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My True Relations

With John Wilkes

BY JOHN H. SURRATT.

For a third of a century prominent writers in every section of the Union have realized that, could John H. Surratt be induced to tell his story freely and unreservedly and fully, it would rival in romantic interest and dramatic detail anything hitherto published concerning the landmarks of the war between the States. Countless efforts have been made to get him to tell his story and make a statement of his true relations with Wilkes Booth, Weichmann, Dr. Mudd and the other actors who figured in that long train of stirring events which culminated in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the execution of Surratt's mother, but prior to the statement by him for the "Sunday Examiner," in which he tells every detail of his life, he has returned but one answer to all—the wound was too deep and rankling to tear open at this late day and expose to the critical gaze of an unsympathetic public.

This is Captain Surratt's statement:

When the war broke out I was a boy of sixteen studying at St. Charles' College, in Carroll county, Md., and like all Southern boys at that time I was a red-hot rebel and dearly loved my native State. At the college it was strictly against the rules to discuss, even in the most casual manner, any of the political questions then agitating the country. I remember one afternoon we were all on the campus, which directly faced Charles Carroll of Carrollton's beautiful estate, Dourchegan Manor, when there issued from the main driveway opposite a troop of Confederate cavalry on their way to join the army of Northern Virginia. The troop had been recruited and was led by young Charles Carroll. They were a magnificent set of young men, full of fire, dash and vim, and presented a splendid appearance. I was fired with martial ardor at the sight, and, tossing my cap in the air, I cheered and cheered again. In fact, I cheered myself hoarse. When the troop had disappeared behind a cloud of dust my comrades assured me that I would certainly be expelled, and, taking the bull by the horns as it were, I went direct to the principal and told him what I had done. He was very angry at first, but, finally softening, said it might prove a good thing, after all, adding, "We may have use for these young men yet."

It was at this college that I first met Lewis J. Weichmann, my Nemesis, a man who has done more than any one living or dead to bring disgrace on me and my family. He is a living proof that the child is father to the man.

After staying at the college a few months I became convinced that my place was in the ranks of the Southern Confederacy, and, suiting the action to the thought, I went direct to Richmond and entered the Secret

Service Bureau under General Wilder, one of the finest Americans that ever lived. I would take every column of space in the paper you represent to detail all my experience while traveling the "underground route" between Richmond, Washington, Baltimore and Montreal. I had innumerable hairbreadth escapes. When I look back on the risks I ran and the desperate chances I took I fail to see how I could have been so foolhardy. I walked in and out of the lines of the two armies, entered Washington, went from Richmond to New York, to London, returned to Washington, and elbowed the Union Generals, all the while gathering valuable information for the service. I know every cross-road, by-path and hiding-place in Northern Virginia and Southern Maryland.

It has been stated in one of the principal magazines that Booth was anxious to get my co-operation on that very account, and that when introduced to him in Washington by Dr. Mudd, I thought at first that he was a Union spy. It is stated that I was with Weichmann.

Wilkes Booth was never introduced to me by Dr. Mudd on the street or anywhere else. Booth came to me with a letter of introduction from a valued and trusted friend. In the second place Weichmann was nowhere near when Booth presented his letter. I looked upon Booth from the start as a hot-headed, visionary man, and the moment he broached his wild scheme to me of abducting Lincoln I simply laughed at him.

"It is utterly impracticable," I said to him. "In the first place, I know Northern Virginia and Southern Maryland by heart."

"It is on that very account that I have come to you for your assistance, co-operation and advice," said Booth.

"And it is on that very account that I tell you that the idea is not feasible," I replied. "In the second place, you do not realize the danger."

"I don't consider that for a moment," said Booth.

"Nor I," I replied, "but it must be considered. After leaving Washington, provided we are able to leave with President Lincoln, which I doubt, we will have to drive over 100 miles before we can cross the Potomac. After having crossed that in safety, we will have to drive from one end of midland Virginia to the other. Don't you know that that section is simply swarming with Yankees? I do, because I have just come through there. Granted, that we get through all right, when we reach the Rappahannock and cross it we will be reasonably safe. But we stand about one chance in five hundred of surmounting all these obstacles. Inside of an hour, or, at most, two hours, from the time we get possession of Mr. Lincoln's person the entire country will be in a furore. The President of the United

States cannot be spirited away like an ordinary citizen. Booth said he was willing to take any chance.

