

New Version of Lincoln's Murder

A NEW version of the assassination of President Lincoln by Wilkes Booth in Ford's theater in Washington—new, at least, in the contradiction of some of the generally accepted details of that great American tragedy—has just appeared. Among the things accepted and vouched for by historians and incorporated in plays, movies and books that have been compiled with painstaking care for small, but dramatic details, which are pushed aside by this new version are the statements that Laura Keene was on the stage at the time of the shooting, and that Booth after the murder defiantly faced the audience and shouted "Sic semper tyrannis," before he hobbled off the stage.

And to give the new version verisimilitude, its author declares that he and he alone was the only actual eye-witness of the slaying of the Great Emancipator.

W. J. Ferguson, the veteran actor, now 77 years old, who was a call boy at Ford's theater when Lincoln was killed, gave his story of the killing recently in an address at the Green Room club, New York, at a reception tendered him by that organization of players. It was, he said, the first time he had ever publicly discussed the details of the event in the years that have followed. This, it was explained, was due to the innate retiring disposition of the aged actor and desire not to enter into any controversy with historians and others.

Some time ago, when David W. Griffith produced "The Birth of a Nation," he spent months searching records and historical data to make his production of the shooting in the theater correct in every minute detail. The result showed the second scene of the third act of "Our American Cousin" going on, with Miss Keene on the stage, when Booth slipped into the presidential box, used, and then, shaking his fist at the audience, leaped onto the stage. He then—and, according to Mr. Griffith, all accounts

coincided—turned to the auditorium and shouted out his rasping "Sic semper tyrannis!"

"I honestly think I was the only actual eye witness to the murder of President Lincoln," said Mr. Ferguson. "At the time I was a call boy at Ford's theater and frequently I was called upon to play small parts for visiting companies. On this evening one of the actors of the company failed to report at the theater and I was told I would have to do a small scene with Miss Keene. It was only a few lines and I was nervous and excited at the prospect of appearing on the stage with the great Laura Keene. It was not until just before the murder that I noticed that President Lincoln was in his private box.

"The scene had just begun, and I was standing in my place on the prompt side. There was no one else backstage, as the players were in the greenroom, where they remained until I called them for their cues. Miss Keene had come out to talk to me and explain a bit of 'business' we were to go through later. I was paying more attention to her than anything else when I noticed a sudden commotion in the presidential box.

"There was a sudden hush, then I saw Booth spring to the rail of the box, poise there a second and then leap onto the stage. He landed on his left knee, rested a fraction of a second and then quickly stumbled toward the entrance where Miss Keene and I were standing. He lurched past us, brushing us to one side. The bowie knife he held pressed against my side as he passed and I could feel his hot breath on my cheek. I know I was terror stricken. As I recall it now my mental processes apparently had stopped. In a dim way I knew that some one had been shot and that some one was President Lincoln. But I was powerless to move until Booth had passed me and had reached the side wall. I could see him stumble along this, holding himself up with one hand as he lurched along. When he reached the rear wall he turned and, still holding himself erect with one hand pressed against the wall,

made for a small door which opened onto a dingy back street. I saw him kick the boy that was holding his horse and then he made off into the night.

"How long Booth was in the little back hall back of the box I do not know. He made his entrance from the 'front' of the house and not from the stage, as many have said. There was no way in which to reach the Presidential box from the stage. The only door to the little hallway was from the theater proper. Then in the halfway was another door which led directly to the box. Booth was in the hall long enough to work a stick into the plaster on the wall and use it as a wedge to keep the door shut. Also there was a gimlet hole in the door, which showed he had looked in on the Presidential party before opening the door and firing the fatal shot. Whether this had been made before or on that night I do not know.

"It was after Booth had made his way to the street and rode away into the night that I, as call boy, gave the signal that rang down the curtain on Ford's theater and upon one of the greatest of American tragedies."