

# THE ASSASSINATION OF LINCOLN

THE HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED ACCOUNT OF AN EYE-WITNESS

BY

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**N**OT an eye saw John Wilkes Booth shoot Abraham Lincoln. Of all the hundreds in Ford's Theater that fateful Good Friday night of April 14, 1865, not one saw the deed done.

Mr. Harry Hawk, the only actor on the stage at the time of the assassination, had noticed Booth near the President's box a moment before, but testified that though he was looking directly at the President almost at the instant the shot was fired, he only heard it — did not see it fired nor realize, until Booth jumped, who must have fired it.

Captain Theodore McGowan, who was sitting in the dress circle close to the entrance of the President's box, saw Booth go in, heard the shot, and saw the assassin leap from the box and cross the stage. But he could only infer what had happened in the intervening seconds.

James P. Ferguson occupied a seat in the dress circle directly opposite the President's box; he had bought his seat after hearing that General Grant was to be there, and Harry Ford had helped him to select one that would command a good view of the box. General Grant not having entered with the presidential party, Mr. Ferguson was still watching the entrance to the box hoping to see him appear, when he observed Booth, whom he knew well, enter the passage-way leading to the box. He saw the flash of the pistol, and saw Booth jump, but did not realize what had happened until he saw the President's head fall forward, and saw Mrs. Lincoln clutch his arm; "and," testified Mr. Ferguson at the trial of the conspirators, "I was satisfied then that he was hurt."

Major Henry R. Rathbone, the President's guest, heard the discharge of a pistol close behind him "and, looking round, saw, through the smoke, a man between the door and the President." He sprang toward the man, grappled with him, and was severely slashed by the assassin's knife. Unable to detain him,

Major Rathbone cried out, "Stop that man!" Then he turned to the President, and concluded from Mr. Lincoln's attitude that he was mortally wounded.

Neither Mrs. Lincoln nor Miss Clara Harris, the other occupants of the box, saw more of the tragedy. Like the rest of those in the theater, they heard the shot, saw the leap, and after one look at the stricken President, deduced the murder.

William Withers, Jr., director of the orchestra, happened to be on the stage at the time, conferring with the stage manager, and he heard the shot. He was, like all those connected with the theater, astonished — knowing, as many in the audience did not, that there was no shooting in the play. A few seconds later Mr. Withers was knocked down by Booth in the latter's flight toward the stage door leading to the alley. After the door had closed, on the fleeing assassin, the orchestra director heard from the excited people behind the scenes that the President had been killed, and, stepping to the front of the stage, "saw him in the box, apparently dead."

Joseph B. Stewart, from a front seat in the audience, heard the shot, saw the leap, guessed what must have happened, and was the only man in the house quick enough in his jump at a conclusion to leap in pursuit of Booth. He chased Booth across the stage and into the alley, and saw him escape.

Walt Whitman was in the audience, but, like all the others, he was made aware of what had happened only by the hue and cry that followed.

Of all the scores of witnesses who were called to testify in the trial, which began May tenth, not one was able to say that he saw Wilkes Booth fire his revolver at the President. There was no need, of course, that any should so testify. Booth had declared his own deed as he cried, "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" and, "The South is avenged!" He confessed it many times to persons he met in his flight. And long before



the trial began, those in authority had read the poor, mad boy's diary, taken from his pockets after his death, in which he expressed himself so piteously about his crime. But it was curious that, of the hundreds present in that small space, on an occasion when as much attention was focused on the President in his hour of triumph as was directed toward the stage, no one actually saw what happened.

No evidence was needed to convict Booth. By the time of the trial he was already dead, and lying beneath the stone floor of the prison where his fellow-conspirators were lodged, unconscious of his secret grave beneath their feet. But, so great was the desire to unearth the roots of the plot of which Booth was felt to be but a part, that every one who could give the least evidence about those fateful moments in Ford's Theater, was called to testify, and was questioned and cross-questioned minutely by prosecution and defence; for on this evidence, proving or disproving complicity, many lives depended. On it, eventually, four persons were hanged and four others were sentenced to long imprisonment.

In all this gathering of testimony, however, two persons were overlooked — two persons who saw and heard as much as any one in the theater, with the exception, perhaps, of Major Rathbone, and who witnessed more fully than any others in the theater the scenes that followed in the house of death across the street.\* One of these persons was Captain Oliver C. Gatch, of Company G, 89th Ohio.† The other was Dr. Charles D. Gatch, his brother, who had been for four years an army surgeon in the hospital at Camp Dennison.

