

SOME RECOLLECTIONS OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH.

BY CLARA MORRIS.



IN glancing back over two crowded and busy seasons, one figure stands out with clearness and beauty. In his case only (so far as my personal knowledge goes), there was nothing derogatory to dignity or to manhood in being called beautiful, for he was that bud of splendid promise blasted to the core, before its full triumphant blooming—known to the world as a madman and an assassin, but to the profession as “that unhappy boy”—John Wilkes Booth.

He was so young, so bright, so gay—so kind. I could not have known him well; of course, too—there are two or three different people in every man’s skin; yet when we remember that stars are not generally in the habit of showing their brightest, their best side to the company at rehearsal, we cannot help feeling both respect and liking for the one who does.

There are not many men who can receive a gash over the eye in a scene at night, without at least a momentary outburst of temper; but when the combat between Richard and Richmond was being rehearsed, Mr. Booth had again and again urged Mr. McCollom (that six-foot tall and handsome leading-man, who entrusted me with the care of his watch during such encounters) to come on hard! to come on hot! hot, old fellow! harder—faster! He’d take the chance of a blow—if only they could make a hot fight of it!

And Mr. McCollom, who was a cold man, at night became nervous in his effort to act like a fiery one—he forgot he had struck the full number of head blows, and when Booth was pantingly expecting a thrust, McCollom, wielding his sword with both hands, brought it down with awful force fair across Booth’s forehead; a cry of horror rose, for in one moment his face was masked in blood, one eyebrow was cleanly cut through—there came simultaneously one deep groan from Richard and the exclamation: “Oh, good God! good God!” from Richmond, who stood shaking like a leaf and staring at his work. Then Booth, flinging the blood from his eyes

with his left hand, said as genially as man could speak: “That’s all right, old man! never mind me—only come on hard, for God’s sake, and save the fight!”

Which he resumed at once, and though he was perceptibly weakened, it required the sharp order of Mr. Ellsler, to “ring the first curtain bell,” to force him to bring the fight to a close, a single blow shorter than usual. Then there was a running to and fro, with ice and vinegar-paper and raw steak and raw oysters. When the doctor had placed a few stitches where they were most required, he laughingly declared there was provision enough in the room to start a restaurant. Mr. McCollom came to try to apologize—to explain, but Booth would have none of it; he held out his hand, crying: “Why, old fellow, you look as if *you* had lost the blood. Don’t worry—now if my eye had gone, that *would* have been bad!” and so with light words he tried to set the unfortunate man at ease, and though he must have suffered much mortification as well as pain from the eye—that in spite of all endeavors would blacken—he never made a sign.

He was, like his great elder brother, rather lacking in height, but his head and throat, and the manner of their rising from his shoulders, were truly beautiful. His coloring was unusual—the ivory pallor of his skin, the inky blackness of his densely thick hair, the heavy lids of his glowing eyes were all Oriental, and they gave a touch of mystery to his face when it fell into gravity—but there was generally a flash of white teeth behind his silky moustache, and a laugh in his eyes.

One thing I shall never cease to admire him for. When a man has placed a clean and honest name in his wife’s care for life, about the most stupidly wicked use she can make of it is as a signature to a burst of amatory flattery addressed to an unknown actor—who will despise her for her trouble. Some women may shrivel as though attacked with “peach-leaf curl,” when they hear how these silly letters are sometimes passed about and laughed at. “No gentleman would so betray a confidence!” Of course not; but once, when I made that remark to an actor, who was then flaunting the food his vanity fed

upon, he roughly answered: "And no *lady* would so address an unknown man—she cast away her right to respectful consideration when she thrust that letter in the box." That was brutal; but there are those who think like him this very day, and oh, foolish tamperers with fire—who act like him!

Now it is scarcely exaggeration to say the sex was in love with John Booth—the name Wilkes being apparently unknown to his family and close friends. At depot restaurants those fiercely unwilling maiden slammers of the plates and shooters of coffee cups made to him swift and gentle offerings of hot steaks, hot biscuits, hot coffee—crowding about him like doves about a grain basket, leaving other travelers to wait upon themselves or go without refreshment. At the hotels maids had been known to enter his room and tear asunder the already-made-up bed, that the "turn-over" might be broader by a thread or two, and both pillows slant at the perfectly correct angle. At the theater—good heaven! as the sunflowers turn upon their stalks to follow the beloved sun, so, old or young—our faces smiling—turned to him. Yes, old or young; for the little daughter of the manager, who played but the Duke of York in "Richard III," came to the theater each day, each night of the engagement, arrayed in her best gowns, and turned on him fervid eyes that might well have served for Juliet. The manager's wife, whose sternly aggressive virtue no one could doubt or question, with aid of art waved and fluffed her hair, and softened thus her too hard line of brow, and let her keen black eyes fill with friendly sparkles for us all—yet, 'twas because of him. And when the old woman made to threaten him with her finger, and he caught her lifted hand and, uncovering his bonnie head, stooped and kissed it—then came the wanton blood up in her cheek, as she had been a girl again.

His letters then from flirtatious women, and alas! girls, you may well believe were legion; a cloud used to gather upon his face at sight of them. I have, of course, no faintest idea that he lived the godly, righteous, and sober life that is enjoined upon us all, but I do remember with respect that this idolized man, when the letters were many and rehearsal already on, would carefully cut off every signature and utterly destroy them, then pile the unread letters up and—I don't know what their final end was, but he remarked with knit brows as he caught

me watching him at his work one morning: "They," pointing to the pile of mutilated letters, "they are harmless now, little one—their sting lies in the tail!" and when a certain free-and-easy actor laughingly picked up a very elegantly written note, and said: "I can read it, can't I, now the signature is gone?" he answered, shortly: "The woman's folly is no excuse for our knavery—lay the letter down, please!"

I played the "Player-Queen" to my great joy, and in the "Marble Heart" I was one of the group of three statues in the first act. We were supposed to represent Lais, Aspasia, and Phryne, and when we read the cast I glanced at the other girls (we were not strikingly handsome) and remarked, gravely: "Well, it's a comfort to know that we look so like the three beautiful Grecians."

A laugh at our backs brought us around suddenly to face Mr. Booth, who said to me: "You satirical little wretch, how do you come to know these Grecian ladies? Perhaps you have the advantage of them in being all beautiful within?"

"I wish it would strike outward then," I answered. "You know it's always best to have things come to the surface!"

"I know some very precious things are hidden from common sight; and I know, too, you caught my meaning in the first place. Good night!" and he left us.

We had been told to descend to the stage at night with our white robes hanging free and straight, that Mr. Booth himself might drape them as we stood upon the pedestal. It really is a charming picture—that of the statues in the first act. Against a backing of black velvet the three white figures, carefully posed, strongly lighted, stand out so marble-like that when they slowly turn their faces and point to their chosen master, the effect is uncanny enough to chill the looker-on.

Well, with white wigs, white tights, and white robes, and half strangled with the powder we had inhaled in our efforts to make our lips stay white, we cautiously descended the stairs—we dared not talk, we dared not blink our eyes, for fear of disturbing the coat of powder—we were lifted to the pedestal and took our places as we expected to stand. Then Mr. Booth came—such a picture in his Greek garments as made even the men exclaim at him—and began to pose us. It happened one of us had very good limbs, one medium good, and the third had, apparently, walked on broom-sticks. When Mr.