HARPER'S MAGAZINE

November 1924

SHATTERING THE MYTH OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH'S ESCAPE

An Adventure in Journalism

BY WILLIAM G. SHEPHERD

(The legend has long been current in the Southwest that the man who was shot by Boston Corbett at Garrett's farm and identified as the assassin of Abraham Lincoln was not John Wilkes Booth but that Booth escaped to Texas and Oklahoma. Evidence in support of the story has recently appeared in one of the State Historical Journals in the West, and a prominent churchman has for years lectured on the subject to thousands of people. This legend has proved so strangely persistent that HARPER'S MAGAZINE asked Mr. Shepherd to probe the evidence to a conclusive issue. The story which Mr. Shepherd has brought back after an extended investigation, involving two trips to Texas and Oklahoma, is a timely, interesting narrative of a remarkable adventure in journalism.—*Editor's Note.*)

IN twenty years of investigating and writing for newspapers and magazines I have never encountered a more absorbing story than the Enid legend of John Wilkes Booth. To meet the believers of this legend in the Oklahoma country, where it arose; to hear them explain their firm belief that John Wilkes Booth escaped and was never punished for the assassination of Lincoln, but lived and died among them; and to discover proofs that they were wrong—has been one of my most interesting experiences.

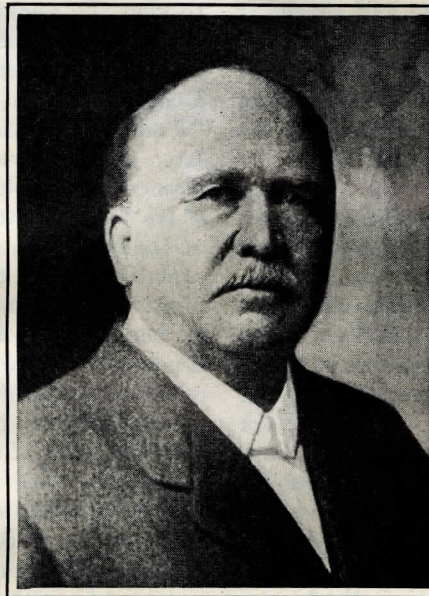
This legend is no mild rumor. It has penetrated the office of HARPER'S MAGAZINE, as well as others, many times during the past twenty years. It still finds its way occasionally into the columns of the daily newspapers. When H. H. Kohlsaat recently published in a magazine an account of how the family of John Wilkes Booth secured his body from the government at Washington and buried it in the family cemetery lot in Baltimore, he received many letters from various parts of the country announcing that John Wilkes Booth had never been captured. He received a front-page article in a prominent Western newspaper which in 1924 carried the story of Booth's escape and of his death at Enid, Oklahoma. An officer in the American army sent him a book relating the Enid legend. Mr. Kohlsaat was called to account for not knowing that John Wilkes Booth was never punished. The Enid legend came to the front from everywhere. Therefore I was asked by the editors of HARPER'S MAGAZINE to put the Enid legend, if I could, through the sieve of fact and history.

Perhaps the most extraordinary feature of the whole legend is that to this day, unless it has been recently disposed of, the body of a man who claimed to be John Wilkes Booth lies mummified and unburied in the city of Memphis, Tennessee.

My sifting of the legend imposed upon me within the past year the unpleasant task of viewing this body. It was in a coffinlike pine box, lying in a garage in the rear of a home on a fine Memphis residential street. For twenty-one years it had been preserved by Finis L. Bates, an eminent citizen of Memphis, a lawyer well known throughout the South. Up to the day of his death, Thanksgiving Day of 1923, Mr. Bates believed that he was holding the body of John Wilkes Booth; and that

in time, for the "correction of history." he could prove to the United States government that John Wilkes Booth had escaped punishment.

It was in the evening after dinner and after the unsuspecting colored servants had retired to their quarters that I was escorted to the garage to see the mummy. There was the body of an old man, with bushy white hair, parted low, as young Booth parted his. If this were Booth's body, then Booth must have lived to be sixty-five years old. My hostess, the widow of Mr. Bates, and her son pointed out to me the raised eyebrow. Booth's right eyebrow had been scarred in a stage duel. They called attention to the right thumb, which closely hugged the index finger. The lower joint of Booth's right thumb had been crushed in a stage curtain and he always carried his cane in such a manner that the handle would hide this injury.



FINIS L. BATES

Who spent many years in trying to establish the truth of John Wilkes Booth's escape

Could I see a slight irregularity on the bone of the right ankle?

Booth broke his ankle when, in jumping from the President's box at Ford's Theater that April evening, his foot caught in the draping of an American flag.

It was difficult for me to see these distinctive marks. The skin of the mummy was like wrinkled parchment. But there was enough of a suggestion of such marks to prevent anyone from then and there declaring that this was not the body of John Wilkes Booth.

John Wilkes Booth had been a handsome man and the despair of lovely women. Could this long gray hair, still curling and plenteous, have been the adornment of that young man who mastered the stage of his day with his talent and his physical beauty? This poor old man, unburied yet after twenty-one years of death!—could he have been John Wilkes Booth? And if he could, what a fate it would be—more ghastly than any punishing judge could impose—that his body should not be laid to rest. Strange thoughts to try to think out on a cold garage floor in the heart of the residence district of one of our fine cities, under the light of electric lamps, with a neighborhood radio concert beating in your ears and with two smiling, amiable hosts studying your bewilderment.

I was glad enough to go back into the warmth and light of the big house.

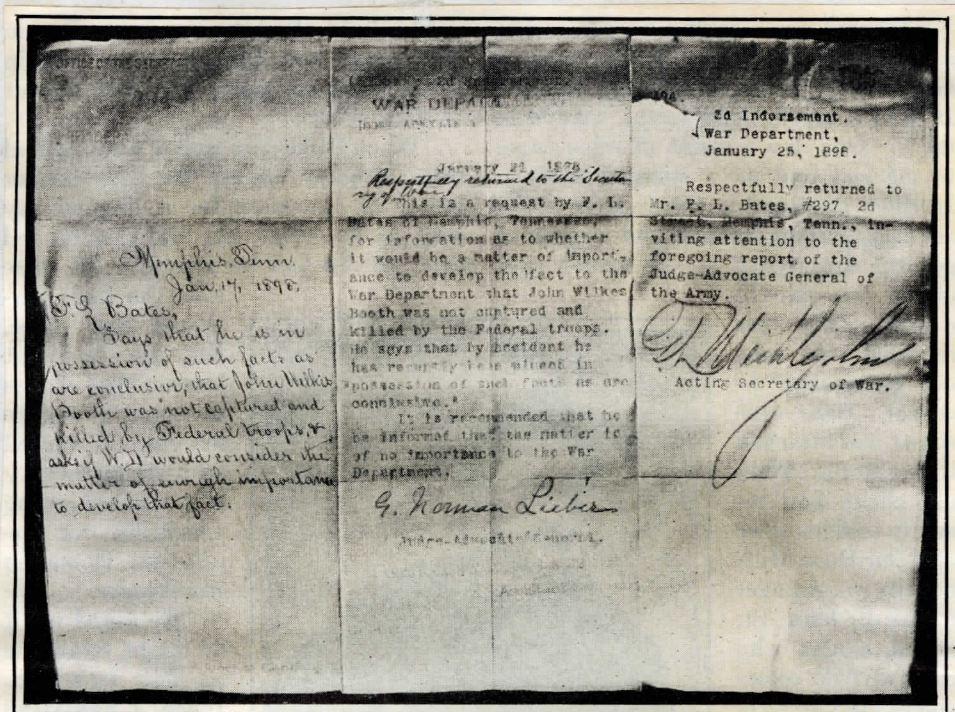
And from this house I went out through the South to different cities and towns to trail down, as best I could, the legend that John Wilkes Booth was never captured and did not pay the penalty of his crime, but that he died a suicide in the city of Enid, Oklahoma, in January, 1903.

