

THE ECCENTRIC BOOTHS.
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THEIR PECULIARITIES DESCRIBED
BY ONE WHO KNEW THEM.

An Old Actor's Reminiscences of Junius Brutus, Junius Brutus, Jr., Edwin and John Wilkes —The Vein of Genius and the Taint of Madness That Dwelt in the Famous Family.

That the border line of sanity was touched by several members of the extraordinary Booth family I think will be conceded by all who were acquainted with their history, and certainly by all who came in contact with them.

It has been my happiness to know them all personally, from the first, Junius Brutus, to the last and youngest.

The terrible deed of John Wilkes Booth, that struck down the foremost American of our time, had its origin in the disordered brain of the young man's father, for if not madness there was at least perversion of intellect in the progenitor of this brilliant and handsome family.

Junius Brutus Booth was still in the twenties when he measured himself against the great Edmund Kean, who then dominated the British stage. In spite of Booth's handsome, expressive face and powerful, melodious voice, that won him instant attention, Kean still continued to hold his supremacy with press and public. Booth had ability enough, but lacked steadiness of mind and tenacity of purpose, for had he persisted Kean's irregularities would soon have given him opportunity. But love triumphed over ambition. The would-be Roscius abandoned the contest, left the field to his rival and eloped with the sweet and beautiful woman who became the mother of a family distinguished for great talent and beauty. He went to Amsterdam, where it is said he acted in the Dutch language. He was an accomplished linguist, for it is of record that he appeared as *Orestes* in Racine's tragedy at the French theatre in New Orleans, where he received the highest acclaim. Theatrical tradition abounds with stories and anecdotes of the vagaries and eccentricities of this singular genius.

George Jamieson, an excellent actor, once told me that he was strolling with Booth along St. Charles street, New Orleans, when he (Jamieson) made some remark about the weather. Booth fell upon his knees, and then exclaimed: "Oh, wise young man, how much more elder art thou than thy looks!" I told this to Edwin, and he said, "The old man was guying him."

When in Washington Booth and Gen. Sam Houston of Texas were great cronies. It was a picture worthy of *Punch* to see this eccentric pair take their afternoon promenade along Pennsylvania avenue. Houston stood 6 feet 4 inches and Booth about 5 feet 5 inches. As it was winter Houston's ample shoulders were covered with a large gray blanket that reached to his heels; his grizzled head was surmounted by a huge Mexican sombrero. Booth was fashionably attired in a brown, long-skirted overcoat, with buttons high up in the small of his back, and his classic head held up a high-crowned silk hat; and thus they marched, little Booth clinging to the arm and with difficulty keeping pace with the sturdy strides of the hero of San Jacinto. They were on pleasure bent, and were soon lost to the view of the amused pedestrian in the hospitable portals of Hancock's hostelry. I never saw this singular man and mighty master of tragic emotion again after this engagement at Washington.

One night Junius Booth gave us his idea of *Othello*, whom he made as black as a negro. What with his wretched dressing and bandy legs, he was a sorry sight. Not even his fine reading could save him from occasional ripples of laughter. But, despite his eccentricities, he gave us some great acting during that, to me, memorable week. His *Richard* and *Shylock* were thrilling in their whirlwind of passion.

The great scene in the "Iron Chest" with *Welford* is still vivid in my memory. His curse, should the boy reveal the terrible secret, was appalling in demoniac fury. The flesh still creeps at the mere recollection.

Yet when the wonderful actor came from the scene he was as playful as a kitten. I had the part of *Fitzhardinge*, an old man. When he first saw me early in the evening he scrutinized me most mysteriously. "What do you play?" he asked. "*Fitzhardinge*," said I. "My boy, my dear boy, this won't do at all. You are not made up properly. Come with me and I'll fix you," and he did. I found out what amused the actors when I glanced into a mirror. I was made up like *Scaramouch*. The great man was having fun with me.

Yet he was kindness itself. I was very young and very nervous, and had mislaid my cane. No young actor can play an old man without a cane! The great man hunted every corner until he found it.

