

# Did Lincoln's Assassin Escape?

In This, the First Installment, Is Told the Story of the Armstrong Myth

By F. L. BLACK

IT WAS on the night of April 14, 1865, after committing his appalling crime, that John Wilkes Booth escaped from Washington with David Herold, an accomplice. Together they worked their way down through Southern Maryland into Virginia, where Booth was shot in a barn, about ninety miles south of Washington, eleven days after the assassination. Presently, however, rumors began to spread over the country that the man shot in the burning barn was not John Wilkes Booth, and that the officers in charge had wilfully deceived the government that they might procure the immense reward offered for the capture. It was said, and by many believed, that the real John Wilkes Booth had escaped to the Island of Ceylon, to Mexico, to Palestine. It began to be whispered that Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor in the Presidency, was the instigator of the horrible crime and that his motive was personal ambition.

Instead of dying out, these whispered rumors finally broke into print, and many newspaper and magazine articles, as well as several books, have been published from time to time in an attempt to prove them true.

During 1920-21-22, the mummified body of a man who committed suicide at Enid, Oklahoma, in 1903, was exhibited in many western and southwestern towns as the body of John Wilkes Booth. With it were pictures of the Booth family, copies of affidavits, and other supporting "evidence" to prove that the mummy was in reality that of the country's most abhorred assassin.

Scores of impossible stories of the escape, subsequent life and lonely death of Booth have been printed with a wealth of circumstance to support them, and thousands of persons may be found, especially in the South, who will never believe that Booth perished in the Garret barn.

One of the first of the published rumors that Booth escaped appeared in 1867 in the Louisville, Kentucky, *Journal*. This story claimed that John Wilkes Booth had been seen alive in the East Indies and that a Captain Tolbert had won the bet of a large sum of money by demonstrating this fact. A letter published in the *Journal* claimed that Captain Tolbert, who commanded a privateer in the South Pacific and Indian oceans, while in Bombay had learned that Booth was hidden on the Island of Ceylon. This story was apparently never fully investigated and whatever circumstantial evidence there may have been to sustain the statements in the letter was never disclosed.

The most definite and persistent of all the rumors that went the rounds was that which may be called the Armstrong Myth. According to this version John Wilkes Booth had lived for years at Atlanta, Georgia, "not as a recluse, not as a skulking wretch stealing out at night in the shadow of a nation's curse, but as a clergyman of the Episcopal church, and in the open light of day."

There lived at Atlanta, Georgia, the Rev. J. G. Armstrong, rector of a local Episcopal church. He bore a superficial resemblance to the actor, John Wilkes Booth. By degrees the rumor grew, supported by his power of dramatic preaching, that the clergyman really was Lincoln's escaped assassin.

Dr. Armstrong knew of the facial resemblance, was rather vain of his dramatic powers, and did not discourage the belief to live that he was the actor-assassin. Dr. Armstrong's taste was for the stage rather than the ministry, he took a deep interest in amateur theatricals, and his favorite plays were Shakespearean. It is said that once when Edwin Booth visited Atlanta, Dr. Arm-

The body of John Wilkes Booth, assassin of Abraham Lincoln, was offered to THE DEARBORN INDEPENDENT for One Thousand Dollars.

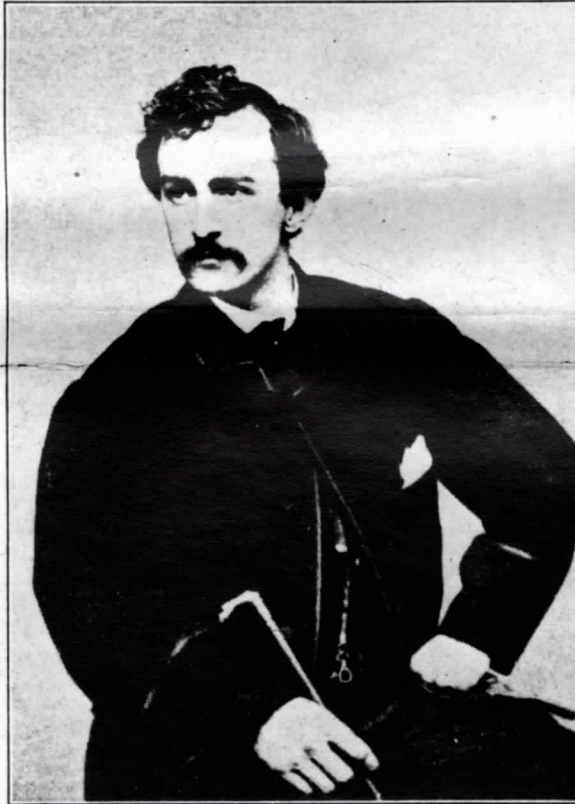
Affidavits and a wealth of circumstantial detail were to accompany it.

