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"The Mad Booths" and Lincoln's Fate

Psychotic Background Against Which the Actor Family Played Its Part

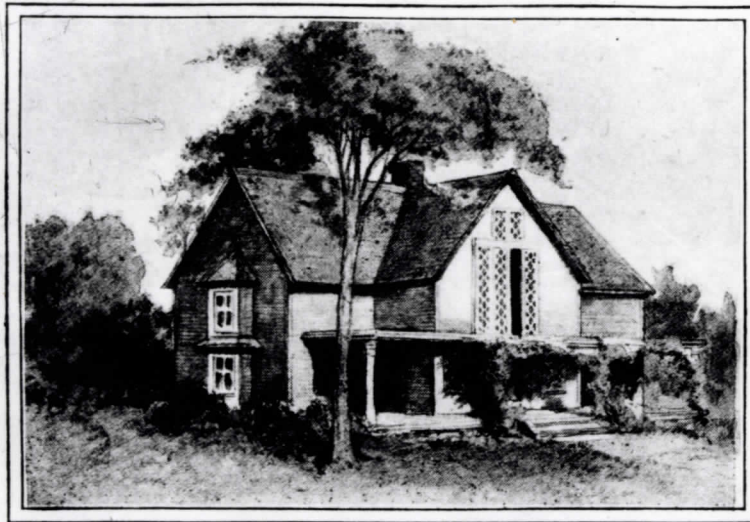
By F. L. BLACK

THERE lived in "the fabulous forties" about twenty miles from Baltimore at the family home, Belair, a "good-hearted, harmless, though wild-brained boy; a rattlepated fellow, filled with quixotic notions" who "would charge on horseback through the woods on the Maryland farm, spouting heroic speeches, with a lance in his hand, a relic of the Mexican War."¹ To his father, who died when he was thirteen, he was "the well beloved, bright boy Absalom."² He was his mother's darling,³ and his love for her is attested by his devotion to her during the years that followed, although it cannot be said that he was obedient or that she had much influence over him. To this boy, John Wilkes Booth, the father had bequeathed a psychotic personality more dominated by phantasy than by that conscious voluntary effort which our modern psychologists call the reality motive.

On the paternal side John Wilkes Booth was related to that profligate demagog of the reign of George III, John Wilkes, for whom he was named, and who, "while seven administrations were raised to power and hurled from it in consequence of court intrigue or of changes in the sentiments of the higher classes of society, retained his hold on the affections of a rabble whom he pillaged and ridiculed."⁴

Junius Brutus Booth, the father, a brilliant figure in the annals of the American stage, was afflicted with such great eccentricities of character that his actions in many instances can be classed only as paranoiac. Born in London in 1796 partly of Jewish descent⁵ he early decided against the law, his father's profession, tried painting, printing, poetry, sculpture and the navy, then the stage and in 1813 became a member of a strolling company of players with which he toured the continent.⁶ It was during this time that "by a boyish misalliance, contracted in Brussels in the year 1814, there was one son."⁷ Returning to London in 1817, he successfully played in Shakespearean rôles. Edmund Kean was the great tragic actor of the period in England and "as 'two stars keep not their motion in one sphere,' and London could not brook the double reign of Edmund Kean and Junius Brutus Booth, the latter, after a short but brilliant contest, left the field,"⁸ and first visiting France and the Island of Madeira came to America in

1821 with his young wife, Mary Anne Holmes, whom he had married on January 18, 1821.⁹ There has been some question as to whether he legally married Mary Anne Holmes. Hornblow says that he was divorced from the Brussels wife. Asia Booth Clarke, in "Passages, Incidents, and Anecdotes in the Life of Junius Brutus Booth (the Elder)," pp. 64-65, states that on January 18, 1821, her father married Mary Anne Holmes, at the residence of the Honorable Mrs. Chambers, and that this lady, who had always manifested a great interest in her father's career, presented his wife on her wedding day with those well-known jewels which decorated the crown worn in his char-



The Booth home near Belair, as it looked in 1865.

acterization of Richard III. Arthur Hornblow, in "A History of the Theater in America," Vol. I, p. 322, claims that Mary Anne Holmes was "an actress and one of the most beautiful women of her day." George Alfred Townsend, in the *New York Herald*, May, 1865,¹⁰ states that "he (Junius Brutus Booth) threw off the wife of his bosom to fly from England with a flower girl, and, settling in Baltimore, dwelt with his younger companion, and brought up many children, while his first companion went down to a drunken and broken hearted death." (George Alfred Townsend repeats this story in his play, "Katy of Catoctin.")