At the outset I must say there would have been no legend of Enid if the records of the War Department concerning the capture and burial of John Wilkes Booth had not been prepared in secrecy and if many of the facts about it had not been shrouded in wartime mystery. In haste, without public notice, without civilian identification, with few onlook-

ers, the body officially described as that of John Wilkes Booth was disposed of. In 1914, before the Great War, it would have been difficult to understand the haste and mystery which surrounded the burial of Booth's body; with the Great War fresh in our minds and with a lively appreciation of what little chance civilians have to know of official wartime doings, it is easier to comprehend the secret military methods which were followed in disposing of the remains of Lincoln's assassin. The secret service department of the army had charge of the Booth affair. Colonel L. C. Baker, a detective, was given sole responsibility for the capture of Booth by Secretary of War Stanton. Colonel Baker put his cousin, Lieutenant L. B. Baker, in charge of the field search. The two Bakers controlled subsequent events—one in Washington and the other along the highways of Maryland and Virginia. They held themselves accountable to no one except the Secretary of War. They even acted as their own censors in telling their story of the capture and death of Booth. A reporter for the New York *World*, at that time writing of the capture of Booth as it was related to him by the officials, practically told his readers that his story was being censored. He began, "A hard and grizzly face overlooks me as I write. This is the face of Lafayette Baker. I tell you the story of the capture of Booth as he told it to me." And he ends his story by throwing doubt on it all, by saying, in effect, "When Herrold, Booth's companion, came out of the burning barn, he said to the soldiers, 'Who is that man that was with me in there? He told me his name was Boyd.'"

Even at the time there were those who doubted that the Bakers had captured John Wilkes Booth. And the two Bakers made no attempt to prove conclusively to the public that the body in their possession—that of the man shot in the Garrett barn ten days after Lincoln's assassination—was that of John Wilkes Booth. This body was brought to Washington on the steamer *John I. Ide*. A group of military men viewed it on a monitor two days after the news had been flashed out to the world that Booth had been captured. A diary written by Booth had been found on the body. There were thousands of citizens in Washington who knew John Wilkes Booth by sight, but not one of them—not even one of his stage associates—was asked to identify the remains. The identification was entirely an official affair. The only civilian who was asked to view the remains was Dr. J. Frederick May, of Washington, who had once performed an operation on Booth's neck. Doctor May, on seeing the body, said, "I don't recognize that as Booth." In later years, however, Doctor May explained in a booklet entitled *The Mark of the Scalpel* that Colonel Baker, there on the boat in the presence of the body, explained to him that Booth had been a fugitive for almost two weeks and that he had suffered for want of food and drink and sleep; whereupon Doctor May reluctantly identified what seemed to be a scar on Booth's neck which might have been the mark of the operation, and expressed his amazement at the astonishing change which suffering had produced in the person of Booth.

Then suddenly one night the body disappeared from the boat. History is befuddled as to what was done with it. The story of the Bakers is that they placed it in a rowboat, having removed it from the deck in a blanket. They carried weights in the boat to give the impression that they intended to sink the body in the Potomac. Instead, they rowed through the darkness to where the penitentiary bordered the river, and through a hole which had been made in the penitentiary walls they thrust the body into a penitentiary cell and there buried it, by lantern light, under flagstones. Dr. George L. Porter, high in the medical service of the Union army, had charge of the Lincoln murderers and suspects. He says that he and four soldiers buried it one afternoon in a cell in


Memphis, Tenn.
Jan. 17, 1898.
F. L. Bates,
Says that he is in possession of such facts as are conclusive, that John Wilkes Booth was not captured and killed by Federal troops, & asks if W. D. would consider the matter of enough importance to develop that fact.

WAR DEPA[illegible]

January 21, 1898.
Respectfully returned to the Secretary of War.
This is a request by F. L. Bates of Memphis, Tennessee, for information as to whether it would be a matter of importance to develop the fact to the War Department that John Wilkes Booth was not captured and killed by the Federal troops. He says that by accident he has recently been placed in "possession of such facts as are conclusive."
It is recommended that he be informed that the matter is of no importance to the War Department.
G. Norman Lieber
Judge-Advocate-General.

2d Indorsement.
War Department,
January 25, 1898.
Respectfully returned to Mr. F. L. Bates, #297 2d Street, Memphis, Tenn., inviting attention to the foregoing report of the Judge-Advocate General of the Army.
Acting Secretary of War.

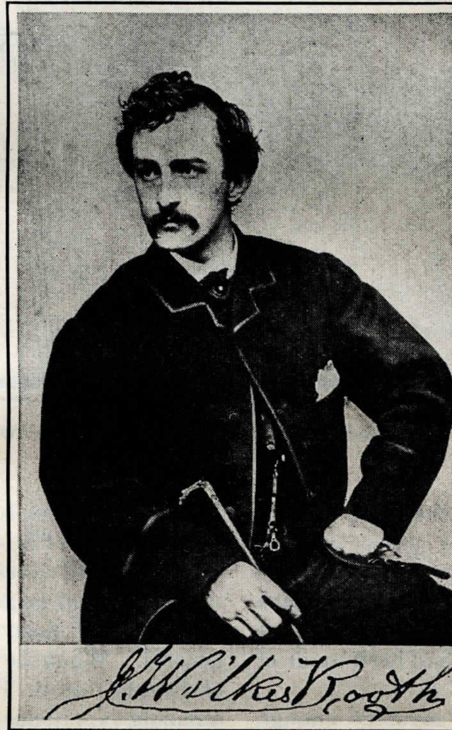
WAR DEPARTMENT CORRESPONDENCE (1898) IN REGARD TO BATES' CLAIM

the old arsenal where the War College now stands. For four years—indeed, not until the body was removed because of building operations and turned back to the Booth family—the public did not know what disposition had been made of the assassin's body.