This was in 1920. The mummified body was owned by a citizen of Tennessee.

Since that time the rumor has broken out anew that the murderer of Lincoln escaped and lived undetected for 38 years after; that the nation was deceived by the report of his capture; that the large reward offered for Booth, dead or alive, was collected under false pretense.

THE DEARBORN INDEPENDENT, curious to know the basis for the rumor, conducted a thorough investigation into every phase of the matter and convinced itself of the spurious nature of the Booth myths, all and sundry. The accumulated material was laid away as of no timely interest until a recent fresh revival of the myth brought it to mind again. In *Harper's Magazine* for November, 1924, and in *Collier's* for December 27, 1924, articles on the question have appeared, while more recently American newspapers everywhere have carried *International News Service* stories purporting to be exclusive interviews with the surviving relatives of Booth—all of which provide amusing reading for anyone in possession of the facts.

It is proposed to give readers of THE DEARBORN INDEPENDENT a complete view of the evidence in the possession of this paper, that they may judge for themselves whether the fascinating stories of John Wilkes Booth's escape and survival are hoax or truth.



JOHN WILKES BOOTH, assassin of Abraham Lincoln.

strong occupied a stage box in the Opera House, and that Edwin Booth was so startled by Dr. Armstrong's likeness to his brother that he sought out the clergyman after the performance.

The *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, in 1922, brought up the discussion as to Dr. Armstrong and received many letters from persons who believed the story. One letter stated:

"It is well known by many people still living in Richmond, Virginia, that John Wilkes Booth preached during the '80s for five years or more at Monumental Episcopal Church under the name of Dr. Armstrong and afterward had a church in Atlanta, Georgia, and died a natural death during the '90s."

Another reads: "About twenty-five years ago, I read in a newspaper, *The New York World*, I think—an article from a man who some years previously had visited a western city, I cannot recall his name, but there was no effort at concealment, and he wrote with every indication of candor and veracity.

"One night he attended church. The minister's name he was informed, was 'Dr. Armstrong.' When the minister rose to begin the service our narrator was immediately impressed with the peculiar familiarity of his voice and manner, but could not recall any specific occasion on which he had seen 'Dr. Armstrong' before.

"In the course of the sermon, however, 'Dr. Armstrong' began to recite 'The Siege of Corinth.' As the recitation proceeded with great dramatic skill and power, the listener at once remembered that some years previously he had crossed the Atlantic on a ship that carried an unusually large number of distinguished and interesting passengers, among whom was John Wilkes Booth and some of his theatrical friends.

"On several occasions during the voyage, Booth entertained the ship's company with dramatic performances and once recited 'The Siege of Corinth,' with startling power and effect.

"So when 'Dr. Armstrong' launched into the recitation, the hearer immediately recognized the tone and manner of Booth and was filled with astonishment, but thought it best not to mention the matter.

"Some nights after this he found opportunity to call on 'Dr. Armstrong' at home. He was ushered into the sitting room with the explanation that 'Dr. Armstrong' was engaged with some one in the study and asked that he await his coming. Some subconscious curiosity prompted him to sit where he could see the door to the study. He waited long and patiently, for he was determined to see 'Dr. Armstrong.'