These young men rendered a service in a time of historic importance, but when they were no longer needed they melted quietly away into the obscurity from which they had come, without so much as giving their names to any who had shared with them the experiences of that momentous night.

Now, forty-two years after the tragedy, Captain Oliver Gatch breaks his long silence, and gives the completest narrative of any person connected with the events of that night.

Oliver Gatch was twenty-five years old at

\*Of the accounts given at the time, of what took place immediately after the shooting of the President, the most comprehensive in detail was that of Major Rathbone, who said that after the escape of Booth he "rushed to the door of the box for the purpose of calling medical aid. On reaching the outer door of the passageway, I found it barred . . . so securely that it required considerable force to move it. Persons on the outside were beating against the door for the purpose of entering. I removed the bar, and the door was opened. Several persons who represented themselves as surgeons were allowed to enter. I saw there Colonel Crawford and requested him to prevent other persons from entering the box. I then returned to the box, and found the surgeons examining the President's person. They had not yet discovered the wound. As soon as it was discovered, it was determined to remove him from the theater. He was carried out, and I then proceeded to assist Mrs. Lincoln, who was intensely excited. On

the breaking out of the Civil War, and lived on his father's farm at Milford, Ohio. In August, '62, he enlisted in Company G, 89th Ohio, as a private. His active service ceased soon after his promotion to the captaincy of his company. At Chickamauga he and his entire company were captured. This was on September twentieth, '63, and Captain Gatch remained a prisoner of war until the first of March, '65. He was taken first to Libby Prison, where he remained seven months and seven days. From there he was transferred successively to prisons at Macon, Charleston, Columbia, and finally to Charlotte, North Carolina, whence he, with two other captains, escaped by bribing a Confederate guard. After nearly three weeks of exhausting and dangerous travel, during which his two companions were retaken, he arrived in Knoxville on March twentieth and was received by General Stone-man, who gave him transportation to Washington, with instructions to report to Secretary of War Stanton. Before going to Washington, however, he was allowed to visit his family in Ohio, with whom he had had no communication for nearly seventeen months. His brother Charles was home on a furlough, and when Captain Gatch's leave expired, the two set out together for the Capital, reaching Washington on Friday morning, April 14.

Great stir and excitement prevailed in Washington. On Tuesday evening, the eleventh, a multitude had gathered before the White House and called loudly for the President, who, in a few simple, generous words, disclaimed honor for the victory the people were celebrating, commended General Grant and "his skilful officers and brave men" to the nation's praise, and besought for the conquered South a magnanimous treatment.

There were a number of illuminations throughout the city on Thursday night, the thirteenth, but many persons preferred to make Friday the day of special celebration, it being the fourth anniversary of the firing upon Fort Sumter. Although it was Good Friday, the solemnity that ordinarily attends that day was forgotten in the general rejoicing.

The two young soldiers from Ohio registered reaching the head of the stairs, I requested Major Potter to aid me in assisting Mrs. Lincoln across the street to the house where the President was being conveyed." Major Rathbone's wound from Booth's dagger was bleeding profusely, and on reaching the house across the street he fainted, and shortly thereafter was removed to his home. Miss Harris corroborated his statement, with no important additions.

William T. Kent testified that he entered the box "about three minutes after the President was shot. There were two other persons there, and a surgeon, apparently, asked me for a knife to cut open the President's clothes. I handed him mine, and with it he cut the President's clothes open. I then went out of the theater."

† Captain Gatch, who lives on his fine farm near Aurora, Indiana, is a handsome, ruddy old man of seventy, and in his community there is not a man more respected or beloved.



at the Pennsylvania House, on F Street, and went out to mingle with the enthusiastic throngs that filled the streets. About noon, Captain Gatch was admitted to the presence of that extraordinarily busy man, Secretary Stanton, and made his report. After that, he had but one duty in Washington, and that was to collect nearly two years' pay.

It was late in the afternoon when the brothers reached the paymaster's office, and, as they were going in, they met that official coming out. He pleaded an important social engagement, and asked Captain Gatch if he would not come again, in the morning. To this Captain Gatch good-naturedly assented, though he had expected to complete his business in the afternoon and leave Washington that night.

The young men were not unwilling, however, to stay a little longer in Washington, with its many sights and its intoxicating air of jubilation, and seeing in an evening paper that President Lincoln and his wife were to attend Ford's Theater that night, they at once decided to go too. Both men had a strong feeling of devotion to Lincoln, and a chance to see him at comparatively close range was not to be missed.