This erratic stage genius soon became a commanding figure in American theatricals notwithstanding the fact that he was mentally unbalanced, which was evidenced by his maniacal excitement under stress conditions and his many deviations from the normal course. It was said of him by his daughter with regard to his mental

impairment that his "aberrations of mind" could be traced back to his youth but that they "seemed to increase in strength and frequency with maturer years." The children were taught by their mother to regard "these periodical tortures of mind with sad and reverent forbearance."¹¹ J. E. Murdock, an actor who played with the elder Booth, describes him as subject to a morbid tendency of feelings which gave rise to wild and defiant moods, and led him, at times, to things at variance with the conventionalities of society.¹² But that when the "cloud" passed and his true nature asserted itself, he was capable of winning the love of many and the esteem of all. Many of those who played with him were both fascinated and frightened

by the fury, the intensity, and the vividness with which he depicted the intricate characters whose rôles he portrayed. In his "paroxysms of delirious art" a stage fight became real and the opponent often was compelled to struggle for his life. Murdock,¹³ describing his actions in a scene they had together, says, "I turned, and there, with the pistol held to my head, stood Booth, glaring like an infuriated demon. Then for the first time I comprehended the reality of acting. The fury of that passion-flamed face and the magnetism of the rigid clutch upon my

arm paralyzed my muscles, while the scintillating gleam of the terrible eyes, like the green and red flashes of an enraged serpent, fascinated and fixed me spellbound to the spot."

At another time, in a rehearsal of Othello in his hotel room, Junius Brutus Booth became so vehement that his

¹Letter, Edwin Booth to Nahum Capen, July 28, 1881, "Recollections of Edwin Booth," by his daughter, Edwina Booth Grossman. N. Y. Century Co., p. 227.

²"Recollections of Edwin Booth."

³"Recollections," p. 227.

⁴"History of England," by Thomas Babington Macaulay, Vol. 1, p. 565. Porter & Coates, Philadelphia.

⁵"A History of the Theater in America," by Arthur Hornblow. J. B. Lippincott Company, 1919, Vol. 1, p. 320. "Passages, etc.," pp. 125 and 180. "Recollections of an Alienist," Allen McLane Hamilton, p. 348. G. A. T. story.

⁶"Wallet of Time," p. 84 and "Passages, etc.," p. 17.

⁷"Passages, Incidents, and Anecdotes in the Life of Junius Brutus Booth (the Elder)," by his daughter, Asia Booth Clarke, Carleton, New York, 1866.

⁸Murdock—"The Stage," p. 174.

⁹"The Wallet of Time," by William Winter. Moffat, Yard & Co., New York, 1913, p. 87. Also Asia Booth Clarke's "Passages, etc."

¹⁰Clipping Lincoln Scrap Book, Lincolniana Department, Congressional Library, Washington, D. C., pp. 54-56.

¹¹"Passages," p. 114.

¹²"The Stage or Recollections of Actors and Acting," by James E. Murdock; J. M. Stoddard and Company, Philadelphia, 1880, p. 180.

¹³"Stage or Recollections, etc.," p. 183.

roommate in self-defense struck him across the face with a fire poker, breaking his nose and marring his countenance.¹⁴

The elder Booth was a strict vegetarian, believing that it was wrong to kill animals for food. This belief was expressed in his disordered mental content in an odd fashion while playing in a mid-western city in January, 1834. He wrote to a local minister for information as to a burial place for a dead friend. Imagine the good dominie's surprise when, calling at Booth's hotel room, he was conducted by the great tragedian to an adjoining room to view the remains and was shown "about a bushel of wild pigeons" spread out on a large sheet. "Booth," said the pastor, "knelt down by the side of the birds, and with every evidence of sincere affliction began to mourn over them. He took them up in his hands tenderly and pressed them to his heart." Booth purchased a lot in a cemetery, had a coffin made, procured a hearse and buried the pigeons with himself as chief mourner.¹⁵

A week after the pigeon incident, Booth becoming more deranged, failed to appear at the theater one evening and could not be found. The next morning he was located, wandering through the snow in the woods some distance from the city.¹⁶

Three years later in New York City he was to be in a benefit performance but did not appear and was found this time at a fire helping to run the fire engine.