"Finally the door to the study opened and 'Dr. Armstrong' and Edwin Booth came out into the hall. Edwin took affectionate and brotherly leave of 'Dr. Armstrong,' and quietly passed out. 'Dr. Armstrong' then came into the sitting room. He had a slight limp as of one who had suffered a broken ankle, and the writer satisfied himself that he was not mistaken as to 'Dr. Armstrong's' identity, but made no mention of having received any information to this effect from 'Dr. Armstrong' himself."

A third says:—

"I would like to answer the question 'Was the Rev. Dr. Armstrong and John Wilkes Booth, one and the same person?' by saying that I believe I knew John Wilkes Booth in the person of the 'Rev. J. G. Armstrong,' of the Episcopal Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and I further believe that my readers will agree with the assertion when they shall have finished this article, which, I shall recount as nearly as possible, at this late date, for it occurred many, many years ago, when I was quite a young man. I was a resident of Atlanta at the time, and held a position on the *Atlanta Constitution* and knew the 'Rev. J. G. Armstrong' very well. He was a very brilliant man, highly educated, and it was said of him that he was the possessor of the finest private library in the city.

"As well as I remember, he was a tall, 'rawboned,' sallow complexioned man, with features as clear-cut as a cameo, with a limp on the left leg, I believe. His hair was long, falling almost to his shoulders and as black as a raven's wing. I used to wonder why he did not have it cut, but I learned later that he wore it in that manner to hide a disfiguring scar on the back of his neck. That was 'J. G. Armstrong,' or John Wilkes Booth, as I knew him.

"Now for the startling story!

"One day an old man, a stranger in the city, was standing in the main entrance of the Kimball House, on North Pryor street, when the Rev. J. G. Armstrong passed. He took one glance at the tall, limping figure, threw both hands above his head and exclaimed:

"John Wilkes Booth, as I live!"

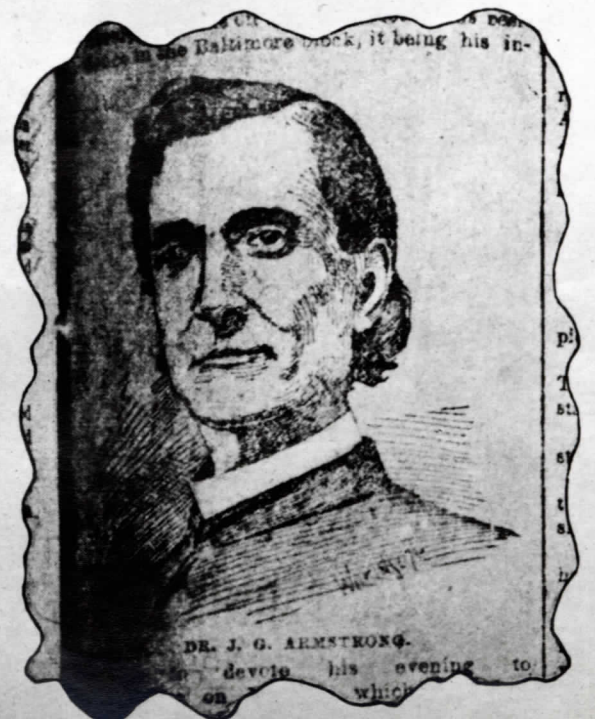
"With this exclamation, he staggered and would have fallen, but for the assistance of two men, who helped him to a seat in the lobby. Soon recovering, he asked one of the men who the man was. 'That is Rev. J. G. Armstrong, of the Episcopal Church,' he was answered.

"That may be the name he goes by here, but his real name is John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of Abraham Lincoln,' he replied, and no amount of reassurance could shake his opinion.

"The story got into the papers, of course, and was played up in a more or less humorous vein and after the usual nine days' wonder was forgotten."

It is claimed that the Reverend Armstrong on several

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DR. J. G. ARMSTRONG, who was taken for John Wilkes Booth.