In 1852, under the auspices of his son Junius, he went with Edwin to California. His success there was marred by his unreliability, and he returned, leaving Edwin there, and landed at New Orleans, where he acted for the last time, his closing parts being *Sir Edward Mortimer* in the "Iron Chest" and *John Leimp* in the "Review" at the St. Charles Theatre. He boarded the steamboat J. S. Chenoweth and was taken suddenly ill, dying before he could reach medical aid, uncared for and almost unknown, an inglorious end to a checkered career.

On a visit to California in 1856 I first met Junius Brutus Booth, Jr., eldest son of the great actor. Like his father, his head was moulded on classic lines, but he had a figure of more athletic proportions than the sire. A handsome face and amiable expression bespoke him a man whom it was pleasant to meet.

While playing at the Chatham Theatre, New York, the unsophisticated youth had been caught in the toils of matrimony by the experienced artist, Clementina De Bar, sister of the noted Ben De Bar, comedian and manager. This lady was a most versatile actress, but far from prepossessing of feature. Tiring of this incompatible alliance, young Junius sought the freer atmosphere of California with the Argonauts and carried with him young and handsome Harriet Mace, whom he soon made his wife.

I saw Junius often, and found him a sensible, upright, amiable man. He had not the least taint of the eccentricity that marked the father and his brothers. Nor was there much of the suspicion of the "divine fire" that gave the father, Edwin, and Wilkes a claim to be classed with the immortals. Yet he was a good actor and had some supreme moments. He was a superb athlete and had few peers with either foil or broadsword. With the celebrated *maitre*, Col. Monstrey, who had his *salle d'armes* at Frank Wheeler's gymnasium in San Francisco, we had many a hot "assault" with foil and sword, often winding up with a few rounds of the manly art.

Junius Brutus Booth, Jr., came East in 1867, his wife having died, leaving a daughter. He became lessee of the Boston Theatre. He married Agnes Perry, a fine actress, sister of Harry Perry, an excellent actor, who died in California in 1861. Booth was not a successful manager any more than his brother Edwin. Later he leased Booth's Theatre on Twenty-third street and Sixth avenue. He failed to make the rent for the owners, so Edwin told me. They were not good managers for themselves, but art did not suffer. It was said that Edwin lost \$500,000 in his theatre. But in his time he earned over \$1,500,000 as a player.

Edwin Booth had been in California for some years acting a wide range of characters, excelling in negro dialect parts. He visited Australia in company with Laura Keane and his life-long friend, David C. Anderson, and stopped at the Sandwich Islands on his way back to California, playing at San Francisco and Sacramento with Henry Sedley, who was afterward editor of the *Round Table*. He was the chief player with Catherine Norton Sinclair, who had recently won her divorce suit from Edwin Forrest.

Forrest pursued every one who countenanced his wife with unreasoning virulence. He never forgave Edwin Booth for having played with her. Edwin had just finished a tour of the mining towns and closed his engagement at Sacramento preparatory to embarking for the Eastern States under contract to Ben Baker to begin his career as a star to fill the void left by his father's death. I followed his engagement at the Forrest Theatre, where Junius and his wife were principal players. Edwin Booth had been in California so long and had appeared so often that, notwithstanding his personal popularity, even this, his last engagement, had not yielded him an adequate sum to begin his journey East. A few of his friends

rallied again and asked me to give up one of my nights for a parting benefit to the young star and to participate in the performance. This I was most happy to do, although I had never met Edwin. On the evening of the day on which this matter had been so pleasantly arranged I heard a knock at my dressing room door. I was in the act of changing my dress for the last act of "In-gomar." A slender, graceful form slipped into the room. A pair of luminous eyes shone out from a beautiful Oriental face illumined by as sweet a smile as ever came from a finely chiselled mouth. A hand was extended, which met with a firm and cordial grip. Only the brief, simple words "Thank you" came from his lips, and he disappeared.

I played *Othello* to his *Iago*, and the house was packed. In his performance of this subtle part I saw then the budding fame that was to flower into a brilliant and prosperous career. And so began a friendship that only ended with his untimely death.

