# RECOLLECTIONS OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH

## By Edward M. Alfriend

The difference in England between Charles Kean and Junius Brutus Booth drove the latter to America immediately after his marriage in 1821. He landed in Norfolk, Virginia, June 30 of that year, and six days later, in Richmond, made his first appearance on any American stage in "Richard III" at the Marshall Theatre, corner of Seventh and Broad streets, Richmond, always a great

JOHN WILKES BOOTH.
From a photograph taken from life.

friend of the dramatic profession and of the drama, received him with open arms, and gave him the recognition that insured his dramatic career in this country.

Junius Brutus Booth was the son of a successful London lawyer of republican principles, who in his youth had sailed for America to volunteer in Washington's army, but was captured and returned to England. In politics Junius Brutus was an English Radical, deeply sympathizing with all popular aspirations for advancement, revolutionary in many of his ideas, and there is little doubt that his son, John Wilkes, derived much of his own restless political spirit and mental radicalism from both father and grandfather. John Wilkes, indeed, all of Mr. Booth's sons, were born in Maryland, and educated in St. Mary's College in that State.

John Wilkes Booth was always an intense Southerner in all his feelings and thoughts, on all the questions that were dividing the North and South. I knew him well, and often heard him give expression to these Southern sympathies and convictions.

When the John Brown raid occurred in 1859, John Wilkes Booth was a member of the theatrical company then playing at the Richmond Theatre. He was playing under the name of John Wilkes. On the night that the First Virginia Regiment was ordered to Harper's Ferry and thence to Charlestown he left the theatre, procured a uniform and musket, joined the Richmond Grays, the company of which I was a member, and accompanied it to Harper's Ferry and Charlestown, and did duty as a private soldier until John Brown was executed, and then came back to Richmond with the command and returned to the theatre. The managers, Ford and Kunkel, discharged him for going to Harper's Ferry and Charlestown; and on this becoming known a large contingent of the First Virginia Regiment marched to the theatre and demanded that he be reinstated, which the managers did.

While at Charlestown the Richmond Grays occupied as their quarters an old tin-factory, and here John Wilkes Booth slept every night, when he was not doing duty as a sentinel, with Wirt Harrison, on a straw pallet which was laid next to my own. Nearly every night before taps

Booth would entertain us with dramatic recitations from different plays. He was very fond of reciting, which he did in such a fiery, intense, vigorous, brilliant way as to forecast that great genius he subsequently showed on the stage.

Edwin Booth once said to me: "John Wilkes had the genius of my father, and was far more gifted than I." Many old actors who saw him in his last years before his terrible and insane deed at Washington have told me that they never saw so great a performance as he gave of "Richard III" and other great parts. In Richmond, as I have said, he played under the name of John Wilkes, and never used his own name until his brother Edwin came to the city to play "Hamlet." He then played "Horatio" to his brother's "Hamlet," and his name was given in the bills as John Wilkes Booth. At the close of the play, when the usual call came for Edwin Booth, the curtain was run up and he came down the stage leading John Wilkes by the hand, pointed to him, and said, "I think he has done well. Don't you?" The response from the audience was cries of "Yes!" "Yes!" and thunders of applause.

When John Wilkes Booth was in the Richmond Stock Company he was very young. In his early twenties he weighed about one hundred and seventy-five pounds, was a little taller than his brother Edwin, possessed his marvelously intellectual and beautiful eyes, with great symmetry of feature, an especially fine forehead and curly black hair. He was as handsome as a Greek god. It is saying a great deal, but he was a much handsomer man than his brother Edwin. He possessed a voice very like his brother's, melodious, sweet, full and strong, and was like him, a consummate elocutionist. Until his brother came to Richmond and he played "Horatio" with him he was the second juvenile man of the theatre, and played small parts. I saw him in "Sir Benjamin Backbite," "Charles Courtley," "Glavis" in the "Lady of Lyons," and in similar small roles. His ability was unquestionable and his future assured. In Richmond, while connected with the theatre, he was a great social favorite, knowing all the best men and many of the finest women. This faculty of social success was hereditary, having been possessed by his father and also by his brother Edwin. With men John Wilkes was most dignified in demeanor, bearing himself with insouciant care and grace, and was a brilliant talker. With women he was a man of irresistible fascination by reason of his superbly handsome face, conversational brilliancy and a peculiar halo of romance with which he invested himself, and which the ardent imagination of women amplified.