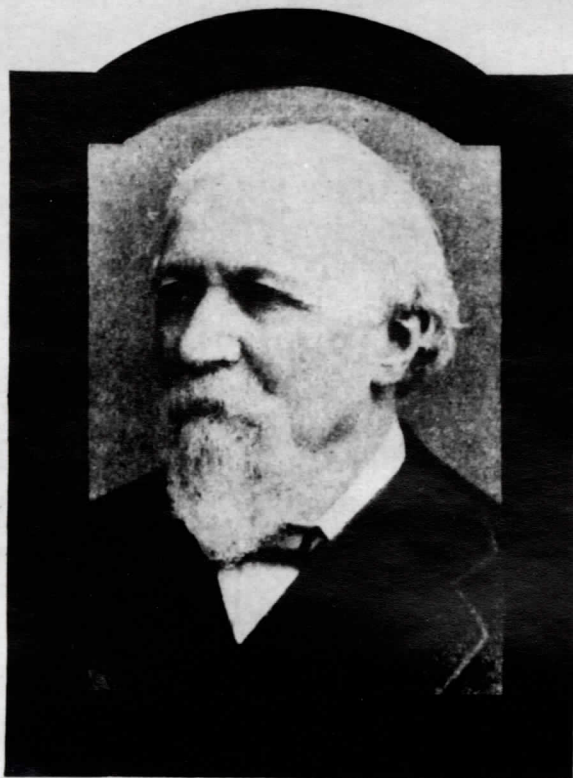
THE ESCAPE AND SUICIDE  
OF  
**JOHN WILKES BOOTH**  
OR THE FIRST TRUE ACCOUNT OF  
**LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION**  
CONTAINING  
A COMPLETE CONFESSION BY BOOTH  
MANY YEARS AFTER THE CRIME

GIVING IN FULL DETAIL THE PLANS, PLOT AND INTRIGUE  
OF THE CONSPIRATORS, AND THE TREACHERY  
OF ANDREW JOHNSON, THEN VICE-PRESIDENT  
OF THE UNITED STATES

WRITTEN FOR THE CORRECTION OF HISTORY  
BY  
FINIS L. BATES

The title page of Finis L. Bates' book.

# A Memory of Robert Browning



Robert Browning.

"THERE is really no harm," said W. D. Howells, "in seeking the presence of a famous man. There are bores everywhere, but he is likelier to find them in the wonted figures of society than in those young people, or old people, who come to him in the love of what he has done."

This is finely, generously said, and it is my only excuse for having intruded myself, now many years ago, into the honored presence of Robert Browning. He was the supreme enthusiasm of my youth, and his influence abides with me to this day. Knowing this, a dear old friend, a lover of the young, gave me a kindly note of introduction with which I found myself one day before the house in Warwick Crescent, London, where the poet lived while in England. He was preparing at this time to leave it finally, and the clang of the knocker, or bell, reverberated through an empty hall.

The manservant after ushering me into a small study rather slowly and stiffly mounted the long flight of stairs leading to the floor above. Evidently Mr. Browning was in a room over the study, for I could hear a brief murmur of voices, the sound of someone rising from his chair with an energy that overturned it, steps hastening through the upper hall and springily descending the stairs. As these steps drew near, a feeling of positive fright assailed me; gladly would I have run away could I have done so unseen, but there was no escape and I sat helpless. Now the steps were at the door, an energetic hand threw it open, and before me stood Mr. Browning with a look of welcome and both hands hospitably outstretched. A cordial handclasp, a word of inquiry about the lady who had sent me there—

"How is she? Well, I hope." I merely nodded: speech was impossible.

"Active as ever, in spite of her years?" Again I nodded.

"And her sister, Miss ———, how is she?"

Through stiff lips I managed to articulate, "Well."

By this time we were seated, Mr. Browning in a chair opposite and close to mine: now all at once he became silent. I stared down at my folded hands, but felt that he was looking at me. Seconds passed, minutes; still silence. Finally, with an effort, I raised my eyes to his, and—lo! the spell was broken. Mr. Browning twinkled—there is no other word for it—and began to laugh.

"There now!" he said, "that is better. Now we can talk."

And talk he did, and question, though my replies were still monosyllabic. Pulling the letter of introduction from his pocket:

"I see," he said, tapping it, "that you like my poems."

"Yes," I murmured.

"Good! I like to be liked. And what do you like best of mine?"