He was not ungrateful, for during one of his brilliant engagements at the St. Charles Theatre, New Orleans, he volunteered for my benefit, and, of course, drew a tremendous audience. I acted *Richard* to his *Richard III*. We acted together often in the South and West, but only once in New York, and that for Ben Baker's benefit. The play was "Othello," and I was terribly frightened, as I had never acted so great a part as that of the Moor in the metropolis. Here the sweetness of Booth's nature was again manifest, for words of encouragement came from him at the end of the great scene in the third act, when the audience summoned us before the curtain. We also appeared together at the theatre in Boston. That able manager, Thomas Barry, was the lessee. Here he began to show some of the eccentric habits that marred the career of his father. On one of these nights the American tragedian, Edwin Forrest, was sitting far back in a private box. He was on a visit to his friend, James Oakes, the "Acorn" of the New York *Spirit of the Times*. Oakes told me afterward that the only comment Forrest made on his prospective rival was, "Why don't the young man learn his lines?" As Edwin had imbibed most of his father's great characters by ear in the theatre, he did not trouble himself with the midnight oil. But now, as recognition of his fine powers came to him, he felt forced to contend for mastery with the holder of the dramatic crown. The fault that was tolerated and condoned in his father couldn't be overlooked in this promising son. Edwin himself began to perceive that the time had come to chasten the Bacchic ebullitions that destroyed his great father, if he expected to reach the height on which the master sat supreme. Edwin Forrest still held the sceptre, and was in the very zenith of his great powers when the daring young actor made his gallant attack on the intellectual world by his ideal presentation of *Hamlet* at the Winter Garden in New York. I saw him quite often during the hundred-night run of this play. Chatting one day, he said: "I understand you acted *Charles de Moor* in German in San Francisco. I intend to visit Germany some day and should like to play 'Hamlet' in that language."

He acquired this notion from the fact that he had acted *Iago* to the *Othello* of the distinguished German actor, Bogouil Dawson, who spoke the part of the Moor in German. Mme. Scheller spoke the part of *Desdemona* in both languages. As I was then to appear in German as *Othello* with her at the Stadt Theatre, our conversation naturally flowed in that direction. He did go to Germany, although he stuck to his own vernacular, surrounded by German players, who were his greatest admirers. Ovarions greeted him everywhere, the actors crowning him with laurel. His triumphs there and his brilliant association with Irving at the Lyceum Theatre, London, are matters of record. His splendid career in this country has furnished themes for many loving poetic pens.

In the winter of 1858-59 I was in Baltimore acting with Atonia Jones, who later married the tragedian Gustavus V. Brooks in Australia. Atonia and Mary Devlin were very intimate. Edwin was then at home laying desperate siege to the susceptible Mary, who was a cheery, bright, and pretty girl. We were all young then, and exchanged the secrets of lovers.

I dined with him at his modest home, and met his stately mother and accomplished sisters, Asia and Rosalie. Asia afterward married John Sleeper Clarke, the comedian, and settled in London. Edwin took me out to Greenmount Cemetery, where he had placed a noble granite shaft over the grave of his father, with the simple inscription, "Booth," on one side, and on the other the family motto, "*Dum spero spiro*."

I have known him in every relation of life; with his fellow players he was ever considerate, courteous, and kind; as a son, in his household, showing deference and affection to his amiable mother and cultured sisters. He was chivalric and true, both as lover and husband. Once only can I remember having seen him roused to anger, giving vent in strong terms to his outraged sense of justice. It was after the death of his second wife, Mary McVicker, or, rather, Mary Runnon, for she was not James Mc-

Vicker's child. He had been easily managed through his affectionate, diffident nature while this extraordinarily gifted being lived; but when death severed the tie that held his loyal soul, the greed of gain on the part of friends became too manifest; they crowded him too far, and he asserted his manhood. There never was a sweeter, gentler nature than that which inhabited the mortal tenement called Edwin Booth. His charities were numerous, but secret. Few knew that within a short time of his death he bought an annuity for the aged actor, Edmon S. Connor. His reverence for his noble art and his high view of the actors' calling is gloriously exemplified by his munificent endowment of the Players' Club

in Gramercy Park, so lovingly accomplished under the guidance of those active spirits and constant friends and companions, William Bisp-ham, Charles E. Caryl, Lawrence Hutton, E. C. Benedict, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich.