He was a great admirer of those Greek and Roman characters that are deemed exponents of popular liberty and heroic patriotism. In this he went almost to radicalism. Of the "Brutuses" he was an especial admirer, and I shall never forget his recitation of "Brutus's" speech in "Julius Cæsar" in defence of his share in the assassination, and with what fervor he rolled out the line "My ancestor that did from the streets of Rome the Tarquin drive." He said to me, "Of all Shakespeare's characters I like 'Brutus' the best, excepting only 'Lear.'" There is no doubt that his study of and meditation upon those characters had much to do with shaping that mental condition which induced his murder of President Lincoln.

I was talking with Edwin Booth at "The Players" one day when I remarked to him, "Mr. Booth, there is an incident in the nation's history to which I would like to allude." He promptly comprehended and replied with flashing eye and a constriction of the lips, "You mean that affair at Washington. I could not approve what he did—but he was my brother!" The last words were uttered with intense emotion.

It is an interesting fact that Edwin Booth never desisted from his patient and quiet endeavor to recover the body of John Wilkes Booth until he delivered it through friends to his mother in Maryland; it is now buried in the family lot in that state. Of John Wilkes Booth's death there can be no doubt. John T. Ford, the Baltimore theatrical manager, and Charles B. Bishop, the comedian, both told me that they witnessed for Edwin Booth the exhuming of the body,

identified it and sent it to his mother. This should set at rest the persistent rumor that he is still alive.

As to the dramatic genius of John Wilkes Booth, I can write with professional authority. It was of the highest order, and had he lived his fame and success would have equaled his father's. The father I never saw, but nearly every great actor from Edwin Forrest down to the present day I have seen and known, and excepting Forrest and that brilliant erratic genius, Edwin Adams, John Wilkes Booth's genius exceeded them all. As I have written, he was a great admirer of "King Lear." I don't think his genius would have ever made his rendition of the part equal to Forrest's but he was an unequaled "Richard III," and would have made the greatest "Iago," "Hamlet," "Cassius," "Othello," "Macbeth," "Coriolanus" and "Charles de Moor" and similar parts. In plays like "The Taming of the Shrew" he had achieved distinction before he died. He acted with a brilliant dash and sweep that was irresistible. To women in such parts he was an imperious fascination. They idolized him. "King Lear" and his genius were not quite in harmony. He did not have the large physical proportions essential to a performance of the sublimest of Shakespeare's characters. Edwin Forrest did, and was the greatest "King Lear" the stage has ever seen. Once in Philadelphia when going over with Mr. Forrest his 1623 (First Folio) edition of Shakespeare, I expressed to him my admiration of his "King Lear." Forrest's eyes flashed, and he said in reply, "Sir, I act 'Hamlet,' but by G— I am 'Lear!'"

It is lamentable that through the insanity which led to that dark deed in Washington the genius of John Wilkes Booth was lost to the American stage. His star went out in the darkest night, and through a deed that cost the stricken South its best friend in the North, Abraham Lincoln. He alone could have stood at the end of the war between the North and the South, the Great Pacificator, and the bullet of John Wilkes Booth robbed the South of his genius, his influence, his noble and kindly heart. I believe that if the truth could be known, John Wilkes Booth, in his insanity, lost his identity in the delirious fancy that he was enacting the role of "Brutus," and that Lincoln was his "Julius Cæsar."

## Parnassus

I lift mine eyes and let my vision climb
The triple peaks whereon the old gods' spell
Outlives the idol-breakers. Then I tell
Legends of eld, and quote from many a rhyme
Wherein is breathed the spirit of old time.
Bacchus was worshipped there, and there, as well,
Sounded the Oracle of Delphi's knell,
And there was seen Apollo's face sublime.

How it subdues a modern's mind and will
To dream beneath the same blue, Grecian skies
That arched the Muses! How one seems to see
Their hands bestowing genius, talent, skill!
And how one yearns with wide, despairing eyes,
And cries, forgotten, "Have ye naught for me?"

—S. Decatur Smith, Jr.

The Era

Oct 1901