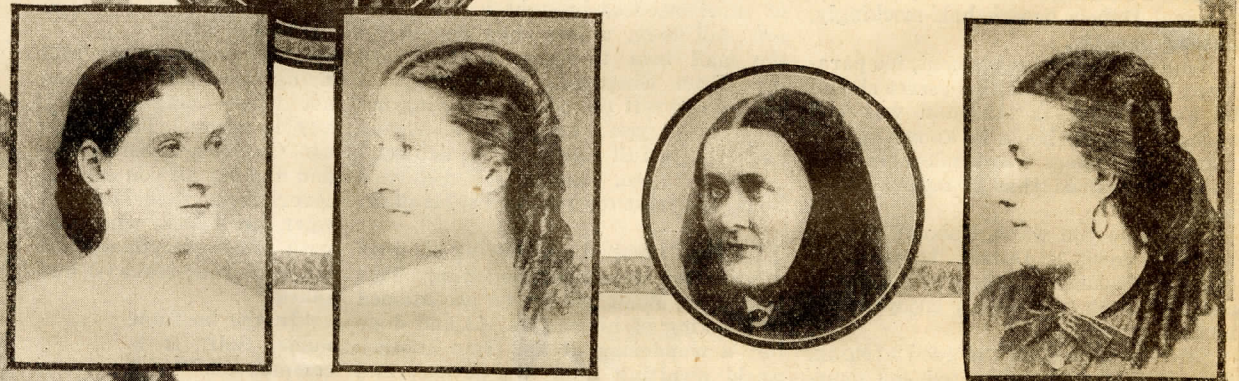


They tried to stop BOOTH

By WILLIAM G. SHEPHERD

Secret Service men, sixty years ago, took these photographs of beautiful women from the pocket of Booth, killed after assassinating Lincoln, and put them in War Department files. Now they've come to light.



Who remembers any of these faces among old-time actresses? Write Collier's

TWO guards stood over me in the dusty attic of the War Department in Washington last July as I fumbled through masses of yellowed documents, over sixty years old, which had to do with the plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln and with the part which John Wilkes Booth played in the assassination.

An ancient legend in the world of the stage, that John Wilkes Booth's mother had written him a letter shortly before the assassination, took me to that attic. This letter, it was said, showed that in her mother-mind she had a premonition that something was wrong with her son. It was this letter I was seeking.

I found it, with several other letters. These letters throw a new light on Booth's escapade; they show that Booth had to struggle against his mother and his best friends to commit his crime. His mother and some of his dearest friends had discovered that he had lost his old self. He had changed, and ominous fears in regard to him and his future filled their minds.

The letters, so far as records in the War Department go, have never before

been given to the public. They were not even used in the trial of the conspirators. They were found in John Wilkes Booth's room in the Barnum Hotel in Baltimore after Booth had been shot and killed at the Garrett farm in Virginia. Secret Service men of the army turned them over to the military authorities and, as they were not considered evidence in the trial of the conspirators, they were placed in the files where I found them after sixty years.

In a yellow envelope lies the yellowed letter from Booth's mother. A nervous hand opened that letter. The tear along the end is irregular. Half way down the edge there is a deep indentation, so that part of the letter, a thumbful along its side edge, is torn away. Not much of the reading is lost; only the figures showing the year in which the letter was written. The date is March 26th; it was on April 14th that the same hand that opened this letter took the life of Abraham Lincoln. From the contents it is safe to assume that the letter was written in 1865, about two weeks before Lincoln's assassination. It was sent from New York:

March 26, (here the letter is torn)
J. Wilkes Booth, Ford's Theatre,
Washington, D. C.
My Dear Boy:

I have got yours. I was very glad to hear from you. I hope you will write me often. I did part from you sadly, and I still feel sad, very much so. June has just left me. He staid as long as he could. I am now quite alone. Rose has not returned yet. I am miserable enough. I have never yet doubted your love and devotion to me; in fact, I always gave you praise for being the fondest of all my boys, but since you leave me to grief I must doubt it. I am no Roman mother. I love my dear ones before country or anything else. Heaven guard you, is my constant prayer.

Your Loving Mother,
M. A. BOOTH.

And well she might have prayed. Indeed, the only worry of her life was John Wilkes Booth. At the time she wrote this letter she was visiting her son Edwin at his home, 28 East 19th St., New York City. She was sixty-one years old. She had reared six children. Only five months before the catastrophe of her life she had passed through the gratifying experience of sitting in a box in the old Winter Garden Theatre in New York City and seeing three sons play in "Julius Cæsar," with Junius as "Cæsar," Edwin as "Brutus," and John Wilkes as "Marc Antony." Financially, she was more than content. Her husband, Junius Brutus Booth, had died thirteen years before and had left her an estate of 150 acres known as "Bel Air" in Hartford County, Maryland, near Baltimore, the family home where the children were reared.