I believe he was a monomaniac on the subject. He had brooded over the South's wrongs so much that his mind was unsettled on the subject. He talked a good deal of ridding the country of an arch tyrant, of helping the South and of dying for his country. He was unquestionably insane when he shot Lincoln. No man in his right mind would have done that. The South lost its best friend when it lost Lincoln. He understood its conditions and the character of its people as no man did before or since. Booth was the South's worst enemy, although he was sincere in wanting to aid her.

After engaging in this conversation with Booth I dismissed the matter from my mind and supposed Booth had done the same. Going direct to Richmond I reported to General Wilder and was directed by him to go at once to Elmira, N. Y., and learn the plans of the fortifications, prison, etc., at that point, with the number of prisoners. I was in Elmira for several weeks and as my pockets were full of Uncle Sam's gold furnished me by my Government I made hosts of friends, and I may add that it was a blessed good thing for me that I did, for it saved my life at my trial. Among the people I met at that point was a Union Colonel, who was connected with the fortifications. He seemed to be suffering from a chronic state of "dead broke" and finding that I had plenty of money and was not averse to accommodating a friend, he soon began to borrow. That was exactly what I wanted. At first it was \$10 and \$20 at a time. Then it was \$100 and \$200. I finally had him completely in my power. One day we were walking along the street and he said to me: "Look here; let me ask you a question. What are you doing around here and what do you want?" I told him that I was in Elmira because I liked the place and I added that I was anxious to get inside of the prison to see what it looked like. He promised to get me inside, and on the following day was as good as his word. He took me all through the place and finally left me on a tower, where I made careful plans of the place. I repeated my visit on the following day and having gained what I wanted I determined to go back to Richmond. It was on my journey from Elmira to Albany that I first learned of Lincoln's assassination. I was shocked and my conversation with Booth immediately recurred to my mind. The next day, en route from Albany to New York, I bought a New York paper and read in it that it was supposed that I was with Booth in his flight and that a reward of \$25,000 was offered for my capture, dead or alive. When I read that startling intelligence I immediately left the train and took the first north-bound that came along. Late

Booth's Secret Book

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that night I crossed into Canada and that was the last time I saw the United States until brought back on a man of war two years later. I went to Montreal and then to Quebec. In the latter city I was se- creted in a monastery and there remained for five months. Thinking it wiser to be out of the country, on account of the angry feeling of the people, I boarded a steamer and went to London. I was in London some time and also visited Liverpool and Birmingham. I then went to Paris and from Paris went to Rome and enlisted in the Papal Zouaves under the name of Wat- son. My life while in the papal guards was very pleasant, but I continually longed for my native land. I eventually became a sergeant and in the war between the Papal States and the Garibaldians I was in my element. It was while in the service of Pius IX that I wrote to one of the most prominent Union statesmen in this country telling him who and where I was and ask- ing him if it would be safe for me to return to the United States and if I could get a jury trial and not undergo a drum-head courtmartial. He wrote back saying that in his opinion I could not get a jury trial and advising me to remain away from America at least three years. The judge at my trial refused to admit those letters as evidence of my intention to return to this country vol- untarily. I determined, however, to return and to take my chances of courtmartial, and was on the point of doing so when I was ar- rested at the instance of Pius IX and cast into prison.

A Canadian who pretended to be my friend went to Cardinal Antonelli and told him my story. Antonelli went with the in- formation to the Pope, who immediately ordered my arrest and strict confinement. I was stationed at one of the outposts be- tween Rome and Naples, in the Italian mountains. It was a beautiful spot and we were quartered in an old monastery. The Papal Secretary of the State at once communicated with the United States Sec- retary of State that they had me, and our Government ordered a man-of-war, then cruising in the Indian ocean, to report to Porto Vecchio and take me aboard.

Now, as a matter of fact, our Government did not want me in the United States. They were willing and anxious for me to remain abroad, and hoped I would continue to do

so. While I was in London, Liverpool and in Birmingham our Consuls at those ports knew who I was, and advised our State Department of my whereabouts, but nothing was done. Of course, when the matter was brought to the attention of the Govern- ment in such an official manner and from such source, there was nothing to do but to express thanks and take measures for having me returned to this country for trial.