His great suggestibility is shown by an incident which happened on one of his theatrical tours. When the boat on which he was passenger neared a point where William Conway, an actor, had committed suicide by jumping into the ocean, Booth, saying he had a message for the unfortunate Conway, leaped from the boat. He was rescued from drowning with difficulty. After he was pulled into the rescuing boat, it is reported that his first words were, "I say, Tom, look out, you're a heavy man, be steady—if the boat upsets we'll all be drowned."¹⁷ Finally, growing tired of all social contact, he expressed a desire to retire from the stage and become a lighthouse keeper, where he felt he would have peace and quiet, but this ambition he never carried to execution.¹⁸

With all his mental aberrations the "American Garrick," as the Elder Booth was called, had the most essential requisite for a tremendously successful stage career—He could carry an audience with him.

They forgot him, the stage, all except the character he portrayed. So vivid was his recitation of the "Ancient Mariner" that his "magic tones and glittering eye" transported his listeners to the terrible scene where "they saw the shining sea, and the slimy things which crawled upon its surface; they felt their tongues withered and their throats parched with a burning drought; they heard the four times fifty men as, one by one, each fell a lifeless lump upon the rotting deck; and they read the horrible curse in the dead men's stony eyes."

To the second matrimonial venture of this mad genius, who died November 30, 1852, on a Mississippi River steamboat while returning home from an engagement in New Orleans, were born ten children, five of whom were living at the opening of the Civil War. Junius Brutus, Jr.,¹⁹ who became an actor but never attained fame; Rosalie, Edwin, possibly one of the greatest tragedians the American stage has produced and whom the father had wanted to become a cabinet-maker;²⁰ Asia, who in 1859 became the wife of the comedian, John Sleeper Clarke; Joseph,²¹ the youngest son, who tried the stage but failed; and the "ill-starred" John Wilkes, born in 1838, who inherited his father's fiery temperament, his great suggestibility, his psychopathic personality, and much of his ability but not his enterprise. The foundation of his inability for social adjustment was hereditarily imbedded to such an extent in his personality that he was predisposed to mental derangement when the stress should become sufficient.

One of our great alienists, who had seen him on the stage, says of him:²² "As a boy Wilkes Booth showed many evidences of instability, and was subject to moods and fits of melancholy, as well as morbid suspicions and moroseness. He was wayward, something of a vagabond, and at one time ran away from home and joined the pirate

oystermen in the Chesapeake Bay. At other times he was winning, gentle, and entirely lovable."

According to another biographer,²³ John Wilkes was sent to a better school

than the other brothers had enjoyed, but, detesting the confined life of the schoolroom and loving the open air, spent his time fishing and hunting, where he gained the admiration of his associates by his "fine nerve and certain eye." He learned to ride while quite young and became an accomplished and graceful horseman. He was proud of his skillful fencing and was quite dexterous in the handling of small arms.

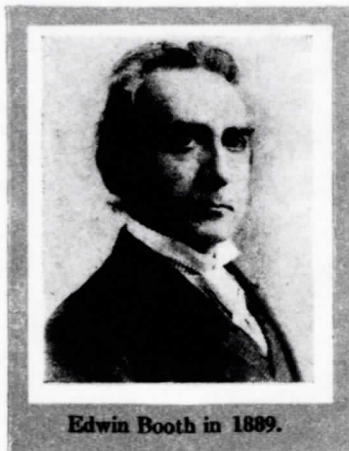
To what extent association with the father intensified and extended the congenitally paranoic tendency of the son cannot precisely be determined; our knowledge of their relations is indefinite. But it can hardly be doubted that, in the formation of John Wilkes' character, the elder Booth was a condition as well as a cause. Whether the son displayed psychotic tendencies in childhood is not a matter of authentic record. After his death numerous extravagantly written newspaper stories gave some sordid details of his life that may or may not be true.