In short, there was mystery enough about the capture and burial of Booth—due to justified caution, perhaps, in view of the wartime conditions and the fear that the Confederates would find the body and treat it as a hero's—to render it not unreasonable to entertain the Enid legend. Booth *might* have got away. There was a loophole for him. It is this one loophole that made the Enid legend not entirely incredible.

With these facts in mind I sat through several long drowsy summer afternoons in a home in Memphis, listening to a sturdy white-haired Southern lawyer telling the strange story of what had befallen him in his very early days when he went to Texas to get his start in life. His name was Finis L. Bates. His forebears and relatives had been eminent in civilian and in governmental life; he himself had been a state's attorney general. When he was a cub attorney of twenty-one in Texas he had had an amazing experience which shadowed and to a great extent molded his entire life. He became acquainted with a man whom he believed to be John Wilkes Booth, *eight years after* Booth had assassinated Abraham Lincoln. I could not doubt this man's sincerity or his utter sanity. I listened enthralled as he spun me his yarn, in soft Southern dialect, of those days in 1872 in Texas and of the years of time and thousands of dollars he had since expended in trying to establish in the public mind, "for the correction of history, sir," his belief that John Wilkes Booth had escaped punishment. The gist of his long story, which sent me trailing through the South and West, was this:

"When I was a young lawyer, in the early 'seventies, I went to the town of Grandberry, Texas, to seek my fortune. It was a small, wild town, with wild ways. One day a client of mine came to me and told me a story of trouble. In those days and in those parts of the country, grocery keepers and keepers of general stores used to sell whisky and other alcoholic drinks. They were required to take out government licenses. Bars were sometimes attached to the stores. Well, my client had recently sold his store at Glen Rose Mills near by to a stranger named John St. Helen, a man who came up from somewhere in Mexico. This John St. Helen had failed to take out a license for selling liquor, and my client had been indicted and summoned to court for this failure. Of course, a mistake had been made. It was John St. Helen who should have been arrested. The federal authorities, in a town two days distant from us by horse, did not know of the sale of the store.



JOHN WILKES BOOTH
(with autograph)

"I sent word to this John St. Helen that I wanted to see him, and he came to my office within a day or two. I never in all my subsequent years and experiences saw such a man as this stranger. He was indescribably handsome. He had a poise and a carriage that commanded instant attention. His voice and his speech fascinated me as they fascinated all with whom he came in contact. He was strangely out of place in this wild Western country. But in those days you did not ask a man in Texas about his past—you took him at his face value.

"When I told him that a warrant had been wrongly issued for the former owner of the store for selling whisky without a license, St. Helen admitted that whisky had been sold in his store since he had purchased the place. But he had not known that it was necessary to secure a license; he showed an unfamiliarity with storekeeping which did not surprise me. He was no storekeeper.

"He asked me if he might retain me as his lawyer. When I agreed to this he said, 'I don't dare to go to a federal court. It's a matter of life and death with me. Can't you persuade the man who sold me the store to go to court and plead guilty? I will pay the fine and all expenses.' "

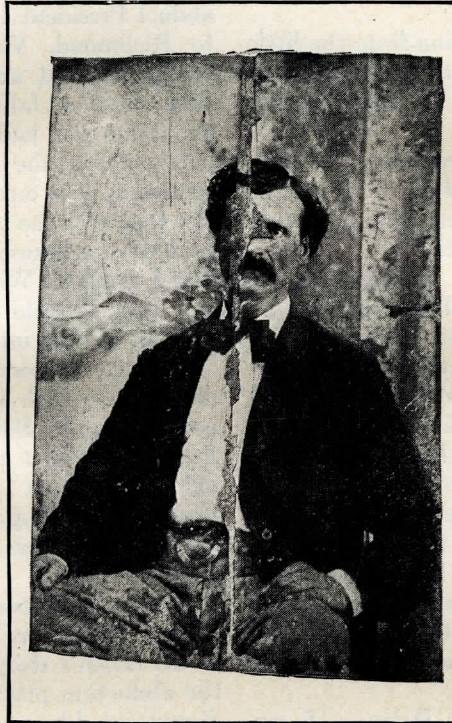
The upshot of this negotiation was that the former storekeeper went on a two days' journey in a buggy with the young lawyer, Bates, and pleaded guilty. From a pocketbook containing a liberal supply of money which John St. Helen had given him, the boy lawyer paid the fine and all the expenses of the trip.

"John St. Helen met us when we drove into the main street of Grandberry and was delighted with the news. I returned him his pocketbook, not emptied by any means, and he put it into his pocket without counting

the bills, and thanked both of us profusely."

Not long after that, as the Fourth of July of the year 1872 approached, John St. Helen invited the young lawyer of Grandberry to come to Glen Rose Mills to deliver the Independence Day oration. Ranchers and cowboys came from many miles to the great barbecue. But on that day the leader of the occasion was not the promising young lawyer from Grandberry. It was John St. Helen—slender, flashing eyed, golden voiced, and eloquent—who carried off the honors.

"As soon as he rose to introduce me," my white-haired host told me, "I knew that the oratorical honors were not to be mine. I knew I could never stir such emotions in that rough audience as he commanded. The crowd cheered and cheered, and demanded, later in the day, that he speak again. His fame as an orator was fixed that day.



JOHN ST. HELEN

The tintype given to Mr. Bates by St. Helen with the request that after his death it be sent to Edwin Booth

"But after a time he sold his store at Glen Rose Mills and moved to Grandberry, where he set up another store. I noted that he did little actual storekeeping. He had a very able Mexican who did most of the work. He lived in a comfortably furnished little room in the store building. He and I used to spend many hours together every day.

"He turned me to Shakespeare and to Roman history. He gave me innumerable lessons in oratory. He taught me what to do with my hands and feet before an audience. He taught me gestures and voice inflection. His imitations of public speakers who made errors in platform manners were excruciatingly funny. Whenever a play came to town he was sure to see it. More than once he took young men who came to town as actors and gave them hours of lessons in the dramatic art. They always knew instinctively that this strange man was a master worth listening to.

"He drank heavily. His drinking spells were followed, very often, by spells of illness.

"Once he became very ill; the doctor thought he could not live. St. Helen sent for me and I hurried to his little room at the store. I found him exceedingly weak. And he seemed very uncomfortable mentally. When the doctor had left he sent the boy out of the room and motioned to me to come to his bedside.

" 'I don't believe I shall live,' he told me. 'Reach under my pillow and take out a picture you'll find there,' he said.

"I found a tintype under the pillow, a picture of him.

" 'If I don't live,' he told me, 'I want you, as my lawyer, to send that picture to Edwin Booth, in New York City, and tell him the man in that picture is dead. Tell him how I died.'

"I promised him and then I called in the Mexican boy and told him to get some brandy. He and I turned in where the doctor had left off. We

rubbed St. Helen with brandy from head to foot until we were almost exhausted. And we pulled him through. Though he was very weak the next day, the doctor found him better. Within a few weeks he was up and around again.