Ford's Theater, on Tenth Street, between E and F Streets, was a new and handsome playhouse where the most brilliant audiences in Washington were to be seen. The management had offered Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln for that night the use of boxes seven and eight, known as the President's box and, when used by him, thrown into one by the removal of the partition between them.

The performance was to be a benefit to Miss Laura Keene, on the occasion of her nearly one-thousandth performance of the part of Florence Trenchard in "Our American Cousin," a play which had brought fame not only to her, but to Joseph Jefferson and E. A. Sothorn—both of whom were in Miss Keene's stock company when the play began its enormously successful career in New York, in '58, but neither of whom were with the company playing in Ford's Theater. Miss Keene was making this her farewell performance in the play, and the occasion was one of some consequence among her many admirers, quite apart from the distinguished presence in the President's box. It is an insignificant but interesting fact that on the night in 1860 when the Republican Convention in Chicago that had nominated Lincoln adjourned, a considerable number of the delegates betook themselves, after the excitement of those stormy sessions, to see Miss Keene in this same play.

Shortly after supper Captain Gatch and his

brother left their hotel and sauntered to the theater, enjoying to the full their progress through the crowded streets where, in the balmy softness of a mild spring evening, people were swarming to see the sights and mingle in the excitement that followed on the news of victory.

At the box office, Captain Gatch bought two tickets for unreserved seats in the balcony. Although the strangers were early in arriving, the best seats, in the center of the house, were already occupied, and they had to content themselves with seats rather far to one side—the right, as one faced the stage, or O.P. (opposite prompter) side, as those behind the scenes would designate it. The seats they took were near the end of a row and close to a handsomely decorated upper box which they did not know was intended for the President's use.

"From where we were seated," says Captain Gatch, "we could see the rear of the box, but had no view of the front. The passage that led to the box-entrance was at our right, and we could almost, had we reached over, have touched the sentry stationed there.

"The play was well under way when we heard a hearty cheering, which commenced at the rear of the house, and in a moment we saw the presidential party enter. The President came first, followed by Mrs. Lincoln, Miss Harris, and Major Rathbone. General Grant and his wife were not of the party, as it had been announced they would be. Lincoln walked slowly, his great body bent forward, his shoulders wearing a noticeable stoop. He carried his high silk hat in his left hand and held it in front of him, with its top down. His smile was a sad smile, we thought, for a man responding to such a deafening ovation as came from every part of the house. He entered the box first, closely followed by the others of his party. Then the sentry closed the door and shut off our view of them. As the crowd continued its wild cheering, the President stepped to the box rail and acknowledged the applause with dignified bows and never-to-be-forgotten smiles. In a moment he sat down, and the performance was resumed.

"I was fascinated by Miss Keene's fine acting. She seemed bent on doing her best that night, and the play was thoroughly absorbing. Now and then I could hear Mr. Lincoln chuckle, but I could not see him.

"It was during a lull in the action of a scene that my brother and I, cramped from long sitting in one posture, rose from our seats to stretch ourselves. While we were standing in the aisle close to the wall, my brother called my attention to a young man who seemed to be



watching the play from a position against the wall near the entrance to the President's box. My brother remarked this young man's striking appearance, and I agreed with him, thinking him the handsomest man I had ever seen. He had a haughty demeanor, but his face was so calm that one would never have thought of suspecting him of any dreadful purpose. I noticed, though, how his eyes flashed and how sharp was their contrast to his pallid countenance.

"Presently I saw him edge toward the box without changing his attitude, and then enter the passage-way and close the door behind him. Almost instantly the house was startled by the loud report of a pistol shot. People leaped from their seats, only to resume them again when cries of 'Sit down!' 'Down in front!' came from different parts of the house, where the auditors thought the shot was part of the play. The men in the orchestra, who knew better, looked around, bewildered. The thing had occurred when there was but one person on the stage, and he, like the members of the orchestra, seemed startled. Then the bluish-white smoke drifted slowly out of the President's box, there came a woman's heart-rending shriek, and in the same instant I saw the handsome young man leap from the box, catching his spur in the flags that decorated the front as he fell. He was thrown heavily to the stage floor, alighting on his left side. It was evident that he was injured by the fall, but as quick as a flash he sprang to his feet and darted across the stage in full view of the audience. In his flight he brandished a dagger and shouted in a loud voice and in a melodramatic manner, '*Sic semper tyrannis!*'"

"Then the crowd went mad. A wilder sight I never saw, not in battle, even. Stunned at first, the people awoke and blazed with fierce passion against the murderer, yelling, 'Hang him! Hang him!' They shouted and screamed and shrieked hysterically in every conceivable tone and key. While this bedlam was going on, there began the mad, terror-stricken clambering of the people toward the exits.