In the mean time, I was confined in a cell in the old monastery. The second day after my arrest—or rather the second night—a messenger arrived from Antonelli directing the officer in command of the post, the Baron de Serappe, who, you will remember, mar- ried Miss Polk of North Carolina, to have me sent to Rome under heavy guard the moment the summons was received. I was awakened at 4 p. m. by the rusty key grating in the lock of my cell, and by the light of a flickering lantern I saw that my untimely visitors were an officer and six soldiers, all heavily armed. At once I knew what it meant, and when the the Lieutenant in com- mand ordered me to dress at once in order to go to Rome. I at once made up my mind that, let the consequences be what they may, I would not go to the Eternal City. While dressing I mentally arranged a plan of es- cape. This old monastery was built on the side of the mountain, nestling on one side, and the west side was directly over a preci- pice over a hundred feet high. A wall four feet high guarded the courtyard. I de- termined to break away from my captors and go over that precipice. When I had finished dressing I was placed in the center of this guard and we slowly ascended the stone steps of the old building, worn smooth by countless feet of many generations of monks. We reached the courtyard and turned towards the left. Just as we reached the point I had selected for my attempt I made a break for liberty, and, running quickly across the courtyard, jumped on the wall. Gathering myself for the attempt, I took a long breath and jumped into space, doubling my legs slightly under me as I did so. About thirty-five feet from the top

of the precipice there was a bare ledge of rock jutting out from the face of the mount- ain and about four feet broad. By great good fortune I landed safely on that ledge.

It has been stated that when I broke away from my captors I made a wild jump over this precipice and landed purely by ac- cident on that ledge. As a matter of fact, I knew of the existence of the ledge. I would not have been such an idiot as to jump over a hundred-foot precipice to certain death in that manner. Many and many a time my comrades and myself, in hours of idleness, would lean over that precipice and wonder how many feet it was from the wall of the courtyard to the ledge, and it was an open question as to whether a man could jump from the wall and land safely on the ledge. While dressing I determined to make the attempt. It makes my blood run cold to think of it now, though. However, I man- aged to land on it safely, and my legs doubling up under me my head struck the bare rock with fearful force. I was knocked completely senseless.

In the meantime what a scene of confu- sion and what a Babel of voices there was above. The Lieutenant in command wrung his hands in anguish and swore in choice musical Italian. My break had been so sudden that every man was taken complet- ily by surprise. They had had plenty of time to shoot me down if they had had the pres- ence of mind. Running to the side of the precipice they looked over the wall. They must have seen me lying there unconscious, for they immediately began firing down on me. They may have done so on a venture, however. I was brought back to my senses by the reports of their rifles from above and the bullets flattening themselves on the bare rock unpleasantly near my head. Dizzy and sick and shaken, I managed to gather myself together and crawl out of danger, and gradually made my way down the side of the mountain to the little town which nestled at its base. Running along the main street of the town I ran directly into the arms of a detail of Zouaves. They

were as much surprised as I, but I had the advantage of being on the alert. With me it was almost a matter of life and death. Doubling quickly on my tracks and expect- ing every moment to be hit by some of the bullets which were flying around my head, I ran like a frightened deer through alleys, down dark streets and across lots I sped and managed to elude my pursuers. In the meantime the entire town was in an uproar. Everyone had the alarm, and all the gates were guarded. Selecting a good point I managed to get over the wall, and headed down the white Italian road towards the coast. I should have said at the beginning that all this took place during the early hours of the morning. It was 4 a. m. when I was aroused and told to dress. By the time I had left the town a few miles in the road the sun was high in the heavens, and I was congratulating myself on my three escapes when I was suddenly startled by the sharp command:

"Halt! Who goes there?"
"Friend," I answered in my best Italian, recognizing that I had run into a Garibaldian camp. Glancing at my Papal uni- form, the outpost was by no means reas- sured. In the meantime I had raised my hands above my head. Bringing his rifle to his shoulder, he was pressing the trigger unpleasantly hard.