"At last, one day, he mentioned to me his strange request. 'Take a walk into the country,' he said. 'I want to tell you something.' "

Along the road leading from the little town, John St. Helen told the story which affected Finis L. Bates' entire life.

" 'I am John Wilkes Booth,' he said to me," continued Bates. " 'I am the man who killed the best man that ever lived, Abraham Lincoln.' "

Here was a client speaking to his attorney. For hours, Bates told me, he tried to disprove to St. Helen his own amazing claim; he thought he saw madness in his friend. Why, Booth had been killed at the Garrett home, in Virginia! Boston Corbett, a sergeant, had shot him in a burning corncrib. Booth's body had been taken to Washington and had been sunk in the Potomac thirteen years before. Booth's diary had been found on the body. Everybody in that plot against Lincoln and the government had been executed; they were all dead.

" 'Not I,' said St. Helen. 'I am John Wilkes Booth and I escaped.' "

They had other talks on the subject and then one day St. Helen (rather impatiently, I judged from Bates' tale) said, in substance:

" 'Look here! I'm going to tell you as a lawyer some things that only John Wilkes Booth himself and no other man on earth could know.' "

In the story that followed, John St. Helen put Finis L. Bates on the trail of historical or official facts that kept Bates busy all his life, that caused him to write a book entitled *The Escape and Suicide of John Wilkes Booth*, full of the mystery of what happened in the city of Washington on that indescribable night of April 14, 1865, and that caused him, years afterward, to keep unburied a body which he believed to be that of John Wilkes Booth.

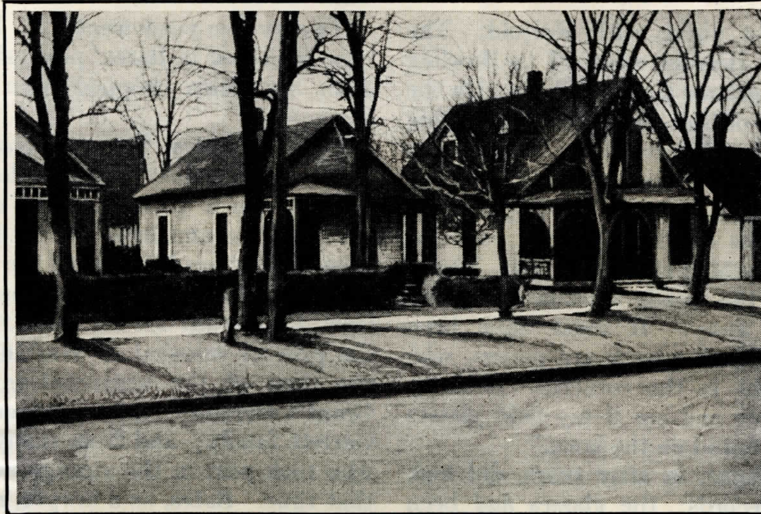
"'How do you suppose Herrold and I got away from Washington that night without the help of men high in the government?' demanded St. Helen. 'I rode into Washington on the morning of that day, intending to take part in a plot to abduct President Lincoln and carry him to Richmond, Virginia. But at the bridge Herrold and I were told that Richmond had fallen. Then I knew the abduction plot had failed. The sentries had held us at the bridge because we had refused to give our names. But when I saw that with the fall of Richmond there could be no abduction, I told the sentries that I was John Wilkes Booth, the actor, and that Herrold was my friend, and they let us pass into the city.'"

In what follows I am not going to name a very high official who was designated to me by Bates. It is part of the Enid legend that a certain government official of great power and position planned the killing of Lincoln and helped Booth to escape. Let his name be Blank.

"'That afternoon,' Bates quoted St. Helen, 'I met Mr. Blank.'" According to St. Helen's story Blank had been in the abduction plot, and he was greatly disappointed because it had failed.

'"Are you too faint-hearted to kill him?" St. Helen said Mr. Blank asked him, over a glass of brandy. 'And then,' St. Helen said, 'Blank told me how Lincoln was preparing to ruin and devastate the South. "I can arrange matters so that you can escape," he told me. "Lincoln is going to Ford's Theater this evening."

"'Mr. Blank showed me that he could give Herrold and me the password at the bridge. He made it appear to me that I would be committing not assassination but an act of war. And so I yielded. He gave me the password late in the day, and that night Herrold and I gave the password to two sentries at the



THE COTTAGE IN EL RENO WHICH DAVID E. GEORGE TRIED TO PAINT

bridge and the sentries permitted us to go through.'"

This story did not convince Bates, he told me.

"What kept General Grant and his wife from going to the theater with Lincoln that night?" Bates told me that John St. Helen asked him. "If I were not John Wilkes Booth how could I know what I'm going to tell you now? I told Mr. Blank, who was urging me to kill Lincoln, that it would be certain death for me to go into Lincoln's box with General Grant present. It had been announced in the afternoon papers that Grant would be there. Mr. Blank told me that he would arrange matters so that Grant would not be there. And Grant wasn't there. Blank had only a few hours in which to act. I don't know how he arranged it but he kept his word. Grant was not there. Up to a late hour in the afternoon, Grant intended appearing in the box with Lincoln—his first public appearance as the hero of the war. But a few hours later he was on a train leaving Washington. I don't know what happened. But Mr. Blank kept his word to me."

Mr. Bates dug out from among his papers a letter which he had received years later from General Grant's secretary. It said that something had happened at the White House that afternoon to disturb Mrs. Grant: a rumor, something she had heard, some intuition of trouble. And she had persuaded General Grant to leave the city with her, foregoing the gala presentation with the President at Ford's Theater.

"How could any man but Booth have known that?" Bates asked me.

"Well, then, if this John St. Helen told the truth, who was the man who was shot in the corncrib at the Garrett Farm?" I asked Bates. And Bates told me he had asked the same question of John St. Helen.

"It must have been a soldier named Ruddy," St. Helen told Bates. "After the escape from Washington I had ridden in a negro's wagon under a pile of furniture to a ferry. After I had crossed the ferry I discovered that my diary and some other papers had fallen out of my pocket. I asked this Confederate soldier to go back on the ferry and catch up with the wagon and get my papers. When he returned he could find out where I should be hiding.

"I slept in a room of the Garrett

house that night, with Herrold. The next day Herrold went off to Bowling Green to get me a pair of shoes. On the afternoon of that day, while I was lying out on the Garrett lawn, I saw some Union soldiers riding past. I knew they were looking for me. I dropped my field glasses on the lawn and, without saying anything to the Garretts, I went out into the woods back of the house and got away. It must have been Ruddy, bringing back my papers, who was caught in the corncrib. Look up the records and see if my field glasses were not found on the lawn."

Finis Bates, in after years, did look up the records; the glasses *had* been found on the lawn.

Bates looked up many records; looking up records became part of his life work.

There *were* strange doings in Washington that day. It is a fact of record that all the sentries were removed from all the approaches to Washington on the afternoon and evening of the day of the assassination; all of the sentries except those at one bridge. And these sentries permitted Booth and Herrold to pass and held back an honest citizen—John Fletcher, a liveryman—who was trying to recover from Herrold his stolen horse.