Many of the shorter poems flashed to mind, but, of all things, I must name "Sordello"! He looked sincerely amused:

"Some of my friends think it obscure. Do you understand it?"

Rather vaguely I said, "I think so."

His amusement persisted:

"We are told that the proof of the pudding is in the eating—can you quote from it?"

By good fortune, the fine lines occurred to me:

"That autumn eve was stilled;  
A last remains of sunset dimly burned  
O'er the far forests, like a torch-flame turned  
By the wind back upon its bearer's hand  
In one long flare of crimson; as a brand,  
The woods beneath lay black."

Luckily for me he did not seem to remember their initial position in the poem, and listened gravely: "That's not so bad," he observed.

And so the talk flowed on, he, as I now recognize, trying with wonderful gentleness to put at ease the badly scared girl before him.

He succeeded so well that presently I ventured to ask him a question long on my mind:

"Was there any picture of 'Flush'?"

"My wife's verses," he quickly replied, "there could be no better or more faithful likeness"; adding, "But I think I have somewhere a lock of Flush's hair." He sought through several drawers of the writing table before finding it, and gave me from its precious contents three hairs which I treasured for years.

From the lock of hair he looked up at a large portrait above the table: "My wife," he said gravely. "I hope you know her poems, too. They are far better than mine."

With thanks for the gift and for his kindness, I now rose to go, but—

"Wait!" he said, "Here is something you will like to see."

The something was a little volume with Mrs. Browning's delicate autograph on the flyleaf. I ventured to touch the yellowed page, and he smiled gently as I did so. Then he reverted once more to myself, asking various questions about my home, my college life, and my plans for the future. I remember confessing that I hoped I might write a little.

"There are too many who write 'a little,'" he said. "Be very sure that the call is clear."

Again I rose to leave, and again he exclaimed:

"But wait! I have forgotten one thing. Come back!"

He led the way down the hall to a disordered dining-room on whose wall were pinned several photographs.

"My son's work," he explained. "He is a sculptor, and I think this is the best thing he has done. I am very proud of it, and of him."

The photographs were three different views of Robert Barrett Browning's statue of Apollo, in the guise of a python wooing a nymph. The great serpent's coils embraced closely her lovely, drooping figure, and beautiful as is the group I was frankly horrified. I said as much.

"Well," admitted Mr. Browning, "the model felt quite as you do, I am told, at first; but the python never hurt her, and she ended by growing fond of it. It was a god, you know"—and he twinkled. "Not only that, but it grew fond of her." Again he twinkled: "She was a very nice girl, you see."

Once more I rose to go, and this time he shook hands and said goodby. But midway down the steps his voice again arrested me. Always I shall remember his very gentle, sweet expression as he said:

"My child, we are at the two extremes of life, and probably shall never meet again. Once more, goodby."



ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

With kind courtliness he bent, kissed me lightly on either cheek, and bowed in final dismissal.

From the street I looked back. He still stood there, an unforgettable figure, motionless, yet, even so, radiating vitality. Some years later, in Westminster Abbey, I paused by the slab marked "Robert Browning." It was heaped with flowers, mostly white, but among them glowed one bunch of deep red roses. Whoever placed it there had the right sense of fitness.

Those who love Robert Browning may be glad to add this little reminiscence to their store of memories. It is a reminiscence of gracious and exquisite kindness from a very great man to a very insignificant girl. She had no claim upon him save a passing introduction, but he honored the poor little draft with the full wealth of his goodness.

—E. L.

## Did Lincoln's Assassin Escape?

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occasions confessed that he was John Wilkes Booth and there is no doubt but that he enjoyed the notoriety he received as a result of the resemblance. Dr. Armstrong died in 1891. The story given to the newspapers by his physician was that the cause of death was apoplexy. Stories were later published to the effect that it was due to an overdose of morphine.

The Armstrong Myth spread until it was finally and thoroughly investigated by the New York *Herald*, which carried the following story in the issue of April 26, 1903.