During the last ten years of his life, 1842-1852, the father remained much at home.²⁴ This was during the most impressionable period of the son's life, and the years of fullest development of the elder Booth's emotional impairment, so that the father whom John Wilkes knew best was "a madman, the wreck of a splendid genius." It was quite natural that the stage should attract him while still young, as it had his older brothers, but his first efforts were dismal failures due principally to his aversion to making the necessary exertion to learn his lines. Finally after playing in "utility" parts in Philadelphia, as John Wilkes, and being hissed off the stage, he decided to try his luck farther South. Undoubtedly the shattering of his "gossamer hopes and high conceits" in the North and his later achievements in the South had greater influence in molding his passionate sympathies for the southern cause than had the arguments he advanced to justify his ardor for its success. At the age of 23 he secured an

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Junius Brutus Booth, the father of Edwin and John Wilkes.



Edwin Booth in 1839.

¹⁴"Players of a Century," by H. P. Phelps; also "Passages, etc.," p. 133.

¹⁵"Passages, Incidents, etc.," by his daughter, pp. 115-125.

¹⁶"Passages, Incidents, etc.," p. 130.

¹⁷"Incidents," p. 131.

¹⁸"Incidents," p. 75.

¹⁹Died Sept. 15, 1883—"Life of Edwin Booth," by William Winter, p. 10.

²⁰"Recollections of Edwin Booth," by Edwina Booth Grossman, p. 10.

²¹"The Sole Survivor in 1893," Ibed; "Life of Edwin Booth," by William Winter, p. 10.

²²"Recollections of an Alienist," by Allan McLane Hamilton, M.D., LL.D., F.R.S., George H. Doran Company, 1916, pp. 346-347.

²³George Alfred Townsend's New York World story written in May after Lincoln's assassination.

²⁴"Passages, etc.," p. 133.

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engagement at Richmond where, having parts more to his taste and playing them better, he won a fair amount of applause during two seasons. It is interesting that Junius Brutus Booth, the father, made his first American appearance in Richmond in 1821.²⁵ It was soon after this that Allan McLane Hamilton²⁶ saw him and described him as a handsome, dashing man with a magnificent head and features of the classic mold, a great deal of a Lothario, pursued by women wherever he went. Ben Perley Poore, a Washington newspaperman of the period, says that John Wilkes Booth had, "added to his native genius, the advantage of a voice musically full and rich; a face almost classic in outline; features highly intellectual; a piercing, black eye, capable of expressing the fiercest and the tenderest passion and emotion, and a commanding figure and impressive stage address.

"In his transitions from the quiet and reflective passages of a part to fierce and violent outbreaks of passion, his sudden and impetuous manner had in it something of that electrical force and power which made the elder Booth so celebrated, and called up afresh to the memory of men of the preceding generation the presence, voice, and manner of the father. Convivial in his habits, sprightly and genial in conversation, John Wilkes Booth made many friends among the young men of his own age, and he was a favorite among the ladies at the National Hotel, where he boarded."²⁷

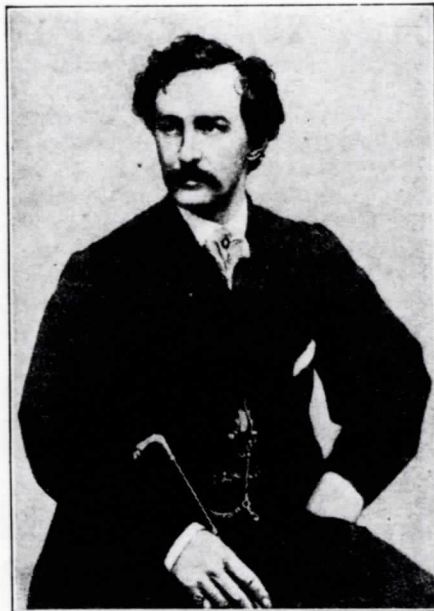
George Alfred Townsend denies that John Wilkes Booth frequently cut his stage adversaries in sheer wantonness or bloodthirstiness, as has been claimed. He says that this mistake is due to confusing John Wilkes with the father. There is no question, however, that his habits after reaching manhood were always extremely irregular and that his progress on the stage was greatly interfered with by excessive dissipations.

