a very respectable young lady, at the National Hotel. He arose from the table at, say eleven o'clock. During the breakfast, those who watched him say that he was lively, piquant, and self-possessed as ever in his life.

That night the horrible crime thrilled the land. A period of crippled flight succeeded. Living in swamps upon trembling hospitality, upon hopes which sank as he leaned upon them, Booth passed the nights in perilous route or broken sleep, and in the end went down like a brave, but in the eyes of all who read his history, commanding no respect for his valor, charity for his motive, or sympathy for his sin.

The closing scenes of these terrible days are reserved for a second paper. Much matter that should have gone into this is retained for the present.

G.A.T.

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