Quietly and without ceremony or farewells, John St. Helen departed from Grandberry, Texas, as if sorry he had spoken to Bates, even in confidence.

Twenty-five years went by. The tintype remained in Bates' possession, but John St. Helen dropped from Bates' ken.

Finis L. Bates, however, challenged by St. Helen's story, began to delve into history. In a great mass of material which he accumulated during his lifetime were letters from one of the sentries who permitted Booth to cross the bridge; from Lieutenant D. D. Dana, aide to the provost marshal of Washington at the time of the assassination; from Grant's secretary; from members of the Garrett family; and from many others who took part in the strange events of that time. Bates, as a lawyer, received in time enough confirmation of the story of John St. Helen to cause him to believe it. But John St. Helen had disappeared.

At last, by a stroke of luck, Bates found F. A. Demond, of Cavendish, Vermont, who had been one of the sentries at the bridge the night Booth escaped.

All of the mystery that John St. Helen put into his story was in the story of this sentry. Demond was eighteen years old in 1865; he was sixty-nine years old when he made his statement for Finis L. Bates. But through all the years Demond himself had been puzzled by the strange orders he and his fellow sentries received at the bridge that night: they were orders that gave freedom to the murderers of Lincoln and held back all others.

As Bates compared the story of the strange John St. Helen with the story told by Sentry Demond, is it amazing that he began to believe that John St. Helen must have been John Wilkes Booth?

"I was sent down to guard the end of the bridge from Washington to Uniontown, Maryland," Demond told Bates. "On the morning of April 14, as Private Drake and myself

IN WITNESS of all of which I hereunto subscribe my name this 17th day of June, A.D., 1900, in the presence of the witnesses whose names are subscribed hereto.

D. E. George

quired to give bond—
In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand
This 31st day of December 1902—

David E. George

SIGNATURES FROM THE TWO WILLS OF DAVID E. GEORGE

The upper one was made at El Reno in 1900, the lower at Enid in 1902. Compare the signatures with that of Booth on page 706.

No. 002 El Reno, Okla., March 1st 1902

FIRST NATIONAL BANK

Pay to the Order of

C. A. Vanness $350 00

Three hundred and fifty Dollars

D. E. George

CHECK OF DAVID E. GEORGE TO C. A. VANNESS
Given in payment for the cottage in El Reno, Oklahoma

were sitting on a timber by the side of the road, two men came along. I asked them where they were going. They said, 'Only looking around.'"

They refused to give their names. John St. Helen had told Bates that he did not give his name until he heard that Richmond had fallen and had decided that the kidnaping plot had failed.

"While talking with them a captain came along on horseback; he was one of the aides of General Augur, the provost marshal. He wanted to know what the trouble was. Booth took him aside and talked with him. Then the captain said that they were all right. But Drake and I said that we took orders only from Lieutenant Dana, and the captain rode off.

"About two o'clock an orderly came from headquarters and told us to let the men go. We did so. We thought it was funny but we had to obey orders."

An hour later Booth, according to history, was at the Kirkwood hotel in Washington, trying to get in contact with the same official whom John St. Helen had named in his talk with Bates. Booth left a note for this official, which was later found by military detectives.

The sentry's story of what happened that black night on the bridge strengthened more than ever the belief of Bates that no one but Booth could have known what St. Helen knew.

"At nine o'clock that night we shut the gate and Drake went on guard," Demond told Bates.

"Just as we were getting ready for guard duty, a little after ten o'clock, Lieutenant Dana came to us and told us not to let anyone through without a password—'T.B.' with the countersign 'T.B. Road.'

"*We thought that strange, for it was the first time that we ever had a password to use since we were on that bridge.*"

Almost at the very hour that Lincoln was to be slain the sentries were given orders which forced them to assist the assassin to escape!

It was a day of mystery in Washington, that 14th day of April. John St. Helen had told Bates that during the afternoon of that day a government official had promised to assist and protect him if he would kill Lincoln. And here, in the evening, these sentries at the bridge are puzzled by the order that they are to permit no one to pass who does not know that double watchword—"T.B." and then "T.B. Road." John St. Helen told Bates he was given these passwords by Mr. Blank late in the afternoon; now Bates has the story of the sentry who was amazed at receiving them.

Booth and Herrold, riding five minutes apart, gave the proper passwords and passed through into the South.

"But we were puzzled by what had

happened," Demond told Bates. "I said, 'It's funny what's going on here tonight.' "

At that very moment Washington, two miles away, was horror-stricken by the shooting of Lincoln and the attack on Secretary Seward.

The story of Private Demond convinced Bates that John St. Helen's story was true. The fact that he was unable to disprove the story of St. Helen preyed on his mind. Finally, twenty years after St. Helen had told him the story, Bates wrote a letter to the War Department in Washington suggesting that Booth had not been captured and that it might be possible to find him still alive. He rereceived a reply, coldly official, which said merely that the War Department would not be interested in the project.

The date of this letter to the War Department (1898) is of the utmost importance in proving the sincerity of Finis L. Bates, for this letter was sent *five* years before the Enid legend arose. On the story of John St. Helen alone, Bates, after years of investigation, was willing to rest his case; was willing to declare that Booth had escaped punishment.

And then came the Enid legend.

While Finis L. Bates, in the city of Memphis, was carrying on his law practice and was from time to time journeying about the country to talk with those who might know something of the Booth case, or was trying by means of correspondence to discover the whereabouts of John St. Helen, there appeared in the little town of El Reno, in the spring of 1901, an elderly man who gave his name at the Anstien hotel, where he registered, as David E. George.

Oklahoma was then a territory. The federal government was preparing to give the land to the public and, though the land distribution was still many months away, thousands of land-buying citizens were thronging to El Reno, Enid, and other Oklahoma towns to select land which they hoped later to receive as gifts from the government. It was into this turbulent and exciting atmosphere that this dignified man of mystery came.

I talked recently with Mrs. N. J. Anstien, whose husband was the proprietor of the hotel at El Reno where this strange man first appeared. There is no doubt in her mind, she told me, that David E. George was John Wilkes Booth.

"There were several little cottages in the yard behind the hotel and Mr. George took a room in one of these. He was a striking man. His hair was curly and jet black. He dyed it, of course. I imagined he was about sixty years old.

"He was a fascinating talker when he wanted to talk. He never spoke to us about his family. One day he told my husband that his trade was that of a house painter. My husband wouldn't believe him. His hands were not calloused or stained; his fingers were long and slender, like a woman's. I could not imagine that he had done a day's work in his life. Just for fun my husband gave him an order to paint the little cottage in which he lived. Mr. George puttered around for several days and made a terrible botch of things.

"'I told you he was not a painter,' my husband said to me.

