

# How John Wilkes Booth Met Death on a Virginia Farm

Few Facts in History Are More Firmly Fixed Than That Swift Justice Overtook Slayer of Abraham Lincoln in a Burning Barn on the Bowling Green Road, April 26, 1865.

**R**UMOR, like truth crushed to earth, has the faculty of rising again. What though John Wilkes Booth, the slayer of Abraham Lincoln, has been dead almost fifty-nine years, rumor rises like a specter out of the grave of the past to assert that it was not he but another who was shot in a burning barn in Virginia by the avenging bullet of Sergt. Boston Corbett; that the young actor, fleeing from the scene of his crime, escaped his pursuers to wander in disguise until his death a few years ago in an Oklahoma town.

The Rev. J. F. Harmon of Louisville, Ill., who is conducting revival services in Columbia, Mo., resurrects the story of how Booth escaped to Colonel Mosby's army in Virginia after assassinating the President. The Rev. Harmon is quoted as follows in the Columbia Missourian of recent date:

"He (Booth) rode alone horseback through Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee under assumed names. He crossed the Mississippi River at Catfish Bend, south of the mouth of the Arkansas River, and rode up the south side of the river to the Indian territory, where he lived eighteen months with the Indians.

"He then went into Nebraska and hired out under the name of Jesse Smith, to drive a government team to Salt Lake City. He went to San Francisco, where he met his mother and his brother. Entering Mexico he joined the army of Maximilian. He got into trouble and was rescued by a Catholic priest. He then came back to San Antonio, Tex., and settled on the Bosque River at the foot of the Bosque Mountains in Western Texas. Here, known as John St. Helen, he ran a store in which he sold principally whisky and tobacco to the cowboys.

STORY IS NOT NEW.

"While here he took sick. As the doctor told him that he was dying, he called in a young lawyer to whom he made full confession, giving him his picture to be sent to his brother, Edwin, in New York, with an account of his death. But he recovered from his illness and went to Leadville, Col., and Fresno, Cal., then returned to Texas. Later he went to Guthrie, Ok., where he was known as David E. Ryan. Later he went to El Reno, where he lived for years in the Anstine hotel and the Kerfoot hotel under the name of David E. George. Here he bought a home and employed a Mr. and Mrs. Simmons to keep house for him.

"While here he took laudanum in an attempt to kill himself. He made a written confession, after which a Dr. Arnold saved his life. He then went to Enid, Ok., and put up at the Grande Avenue hotel, where, after writing his attorney, he took eighteen grains of arsenic. The hotel keeper, hearing his groans, broke into the room where, with a doctor, he worked with him all night. Next morning he died, leaving his third

confession. This was in January, 1903, and Booth was 64 years old.

"The young man who was killed and taken for Booth at the Garrett barn in Virginia was a man named Ruddy."

The story is not a new one. At the time of the death of David E. George in Enid, Ok., newspapers printed substantially the same account as that given above. A man professing to be an old schoolmate of Booth's went from Memphis to Oklahoma and identified the body as that of Booth's by means of certain scars. The wife of a Methodist minister in Enid detailed the wanderings of the supposed Booth as related to her by George. An "ex-Confederate soldier" made himself known as one who had guided the escaping Booth in his flight through Freestone County, Texas, on his way to Mexico, Booth having been, it was alleged, in charge of the Ku Klux Klan of that day.

## BOOTH'S DIARY.

All this notwithstanding, few facts in history are more firmly fixed than the capture and death of John Wilkes Booth. Lincoln's assassin was a member of the well known theatrical family of Booth; his father and his brother, Edwin, each in his day was distinguished in Shakespearean roles. He, himself, was an actor of ability, although at the age of 26 when he turned assassin he had met with no success. He was popular and a familiar figure in Washington, and well known about the theaters. Many in the audience recognized him when he suddenly appeared in the President's box at Ford's theater the night of April 14, 1865, shot the President and leaped to the stage where, rising with a broken leg which he had sustained in his leap, he brandished a knife and shouted theatrically to the audience, "Sic Semper Tyrannis," and fled through the wings to a waiting horse outside the stage door.