It was during the Richmond engagement that the John Brown raid occurred, and Booth, joining a company of Virginia volunteers, took part in the capture and execution of the doughty old Reformer. He was inordinately proud of his "little share in the transaction and deemed that he was doing his duty in helping his country to perform an act of justice."²⁸ It was impossible for him to understand how what had been considered a crime on the part of "poor John Brown" could later become a virtue, and he bitterly assailed the Republican party and the North for

what he deemed a greater traitorism than Brown had committed.²⁹

As a business man, John Wilkes Booth displayed considerable common sense, honesty, and ability. Amounts borrowed were always promptly returned, and although he spent money lavishly he "took note of his expenditures" and "kept his accounts with considerable regularity." It is said that his cashbook showed earnings of twenty-two thousand dollars during one season. Part of this he invested in Pennsylvania oil lands which proved quite profitable.

His initial star engagement was in "Richard III" at Montgomery, Alabama, where he first commendably played the part that his father loved so well. The tour that started with this success took him through many of the southern cities and ended in Boston where he "received special commendation for his enactment of Richard." He later appeared in this part in New York City but did not attain the success he ex-



John Wilkes Booth.

pected. It is said that his acting was "too energetic to be correct," that it was "excellent in strong physical parts which did not require delicate characterization, refined conception, or carefulness." Like his father he had a penchant for collecting and reciting poetry which had made an appeal to his fancy. While the tears flowed down his cheeks, he would recite with fine effect his favorite selection, "The Beautiful Snow."

In a memorable performance November 25, 1864, at the Winter Garden,

New York, the three brothers, Junius Brutus, Jr., Edwin, and John Wilkes, played together in Julius Caesar, Junius appearing as Cassius, Edwin as Brutus and John Wilkes as Mark Antony. The proceeds went to a fund used in the erection of the Shakespeare statue in the mall in Central Park.³⁰ The brothers were accorded quite an ovation from the crowded house as they stood "side by side before the curtain."³¹ This was the night of the Confederate attempt to burn the principal buildings in New York City. At 8:45 that evening Barnum's Museum was discovered to be on fire, a few minutes later several of the larger hotels, then warehouses and other buildings.³² News of the conflagration reached the Winter Garden and had not the audience been calmed by a reassuring speech from Edwin Booth, the play would have been finished before an empty house.³³

The letters of John Wilkes Booth and the reminiscences of those who knew him indicate that he would have joined the Confederacy had he not regretfully promised his mother that he would "keep out of the quarrel, if possible." The family, although from that part of Maryland, half southern and half northern in sympathy, was of unquestioned northern loyalty. Edwin Booth voted for Lincoln in 1864,³⁴ and had no patience with his brother's southern political leanings.

"It is evident that John Wilkes Booth was of the sensational type, with a will to strut and pose not held in check even under social pressure. His highly emotional nervous organization, inherited from the father, his tragic rôles, and his impulses and perceptions which had become perverted by his overwrought feelings, made him the easy victim of the suggestion to become the 'Brutus,'³⁵ in real life, that he had been seen on the boards."

Six weeks before the assassination of Abraham Lincoln he played at Ford's Theater in Washington, D. C., "his last mock part in this world," for "in this beautiful palace an outlaw had builded his fire, and slept, and plotted, and dreamed."

²⁵"Recollections of Edwin Booth," by Edwina Booth Grossman, p. 45.

²⁶"Recollections, etc.," p. 348.

²⁷"Perley's Reminiscences," Vol. II, p. 174.

²⁸George Alfred Townsend's story.

²⁹Letter left in November, 1864, by John Wilkes Booth with J. S. Clarke, his brother-in-law—*New York Tribune*, April 20, 1865.

³⁰"Life of Edwin Booth," by William Winter, p. 34.

³¹"The Older and the Younger Booth," by Asia Booth Clarke, p. 159.

³²*New York Tribune*, November 26, 1864.

³³"Lincoln in the Telegraph Office," by David Homer Bates, pp. 306-307.

³⁴Letter of Edwin Booth in "Recollections," by his daughter, Edwina Booth Grossman, p. 227.

³⁵C. T. Pittman, p. 339.