John Wilkes Booth I first met in the summer of 1858. It was in a billiard room next to Grace Church, managed by Michael Phelan, then the champion of the cue. We played several games; he was an expert. Indeed, he excelled in all athletic sports. Like his brother "June," he was a master of fence. I was struck with his easy movements of alluring, springy grace. The classic Booth head sat above broad shoulders and deep chest. Taller than any of the other Booths, his frame was compactly knit and instilled with virile life in every fibre. He was then engaged to Matt Canning to go to Montgomery, Ala., to take his initiation in the roles that made his father famous, in which Ed win was now forging ahead for first place in the dramatic arena.

I did not see him again until the winter of 1864. He was then a full-fledged star in some of his father's parts, and had made his mark in the South and West. But suddenly his voice failed. He was compelled to remain idle, his time being passed mainly in Washington. From there he could easily run over to Belair, the home of the family in Maryland. He was a great favorite in Washington society; his talent as an actor, beauty of person, and engaging manners made him a welcome guest in any company. The men were charmed and the women fascinated. It was said that the handsome and witty daughter of a certain famous Senator was greatly in love with him, and it was soon rumored that their engagement was shortly to be announced, when Booth's terrible crime put an end to the romantic episode.

The peculiar teaching, or rather lack of teaching, of the head of the Booth family, and the vagaries of that extraordinary man, found perhaps greater expression in John Wilkes than in any other of the children. Raised in a wild and free way, without the restraint of proper parental influence in the father, and surrounded by the atmosphere of a so-called chivalry, which then had greater expression in Maryland than in any other Southern State, it is perhaps not so surprising, after all, that young Wilkes became imbued with the same ideas of our Government that impelled the great spirits of the South to rebel. As I have said, he had access to all circles in the capital. The departments were honeycombed with Southern sympathizers. Everything was ripe for a conspiracy. The loss of his voice made him brood. The prospect of fame as an actor seemed to be passing from him. His brother Edwin had the field. He must do something to impress himself upon mankind and leave a name. In "Richard III." he had often spoken the lines:

"The aspiring youth that fired the Ephesian dome
Oulives in fame the pious fool that raised it."

That was better than no fame at all.

It was, at this time I saw him again at the Metropolitan Hotel in New York. I was acting in the "Corsican Brothers" at Niblo's. He saw the duel scene and spoke about it next day. I remembered afterward his eyeing me from head to foot, saying: "You handle a sword pretty well." I replied that I had had many a bout with both of his brothers, and especially with "June." "How long is your engagement?" he inquired. "A month longer," said I. He paused, eyeing me curiously, surveying me from head to foot. "When you are through here," said he, take a run down to Washington. I have some enterprises on hand that may interest you. I'll give you a good time, and if you fall in with my ideas we'll make a fortune." I asked him why he did not act. "Oh, my voice is in bad shape. Besides, I must look after my coal and oil lands I have bought near Cleveland, O." We shook hands cordially and parted.

Two months later, after midnight on the morning of April 14, 1865, when going to my room I heard the newsboys cry: "Extra! Extra! Booth has shot President Lincoln!" Excited and maddening crowds surged through the streets. No one would believe that a Booth could have been guilty of such an unspeakable crime. Remembering the conversation with Wilkes on the steps of the Metropolitan Hotel, I said to myself: "It is true." No language can give expression to the detestation of the crime that took the life of the greatest man America has produced. Yet Wilkes Booth was no hired assassin. The spirit of exaltation that made him exclaim as he leaped upon the stage after the fatal shot: "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" was but the natural outcome of the distemper that lay in the blood and ill-regulated mind of the father, which skipped the other children and lodged in the superficial brain of the mad Wilkes.

CHARLES POPE.