But at the time she wrote this letter, with her son Junius absent, as she says, and "Rose," her spinster daughter, also away from her, there was nothing for her to worry about except the utter recklessness of her son John. He would not act. He would not remain at home. He traveled, it is believed, to Canada, where Southerners were spying on the North and plotting against Lincoln. Next he would be heard of in Washington, consorting with Southern sympathizers. There was danger for him, morally and otherwise, in almost every act of his life, and this unspeakably sad letter shows beyond any doubt that his mother, in all her surroundings of comfort, knew his plight, and had tried to save him.

Advice That Went Unheeded

FOR at least two months before the assassination of Lincoln, friends noted a strangeness about Booth's demeanor. Here is a letter written to him by a friend in the Pennsylvania oil country. Oil was new then, in America, and in the world. The industry was only beginning and fortunes were waiting for those who would build up the new enterprise. If Booth had answered the pleading of this friend, the history of America might have been considerably changed. The letter written two months before the assassination, runs:

Feb. 21, 1865
Franklin, Pennsylvania.

Dear John:

Your strange note of the 16th received. I hardly know what to make of you this winter, so different from your usual self. Have you lost all your ambition or what is the matter? Don't get offended with us, John, but I cannot but think that you are wasting your time spending the entire winter in Washington doing nothing, where it must be expensive to *(Continued on page 42)* live, and all for no other purpose beyond pleasure.

If you had taken 5 or 10 thousand dollars and come out here and spent the season living with us trailing off over the country hunting up property I believe we both could have made considerable money by it. It is not too late yet, for I believe the great rush for property is to be this spring, and if you are not going to act this season, come out here, John, where at least you can live prudently and where I really believe you can make money. Come immediately, John. We have plenty of room at our house now.

Yours, JOHN H. SIMONDS.

P. S. Let me hear from you soon and see you sooner. Ma is well and sends regards.

Seven weeks after receiving this letter Booth was "trailing off over the country," a fugitive in a man hunt that ended in his death.

There are more than a dozen letters from Simonds to Booth telling of oil enterprises.

While some of his friends were trying to help him, others were trying to lean on him. Twelve days before Booth assassinated Lincoln, this painful letter was received by him:

Baltimore, April 2, 1865.

Dear Friend John:

I have been so devilishly unfortunate as to be drafted the other day. I am very scarce of funds just at present (having been put to considerable expense by the death of my brother-in-law in Washington and the consequent necessities of his widow and children). I avail myself of old intimacy to ask if you will be willing to play "Richard" for my benefit at the Front Street Theatre on Saturday afternoon next provided I can get the theatre. I spoke to Kunkle last night and he will give me an answer to-morrow. Necessity only, John, induces me to make this request. Mary wishes particularly to be remembered. I trust you will favor me with an early reply and oblige, yours, as ever, in friendship,

J. H. YOUNG,
Sun office.

Young never went to the war, of course; Richmond was tottering even as he wrote. His troubles were as nothing to those of the young man of twenty-seven whose aid he was seeking.

Not only were Booth's friends worrying about his welfare, but his opportunities for work on the stage might have kept him busy and out of trouble.

A Christmas Day letter from McVicker, the theatrical producer of Chicago, was among Booth's possessions. It is addressed Dec. 25, 1864, from McVicker's Theatre, Chicago. It runs:

Friend Booth:

What do you say to filling time weekly with me, May 29th? I have not yet filled your time, in January, and see no chance of doing so with an attraction equal to yourself. [It would

appear that from this Booth had canceled an engagement for January with McVicker.] There are plenty of little fish but I don't want them if I can help it. So, if you can come then, come at the above date. With a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year,
Truly, McVICKER.

In Booth's pocket, as he lay dying on the porch of the Garrett farmhouse, a young army lieutenant found a little notebook. In this, Booth had scribbled notes of his experiences and sufferings during his twelve days of flight and hiding. And in this book were the photographs of five lovely women.

These photographs too were part of the unused evidence in the Booth conspiracy case. On the backs of the photographs, written in pencil, are dim and almost unreadable notes, showing the guesses of the Secret Service men as to the identity of these women.

And there is evidence that perhaps one of them knew that there was something wrong with the young actor. Here is a note that lies in the same packet with the letter by Booth's mother:

My Boy:—Please call this evening as soon as you get this note. I will not detain you five minutes, but, for God's sake, come!
Yours truly, E. S.

Washington, Feb., 1865.

P. S. If you will not come, write seriously.

Less than a month later, against all the pull of those who loved him most, he had committed one of the most grievous crimes in American history.