In company with David E. Herold, a young druggist's clerk, who was one of the conspirators, Booth was concealed by friends who aided him with his broken leg and succeeded in getting him across the Potomac River into Virginia. Booth's deed was that of a fanatic; he



JOHN WILKES BOOTH, THE SLAYER OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

conceived he was playing a heroic part in the slaying of Lincoln, and his vanity suffered a blow when he discovered the public regarded him as a murderer. In the week following the assassination he recorded in his diary: "I struck boldly, and not as the papers say; I walked with a firm step through thousands of his friends: was stopped, but pushed on. A colonel was at his side. I shouted *Sic Semper* before I fired. In jumping I broke my leg. I passed all his pickets. Rode sixty miles that night, with the bone of my leg tearing the flesh at every jump. After being hunted like a dog through swamps, woods and last night chased by gunboats till I was forced to return, wet, cold and starving, with every man's hand against me, I am here in despair. And why? For doing what Brutus was honored for—what made Tell a hero. I struck for my country and that alone—a country that groaned beneath his tyranny and prayed for this end; and yet now, behold the cold hand they extend to me." He was tortured with doubts whether his crime would be forgiven him, whether he should not go back to Washington and "clear his name."

"I am abandoned, with the curse of Cain upon me, when, if the world knew my heart, that one blow would have made me great." He closed this strange theatrical outpouring in his diary with, "I do not wish to shed a drop of blood, but I must fight the course." That he did fight the course to the end is disclosed by the events that followed.

#### CONCEALED ON A FARM.

Definite information of the direction Booth and Herold took in their flight was not had for some days after the assassination. April 22 the pair crossed the Potomac, and two days later reached Port Conway on the Rappahannock River. That morning in Washington Capt. Edward P. Doherty, then a lieutenant of cavalry, was detailed with twenty-five men to scour the region in Virginia into which Booth and Herold had fled, it having been discovered they had crossed the Potomac. At Port Conway the fugitives fell in with three disbanded Confederate officers, Maj. M. B. Ruggles, Capt. William Jett and Lieut. A. R. Bainbridge, all of Mosby's army. Booth's leg, which had been broken ten days before, and which had been crudely set and bound in a pasteboard splint, was giving him great pain; it was badly swollen and infected, and, in the opinion of the officers, explained later, had Booth lived it probably would have had to be amputated to save his life.

There was no effort on the part of Booth to conceal his identity. He proclaimed it in fact at the time of the meeting, and prepared to defend himself until it was discovered he had fallen in with Confederate soldiers, who while not condoning the murder of Lincoln were unlikely to deliver him to his enemies. They were ferried across the Rappahannock, Booth, wearing an old black slouch hat and a gray shawl thrown about his shoulders, sat quietly, talking little. The initials "J. W. B." faintly tattooed on the back of one of his hands were plainly visible. Across the river in Port Royal the officers tried to get shelter for Booth and Herold, representing Booth to be a wounded Confederate soldier. They finally found refuge on the farm of a man named Garrett on the road to Bowling Green. Here the three officers parted with Booth.

#### CHALLENGE TO FIGHT.

Lieutenant Doherty and his men reached Port Conway about twenty-four hours behind Booth. He was on a warm trail, having wasted no time in coming from Washington, but across the river he went astray, passing by the farm on which Booth and Herold were concealed, and continuing on to Bowling Green. Here Captain Jett was discovered and placed under arrest and made to disclose the hiding place of Booth. Jett guided Doherty and his men back to the Garrett farm, which was reached about 2 o'clock in the morning. The occupants of the farmhouse were roused and at the point of a pistol informed Doherty the assassin and his companion were concealed in the barn. In the Century Magazine for January, 1890, Captain Doherty related what followed after they surrounded the barn:

"The doors were locked with a padlock. I ran around the barn to see if the men were properly posted. There was a large crack at one side. I placed Sergeant Boston Corbett there. It was my intention to wait until daylight before examining the inside of the barn. But the men told me that they heard voices and the moving about of men in the hay. I then decided to get at them as soon as possible. The other Garrett boy was caught by a corporal. He gave me the key, and I opened the door. I ordered Booth and Herold to come out.