"He used to get very sick from overdrinking," Mrs. Anstien continued. "He would get up out of bed and go out into the yard and pump a pitcher of water and take it back into his room to drink. I took care of him many times, carrying food to him. He was always extremely grateful. It was pleasant in those wild days to meet such a gentleman as he was. I was not surprised to hear afterward that he was John Wilkes Booth.

"I remember one day while he was sick in his cottage room, a father and mother brought their daughter to him. They insisted that he should marry her. They said the girl had fallen in love with him and that it was not her fault. They did not claim that he had wronged her, except mentally. They thought he had a great deal of money and that he was a

fine gentleman. I was out in the yard when he sent them away. He went into a tremendous fury and I heard him shout 'Madame, I have not wronged your daughter. She does not say I have wronged her. Out! Out! All of you. Begone!' He talked like an actor in a tragedy. When they had left I went into his room.

"'Me! Me!' he was saying. 'They challenge me!' And then he said to me, 'Why, they don't know who I am. Why, I killed the best man that ever lived.' I thought his talk was all part of his spell of fury and I did not know, until a year later when he was dead, what he meant."

DAVID E. GEORGE'S HOME IN EL RENO

This four-room house was purchased with the check reproduced on page 711.

This strange old man made an impression on men and women wherever he went. It was easy for me to trace his twenty-two-year-old trail through the town affairs of El Reno and Enid. He was a proud old man, vain of his appearance.

He was very careful about dyeing his hair and mustache; he purchased his dye of a druggist who remembers this customer.

"But I never thought he was John Wilkes Booth," the druggist tells you—(every elderly person in El Reno and in Enid, three hours away, either believes or does not believe that David E. George was John Wilkes Booth)—"he bought house paint from me and when he died he owed me forty dollars."

He read theatrical journals, sitting in a rocking chair in the little lobby of the Anstien hotel. He talked occasionally with guests of the hotel who seemed worth while, but not every Tom, Dick, or Harry could find him willing to converse.

Then one day he announced that he would buy himself a house in El Reno. He told his host that he was no longer a young man and that it was time he settled down. The house he bought is standing in El Reno to-day. He bought it from a man named Vanness.

In everything that David E. George does, from now on, you will see a wandering, friendless, proud old man trying to protect himself from a friendless end; trying to make sure that there will be help and comfort and peace and friendliness about his bed when he dies.

He must have used all but his last dollar to make a payment of three hundred and fifty dollars for the simple little four-roomed house which he bought in El Reno. He found a man and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Simmons, who were willing to live in the house, rent free, and give him care, board, and lodging.

He drank in the town saloons, but even in his cups he seemed to be able to command the respect of his fellow-drinkers. He recited poetry and he was sentimental. Even among those who did not believe that David E. George was John Wilkes Booth I found a man who could remember George's barroom poetry. He was W. H. Ryan,

who in recent years has been mayor of Enid.

"I never thought he was Booth and I don't think so to-day," Mr. Ryan told me. "But he could recite. I can easily remember a verse I used to hear him repeat." And then Mr. Ryan quoted:

Come not when I am dead
To shed thy tears around my head.
Let the winds weep and the plover cry,
But, thou, oh foolish man, go by!

"But did he quote Shakespeare?" I asked.

"It may have sounded like Shakespeare to the men in the saloons who heard it," he answered, laughing. "But we didn't know much of Shakespeare in Oklahoma Territory in those days. He could recite very well, very impressively."

He made other friends, outside of barrooms. Guests in the home where he lived found him interesting; he entertained them with his conversation; to them he was fascinating, a man of mystery.

But in following his trail you discover that this strange person, even in this household, was carefully selecting those persons who might aid and be kind to an old man who might soon be dying.

One of these was Mrs. Anna Smith. In the courthouse at Enid, Oklahoma, I found a will which David E. George had made in favor of Anna K. Smith; it was dated June 17, 1902, a few months after he came to El Reno. He became acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. George E. Smith and impressed them with the fact that he had considerable property. They befriended him—and he made a will which would leave to Mrs. Smith "all his property." He named her husband as the executor.

Another person to whom the old man tried to cling was Mrs. Ida Harper, wife of the Methodist clergyman of El Reno. She was among the visitors who called on the family with which he lived. A month after he had established himself in the little house, and three months before he had made his will, he came into the house one afternoon, greeted Mrs. Simmons, Mrs. Harper, and another lady who was calling, and passed to his own room through the one where they were sitting. Within a short time the women heard him calling for help. They ran into the room and found him ill, lying on his bed. His eyes were dilated as though he had taken a drug.

"I'm very ill," he said. While the other two women ran out of the room to make strong coffee, George called Mrs. Harper to his bedside.

"I believe I'm going to die," he said. "I'm not an ordinary painter. I killed the best man that ever lived."

I give her story as she made oath to it when George was dead, almost a year later, and as it appeared in Bates' book.

"I asked him who it was he killed, and he said, 'Abraham Lincoln.' I could not believe it and thought he was out of his head, so I asked 'Who was Abraham Lincoln?' 'Is it possible you are so ignorant as not to know?' he answered. Then he took a pencil and paper and wrote, in a peculiar but legible hand, the name, *Abraham Lincoln*. 'Don't doubt me,' he said. 'I am John Wilkes Booth. I am dying now.'

"He told me he was well off; and he seemed to be perfectly rational. I really thought he was dying. He made me promise that I would keep his secret until he was dead. He said that if anyone should find out he was John Wilkes Booth, they would take him out and hang him and the people who loved him would despise him. He told me that people high in official life hated Lincoln and were implicated in his assassination. He said that Mrs. Surratt was innocent, and the thought that he was responsible for her death as well as of others stalked before him like a ghost. He said he was devoted to acting but that he had to give it up because of his rash deed, and the thought

that he had to run away from the stage when he loved so well the life of an actor made him restless and ill-tempered. He said he had plenty of money but had to play the role of workman to keep his mind occupied."

A doctor came in while George was talking to Mrs. Harper, and he drew the old man back to life. Mrs. Harper kept her secret for a time.

Just as St. Helen had disappeared from the knowledge of Finis L. Bates after telling his strange story, so David E. George, thirty years later, was suddenly lost to his acquaintance in El Reno. His over-drinking proved his undoing with the Simmons family; Mrs. Simmons told her husband she could not endure hearing the old man talk and rave to himself. So the Simmons family took over the house, giving a note to George for three hundred and fifty dollars, and the old man went away.

I could not find that he had said good-by to anyone, even to Mrs. Harper to whom he had told his strange story.

And now the old man is coming to the end of his trail. We pick it up at Enid, a few hours' train ride from El Reno. He registered at the Grand Avenue Hotel. It was a good hotel as hotels went in Enid in those days. The office was on the second floor; on the first floor was a store. Guests slept in cubby-holes separated by partitions that did not reach to the ceiling. One took no comfort in his room except while in bed. In the lobby were rocking chairs where guests did their reading, talking, and smoking. It was in early December that George registered here; the hotel is gone now and so is the register.