"In less than a minute after the shot was fired some one called to me to bring a doctor. I answered that my brother was a surgeon, and a man literally dragged us into the box where the wounded President sat, unconscious, his head fallen on his breast. On entering, we found Miss Harris and Major Rathbone opening Lincoln's collar and examining his breast in an effort to locate the wound. My brother introduced himself as a physician and made haste to find the wound. He raised the President's head to a more erect position, and in so doing

his index finger on the left hand came in contact with a jagged hole in the back of Mr. Lincoln's head near the left ear, from which the brain was oozing. Turning to Major Rathbone, my brother said, 'Here is the wound and it is fatal.'

"While my brother and I laid the President on the floor and held a handkerchief over the wound, Major Rathbone sent a messenger for Surgeon-General Barnes. No one seemed to know just what to do. Major Rathbone was suffering from his wound and nearly prostrated by the awful calamity. Miss Keene, who had hastened to the box, was with Miss Harris occupied in ministering to poor, distracted Mrs. Lincoln.

"It seemed, for a few moments, as if we were all paralyzed. Then my brother broke the silence in our little group around the dying President, so sharply contrasted with the tumult all about us, by calling Major Rathbone's attention to the fact that while Mr. Lincoln was in a critical condition to be moved, he ought, if possible, to be got to a private house, or some more fitting place, for the end that was so imminent. Accordingly, we two — my brother and I — with the aid of a couple of others, raised the President from the floor and carried him through the passage-way, down the stairs, and out of the theater. There was silence as we passed. No one spoke. As we moved slowly across the street, the only sound that was heard above the sobbing of the people was the hoof-beats of cavalry already approaching to guard the street.

"The crowd parted to let us through, and we carried the President up the steps of a house, where a man who was standing outside looking on at the commotion said we might come in. He showed the way to his own room, a small one on the first floor, and we laid the President on this young man's bed. The young man was William T. Clark of Company D, 13th Massachusetts; he was detailed to duty in the Quartermaster's Department, and was lodging in this house, which belonged to a tailor named Peterson.

"Soon there was a gathering of great physicians, and a hopeless battle against death began. No hope was entertained at any time, but Mrs. Lincoln was not told so.

"Then, as the great men of the nation began to assemble around the death-bed, my brother and I withdrew to the windows of the parlor, where we kept silent watch through the night. Mrs. Lincoln was there most of the time, and Captain Robert Lincoln and others, coming and going. Stanton came, and spent the night between the little room where Lincoln





CAPTAIN OLIVER C. GATCH  
 FROM A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN AT ABOUT THE TIME OF  
 LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION

lay and the back parlor, where, sitting at a little table, he began the work of inquiring into the tragedy by calling together those of us who knew anything of the evening's events and asking us for our account of them. He assumed charge of everything, in the absence of Mr. Seward, who was wounded, mortally, it was thought, by Booth's accomplice, Payne.

"Hour after hour I stood looking into the street. Cavalry patrolled both sides of Tenth Street, as far in either direction as I could see, and the steady hoof-beats of the horses fell with a rhythmic regularity.

"About two hours before sunrise the doctors realized that the end was approaching. The moans that had harrowed us all night were hushed now, and silence fell upon us. Outside, a dreary rain began to fall in the gray of breaking dawn, which ushered in that sorrowful day.

"Two hours after Lincoln breathed his last—

which was at twenty-two minutes past seven o'clock — I assisted others in putting his body into the hearse. Then, when the mourning party had left the street, my brother and I crossed over to the theater and re-entered it. Everything within was confusion. We climbed to the stage and measured the exact distance of Booth's jump; it was fourteen feet.

"Later that same day my brother and I left Washington. We thought Secretary Stanton knew our names and would call on us if we were needed further. Perhaps he did remember us; more probably he forgot. It never occurred to us, as we read of the trial, that our evidence could be of any value — as, indeed, it could not have been. Only, as the years go by and those who are left of the witnesses to the tragedy become fewer and fewer, I have been prevailed upon by my friends who have known my story these forty years and more, to talk about it for publication."