Raising my hands even higher in the air, I sang out to him: "Lower your rifle, man; can't you see my hands are up?" Still cov- ering me with his rifle, he ordered me to ad- vance within a few paces of him and called out lustily for the corporal of the guard. That officer came on the run, and, seel- ing my rig, called for the sergeant of the guard. He no sooner caught a glimpse of my dress than he called for the officer of the guard.

To make a long story short, I was soon sur- rounded by a mob of Garibaldians of all ranks and sizes. When I told them that I was an Americano, a deserter from the Paplo Guardo and wanted to get to the coast, they treated me with the greatest kindness. Brothers could not have been kinder. I shall remember these honest, red- coated men with deepest gratitude as long as I live. They entertained me for a week, and when I decided to go to Naples, they made it possible for me to do so with safety.

As I was traveling under English pass- ports, I went direct to the English Consul and told him who I was. Glancing with un- mingled surprise at my red fez, baggy trou- sers, and leggings of the Papal Zouaves, he said to me:

"Do you realize for a moment, man, the risk you run? Don't you know that Naples is in the hands of Garibaldi and that you might have a knife run in your back at any moment?"

I told him that the Garibaldians were the very best friends I had—the only friends, in fact, and that the money I had in my pocket was given me by them. I remained in Na- ples several days, and the entire time I was there I was shadowed by two detectives. They never lost sight of me. Coming face to face with them on one occasion, I said to them:

"You stick to me nobly, brothers. I feel deeply moved at your kind attention. They made no reply, but they did not dare to arrest me in Naples in the presence of my Garibaldian friends. It became known that I was going to Alexandria, and by a singular coincidence the very ship which took me there also carried dispatches to Consul Hale at that point to arrest me and keep me in close confinement until the arrival of Com- modore Jeffreys. When we were a few days out from Naples it became known on the vessel who I was or was supposed to be.

It was reported that I had killed the Pres- ident of the United States. When this be- came noised around the ship there was the greatest excitement at once. The Captain of the vessel came to me and said:

"Your presence is kicking up a great fuss on this ship. Who are you, anyway?" I told him frankly the truth, and while he was most kind, he refused to land me anywhere else than Alexandria. I was by this time completely tired of being a man without a country, and determined that on reaching Alexandria I would place no more obstacles in the way of my capture and return to the United States. Accordingly, when I reached that city I went to a hotel, signed my cor- rect name and sat quietly on the porch smoking a cigar, waiting for some one to come to arrest me. On the afternoon of the day after my arrival, glancing down the street, I saw coming up towards the hotel an open carriage, containing one man and followed by a squad of cavalry. I knew at once who they were. The cavalcade stopped in front of the hotel and the gentleman got out—he was Consul Hale—and, coming up to me, asked me if I was John H. Surratt. I told that such was the case. He said he had orders for my arrest. When the carriage drove off there were two in it, and I was the second occupant. I was placed in the city prison, awaiting the arrival of the man- of-war, and was visited daily by Mr. Hale. He treated me as a son. While he gave me plenty of reading matter, he would never tell me when and how I was to be taken back to the United States. One day I heard a great fuss in the yard of the prison where the common prisoners were kept. Some one was swearing like a trooper in English. I went into the yard and found a United States man-of-war's-man. On my asking him what the trouble was, between his oaths he stated that he belonged to a United States war vessel which had arrived the night before, and, getting drunk, he had been "jugged." He said: "Here we have been chasing all over Europe for a fellow named Surratt, and blankety blanked if he hasn't given us a slip three times. We have come here to get him now, and blankety blank if I believe we will ever see him." I smiled grimly. He said the vessel was in command of Commodore Jeffrey. When Consul Hale called that day I asked him when I was to be delivered to Commodore Jeffrey. To say he was surprised was putting it mildly. He never learned how I found out. I was

placed on board the vessel, heavily chained and handcuffed, and taken to Marsailles, where a United States fleet was lying in com- mand of Admiral Colesborough. When we entered the harbor and I saw that fleet of splendid vessels, with the stars and stripes flying from every ship, I could have cheered. I was proud of my country. The bands were playing "Star Spangled Banner," "Hail, Columbia!" "Maryland, My Maryland," and "Dixie." I was taken aboard the Admiral's flag ship, and when he saw me he said:

BATES SCRAP BOOK

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