Drinking made up the few weeks of life that was left to the old man; drinking and days spent in bed in his miserable little room under the depression of alcoholism. I could not piece together exactly what happened to him in the Grand Avenue Hotel. But I found in the courthouse at Enid a will which he made. On the face of it, it is an ordinary will. But as I delved into the facts, this piece of paper told of tragedy; a story of a weak, tired, helpless man at the end of his days, too hard pressed by the world.

First, in this will, he gave a seven-hundred-acre tract of land—which he did not possess—to a nephew, Willy George, who was never found.

Next, he bequeathed to "my friend," Isaac Bernstein, the money from a life-insurance policy for three thousand dollars, his watch, trunk, and all his wearing apparel. There was no such policy. Isaac Bernstein kept the saloon where George drank; when he made this will George had known him for less than a month.

Next, he bequeathed life insurance amounting to twenty-five hundred dollars "to my friend, George E. Smith, after he shall pay all the expenses of my illness and all funeral expenses." There was no last illness and though David E. George has been dead twenty-two years, there has been, at this writing, no funeral. And there was no life-insurance policy for twenty-five hundred dollars.

He left one hundred dollars to "my friend, S. S. Dumont." Mr. Dumont was the hotel proprietor, to whom the sad, helpless old man was indebted for food and lodging. He left another hundred dollars to "my friend, L. S. Houston," together with the Simmons note for three hundred and fifty dollars. The will does not say who Houston was, but I discovered that he was the lawyer who drew up the will. It is hardly possible that George, who had been in town only a few weeks, even knew him. But an aged man, penniless, must find some way (even if it be by bequest) to pay a lawyer who draws up his will. And then he gave the remainder of his property, though there was none, to the Roman Catholic Church of El Reno. He made Lawyer Houston his executor.

He made this will on the last day of the year 1902.

There is a man living, and I have talked with him, who signed this will as a witness. He is Charles S. Evans, one of

the leading druggists of the lively Enid of to-day.

"I remember signing the will," he told me. "I lived at the Grand Avenue Hotel then. I was a drug clerk. I knew the old man and used to talk with him in the hotel lobby. I've always sort of thought he might have been John Wilkes Booth. That forenoon the clerk of the hotel, R. B. Brown, came running in through the back door of the drug store, which was near the hotel, and told me that Mr. George was dying and that he was making his will; they wanted me to be a witness to it. I hurried over to the hotel. Dumont, the hotel proprietor, Charlie Wood, another drug clerk, and Lawyer Houston were in the room. George was lying in bed, looking very weak, with his eyes closed. There were three witnesses —Brown, Wood, and myself. They asked old man George to sign the will, and he opened his eyes and sat up. He took the pen in his hand, and I was surprised to see how strong he was. He put down his signature and then lay back on the bed again and closed his eyes while we put down our names."

These were creditors of the old man—Dumont and Houston and Bernstein the saloon keeper; and the old man had no money; he was at the end of his rope. In that sad will he promised to pay after he was dead. Did they ask him to make the will? Or did he call them in to make it? There is no way of knowing. But the harried old man got up from his sick bed, after a day or two, and opened the new year of 1903 with more drinking at Bernstein's. He had new credit there now; and he had new credit at the Grand Avenue Hotel. He would pay, if not sooner, at least when he was dead; and the payment he would make after death would be far greater than any debts his hotel keeper or his saloon keeper would permit him to assume; they had their hands on the old man's affairs; and Lawyer Houston, their friend, was the executor of the will.

Two weeks of drinking and illness, drinking and illness—and then what happened? Did his credit again run low? And did his creditors again press him? An old man who cannot work, who is very proud and cannot beg, must still have his whisky if he has used it through long years; he must have his tobacco and his food and his bed.

Then he played a trick on everybody in Enid. He wrote a note and thrust it into his coat pocket. He went to the drug store where he knew the clerks and complained about a dog which had howled during the night. They too had heard the dog.

"Give me some poison and I'll kill him," he said.

A clerk gave him the poison, and in the forenoon of January 13, 1903, he took the poison and died. They had heard groans coming from over the partition of his cubicle. The clerk and guests had run to his "room." Doctor Field, who happened to be passing, had been called in. A clerk had climbed over the partition and had opened the door. Doctor Field had rushed in, but it had been too late. The poison bottle had stood there, empty.

Doctor Field is an old man now. I found him the other day in Enid, sitting in the room of the leading undertaker, W. H. Ryan. He remembered the incident clearly. So did Mr. Ryan. Mr. Ryan was an undertaker's assistant then, working for W. B. Penniman, the furniture man, at fifty-five dollars a month. Since then he has become wealthy and one of the city's leading business men. He has been mayor. Mr. Ryan remembered that he went for the body of the old man who had poisoned himself in the Grand Avenue Hotel and took it to a back room in the furniture store. They have remembered that day and its happenings.

The local newspapers told the story; a well-dressed man had killed himself with poison in the Grand Avenue Hotel; his name was David E. George. Mrs. Ida Harper heard the news.

"While I was fixing up the body," Mr. Ryan told me, "the Reverend Mr. Har-

per came into the room and looked at the corpse.

"He gave sort of a cry and then he said to me, 'Do you know who that is?' I said, 'Why, his name is George.' 'No, sir, it isn't,' said the Reverend Mr. Harper. 'You are embalming the body of John Wilkes Booth—the man who killed Abraham Lincoln.' And then he told me the story that George had told Mrs. Harper. Of course I took special pains with the body after that; I did the best job of embalming I've ever done. If it was Booth's body, I wanted to preserve it for the Washington officials when they came. But they never came,' he added. 'At least, not so far as I ever knew.' "

The newspapers printed Mrs. Harper's story and it reached Finis L. Bates in faraway Memphis—Bates who had known John St. Helen and had been floundering for twenty-five years with his unsolvable puzzle. Bates hurried to Enid. The town was in excitement. There was talk of burning the body if Mrs. Harper's story proved true; a pyre in the town square was suggested. Penniman, the furniture man who was also the undertaker, didn't want trouble. He knew that Bates was coming from Memphis to look at the body and he met the visitor at the train and advised him to keep silent.

"Don't let folks know who you are," he said. "If you identify that body as Booth's and the public hears about it, we'll have trouble."

It was two o'clock in the morning when Finis L. Bates was escorted into the rear room of the furniture store. Twenty-five years had passed since he had seen John St. Helen.

"My old friend! My old friend St. Helen!" Bates said, and then began to weep.

"I was watching his face," Mr. Penniman told me. "I've seen hundreds of identifications in my time and Bates' identification was genuine. He was sure that George was St. Helen."

Mr. Ryan, too, remembers the identification. Mr. Ryan does not believe that David E. George was John Wilkes Booth.

"Bates didn't persuade me that night that it was John Wilkes Booth's body. I never have thought it was. Booth had black eyes, they say. Well, a hundred times in that back room I went to the corpse and raised the lids and looked at those eyes and they were dark blue. I pointed out the blue eyes to my friends. I've always said the eyes were blue; and Booth's eyes were black."