"I did not get any answer, so I ordered Corporal Newgarten to pile some hay and brush against the side of the building and set it afire. Booth heard the order and called out:

"'If you come back there I will put a bullet through you.'

"I suppose he meant if I came back to the door. I again decided to wait until morning. But the men at the other end of the barn had acted promptly on my orders, and set it afire. I called out to Booth:

"'You'd better come out.'

"'For whom do you take me?' he asked.

"'I does not make any difference,' I replied.

"'I may be taken by my friends,' he said sarcastically. I am a cripple and alone. Draw your men up at twenty-five paces and give me a chance for my life.'

#### THE END OF BOOTH.

"'I did not come here to fight. I have fifty men and can take you,' I said.

"'He waited a few minutes, then he said: 'Oh, captain! there is a man here who wants to surrender pretty bad.'

"'You'd better follow his example and come out, too,' I answered.

"'No. I have not made up my mind,' he replied.

"'I then told Herold to hand out his arms.

"'I own all the arms,' said Booth. 'He has no arms. I may have to use them.'

"'By this time Herold was at the door. I again commanded him to give up his arms. He said he had none. I opened the door slightly and told him to put his hands out. I took him by the wrists and turned him over to Corporal Newgarten. Just then I heard a shot. I thought Booth had shot himself. The hay in the barn, which had been set on fire at the other end, was blazing brightly.

"'Sergeant Corbett had been looking through the crack where I had stationed him, and in the light of the fire he saw Booth raise his rifle to shoot me or Herold as I caught hold of the latter by the

wrists when he surrendered. Corbett put his pistol through the crack and shot at Booth, intending to hit his arm and disable him so that he could not shoot me or Herold. He was a splendid marksman. But instead of hitting Booth in the arm, as he intended, he hit him in the head, within an inch of the place where the President had been hit.

"'I rushed into the barn. Booth's crutch had fallen. He was trying to support himself with his rifle. I sprang forward and caught him in my arms as he was falling. We carried him out of the burning barn and laid him down just outside the door. While he was lying there I spoke to him. He tried to raise his hands. He seemed powerless to do so, and I took hold of his hands and raised them up, as I supposed he wanted them raised. But he shook his head and muttered: 'Useless, useless!'"

#### NO QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

Booth died about three hours after he was shot. The body was sewn in a saddle blanket and taken to Washington, where it was turned over to the officers of the ironclad Montauk lying in the Potomac off the city. There on board the identification of the body was complete, the broken leg examined, the course of the bullet that had ended the assassin's life traced. On April 28 the body was secretly buried in the old Washington penitentiary. It remained there four years, when permission for its removal was granted Edwin Booth, who had it reinterred secretly in the Booth family lot in Greenmount cemetery, Baltimore, Md.

At the time of Booth's death there was no question as to his identity. The Garrett family, on whose farm he died, knew him by his own admission to be the slayer of Lincoln. Captain Jett, one of the three Confederate officers who helped him in his escape, was at the farm and saw him die. Lieutenant Doherty and his men carried photographs of Booth and Herold by which identification was made. Herold, who, with other conspirators, some months later, was hanged, raised no question of identity, although if Booth had escaped he would have been safely away by then and Herold could have spoken. In Washington the identification was made by those who had known Booth, and at the reinterment, four years later, close friends of the family viewed the body and raised no question.

Confirmation of Booth's identity is even in the death scene. From first to last the whole drama of Lincoln's murder was shot through with the theatrical personality of the young actor-fanatic: his shouting of "*Sic semper tyrannis*" before the horrified audience, his melodramatic escape, the strange outpouring in his diary, his resolve "to fight the course," and, when surrounded in the burning barn, the challenge to Doherty and his men to combat at twenty-five paces, and finally the dramatic words as he lay dying: "Useless, useless!" There is no doubt swift justice overtook Lincoln's assassin.