Excitement came thick and fast in Enid that January twenty-one years ago. When Bates' story became public knowledge there was no doubt in the public mind that here was the corpse of John Wilkes Booth. Men, women, and children thronged by the thousands to look at the body in the rear of the furniture store. Newspaper reporters *proved* in ingenious ways that the body was Booth's; the editors of both local newspapers said they believed that George was Booth. Newspapers in St. Louis and Kansas City carried stories to this effect, sent to them by the Enid correspondents. All comers were permitted to see the corpse. Any visitor could get his name into the paper by merely saying, "Why, I once saw Booth on the stage, and this man looks like Booth." The Booth they might have seen could not have been more than twenty-five years old; this old man had reached the sixties; but no one doubted such identifications.

"That back room was a queer place," Mr. Ryan told me. "Almost every day some visitor would find something new, and some new story would go out." It was in the midst of this atmosphere of excitement and rumor that Bates was trying to solve his life problem. For more than a quarter of a century he had been puzzling over John St. Helen's story; and now he was sure he had found St. Helen dead. He went about hearing the stories of all those who had known George. He was a lawyer and took depositions; people gave oath to the stories he wanted to put down. It was

these depositions that form the backbone of Bates' legend of Enid.

Bates carried into the back room the photograph which he had taken from under the pillow of John St. Helen. A number of people insisted that it was a picture of the dead man, though the dead man was in the sixties and the man of the photograph in the thirties.

There was no funeral, no burial. Penniman the undertaker could not see his way clear to put the body away if it was that of John Wilkes Booth—the government officials might want it. And there was still a standing reward (unpaid by the government, he was told) for the assassin of Lincoln. None of the local officials wanted to take the responsibility of insisting on burial; the government men might come some day and claim the body.

Days, weeks, months passed, and then the years went by. Enid became accustomed to having the mummy on display in the rear room of the furniture store; it was one of the sights of Enid. Townfolks brought visitors into the store and said, "We'd like to see the body of John Wilkes Booth." "Go right on back," the proprietor or a clerk would say.

No one claimed the body. So Finis L. Bates, with the permission of W. B. Penniman, the undertaker—who had been appointed administrator of the old man's effects and affairs—took the body back to his home in Memphis.

"There was a mystery about the old man, all right," the undertaker, W. B. Penniman, told me in his present home in Columbus, Ohio, a few days before I sat down to write this strange tale. "We handled hundreds of bodies taken from all sorts of places in those days; from haystacks and box cars, from fields and roads and hotel rooms. We never found a body that wasn't identified and claimed in due time and buried at the expense of relatives or friends—except one: that was the body of poor old George."

And there you have the Enid legend of John Wilkes Booth. To prove it or disprove it had been my task.

Two pennies were in the old man's pockets when he died, and that was all, except a note. It was dated the day he died; it knocked into a cocked hat whatever financial hopes may have been entertained by Jack Bernstein, the saloon keeper, and the men who were in the gruesome gathering at the bedside of the old man that day in his hotel room. It read:

"I am informed that I made a will a few days ago and I am indistinct of having done it. I hereby recall every letter, syllable, and word of that will that I may have signed at Enid. I owe Jack Bernstein about ten dollars, but he has my watch in pawn for that amount. D. E. George."

What he left belonged to Anna K. Smith, one of the ladies who had been kind to him the time he had tried to settle down peacefully in the little house in El Reno. But what he left was nothing.

No one had claimed the effects of David E. George. Mr. Penniman, the undertaker, had taken charge of the few papers which were found in his room—so an old-time clerk in the office of the probate court at Enid told me. And so I went to the home of Mr. Penniman in Columbus, Ohio. From the basement he brought a musty old grip full of papers.

"I haven't looked at them for years," he told me.

Among them we found a canceled check. That check brought me to the end of *my* trail. There it had lain for years, unseen by Bates and unexamined by any of the leading believers and supporters of the Enid legend. It was in the handwriting of David E. George. It was the check for three hundred and fifty dollars he had made in payment for the little house in El Reno.

Within two days I held that check in my hand in an attic room in the War Department in Washington where are stored the dusty relics, archives, and exhibits in the case of John Wilkes Booth.

With permission of the War Department and in the presence of two guards, I had access to all the documents in the Booth case. In the other hand I held a little book, covered with red leather and lined with decaying silk—the diary of John Wilkes Booth, found on the body taken from the Garrett corncrib. It is such an important historical document that it is not kept with the rest of the papers but has special protection in a safe. In one of the pockets of the book were the photographs, carried by Booth through his flight, of four exquisitely beautiful women.

Putting the check and the diary side by side, I had my proof. Different hands wrote that check and that diary. One was the hand of a man who wrote laboriously; a man so unaccustomed to check-writing that he spelled out the number of his check, "One," instead of using the numeral, as if this were the first check he had ever made out in all his long life. The other was the hand of John Wilkes Booth. That afternoon in the War Department attic in Washington I ended, to my own satisfaction, the Enid legend. George was not John Wilkes Booth.

No mystery remains in my mind about the end of John Wilkes Booth. The signature on David E. George's check backs up evidence from another source which might perhaps be disputed, but now need not be. There is in the Booth family plot in a cemetery in Baltimore, an unmarked grave. In that grave, four years after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, was placed a body which had been turned over to Edwin Booth and the Booth family by the government at Washington on the order of President Andrew Johnson. The rough casket bore the name of John Wilkes Booth.

In that casket, according to contemporary accounts, was the body of a man dressed in the uniform of a Confederate soldier. It is said that a member of the Booth family identified it as that of John Wilkes Booth. On one foot, when the casket was opened at the time of the transfer, was found a riding boot. On the other foot was a soldier's heavy brogan. It had been slashed with a knife across the instep to ease a broken foot.

John St. Helen's messenger who, St. Helen said, was killed instead of Booth, would not have been lame as Booth was with a broken bone. John St. Helen's messenger, "Ruddy," who he said had been sent away by Booth to buy a pair of shoes for the fugitive, brought no shoes to the Garrett place. No new shoes were found there, but a crutch was found in the barn—the crutch on which Booth had hobbled away from the home of Doctor Mudd, who had dressed his broken shin.

The evidence against the Enid legend is overwhelming. But what a strange story it is! And into what times and places its trail leads! If John St. Helen and David E. George were one and the same man, what kind of man was he? The very name "John St. Helen," was one that John Wilkes Booth, with his delusions of grandeur, might have chosen. This man told a story which fitted so plausibly into the true and inner account of the movements and experiences of the assassin of Abraham Lincoln that, to this day, it throws into high relief the very elements of the official records which are mysterious and unprovable.

To my mind there is little wonder that Finis L. Bates, with the facts at his disposal, believed in the story of John St. Helen; there is little wonder that there are still those who, being only half-informed, still credit the strange Enid legend of John Wilkes Booth.