"When Dr. Armstrong died a record of his life was made public. According to it he was born at Ballymena, Ireland, on July 24, 1828, and was educated at Queen's College, Belfast, under the direction of his uncle, the famous James Glasgow, D. D., after whom he was named. He came to America in 1856, and prepared for the Presbyterian ministry in 1857 and 1858 at Xenia College, Ohio. His first charge was at Sidney, Ohio, where he married Miss Alma Hitchcock. She is still living in Atlanta, Georgia.

"From Sidney he moved to St. Louis in 1863, where he had trouble with the Presbyterian church and resigned to become an Episcopal minister. He attended St. Paul's Episcopal College and worked his way through as instructor in Hebrew and metaphysics in 1870, and was ordained as an Episcopal minister by Bishop C. F. Robertson at St. Paul's Church, Palmyra, Missouri, in 1871.

"From Palmyra he moved to Hannibal, Missouri, in 1871 to 1874; then to Wheeling, West Virginia, from 1874 to 1878; then to Richmond, Virginia, from 1878 to 1884; then to Atlanta, Georgia, from 1884 to 1888, where he again had trouble with his bishops. He gave up the ministry and lectured from 1888 until 1891, when he died suddenly.

"It is necessary to prove his career only prior to 1865, the year in which Lincoln was killed, to show that Dr. Armstrong was affecting a pose in permitting the rumors about him to be circulated. And a telegram to any one of the places mentioned in the above history would be sufficient. The following comes from the Rev. Dr. William G. Moorehead, president of Xenia College, where Dr. Armstrong, according to his record, prepared for the Presbyterian ministry in 1857, eight years before Lincoln died. Dr. Moorehead knew Dr. Armstrong in 1862, and speaks of his resemblance to Booth:

"I find in the records here," he says, "that James G. Armstrong was a native of Ireland, born at Ballymena in 1828; that he graduated from Queen's College, Belfast; studied theology in the Xenia Theological Seminary; was licensed to preach in 1859; settled at Sidney, Ohio, 1859; removed to St. Louis in 1863, and was afterward connected with the Protestant Episcopal church and settled at Wheeling, West Virginia. He was rector of one or more churches in the South, the last being at Atlanta, Georgia, I think, where he died some years ago. He married in Sidney, Ohio. He was somewhat lame, walked with a cane, but had a very handsome and attractive face. He so closely resembled John Wilkes Booth that he was actually mistaken for the actor, and one or more papers of the country some years ago confounded him with Booth. He was gifted as an orator, clear and keen of intellect, but erratic and opinionated, as I knew in 1862. Whatever became of his family I do not know."

"All of which proves conclusively that the Rev. Dr. Armstrong lived in the western part of Ohio at the same time that J. Wilkes Booth was living at Baltimore and Washington. There is, therefore, only one supposition remaining, and that is that the Rev. Dr. James Glasgow Armstrong was the Rev. Dr. James Glasgow Armstrong and not J. Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Abraham Lincoln."

The last and most elaborate Booth myth, the one which has caused the recent magazine and newspaper interest, owed its existence largely to the work of Finis L. Bates, a lawyer of Memphis, Tennessee, who wrote a book of 309 pages, first published in 1907, and owned the mummified body which was exhibited in southern and southwestern towns as that of John Wilkes Booth. More than seventy-five thousand copies of the book have been sold, and due to the astounding claims and accusations it contains, purchasers of the book are led to feel that they have made a discovery in concealed history. And as few of its readers have any opportunity to check the claims and "definite proof" so positively stated, the story succeeded in gaining numerous believers.

The title sheet is an elaborate affair, which sets forth the thesis the author hopes to sustain.

It was this claim that THE DEARBORN INDEPENDENT has investigated. It has in its possession and will publish all the available material bearing on the identity of the man who was shot in the Garret barn by Federal authorities as John Wilkes Booth. This, we believe, is sufficient to dispose of the question finally. The territory of the flight and capture was thoroughly covered, the identical sites examined, the living witnesses were interrogated, the contemporary evidence was again weighed, many forgotten records have been ransacked, and the mute gruesome relics of the crime have been made to yield their testimony.

It is now possible to enable the candid reader to determine the question with finality, and succeeding articles will, it is believed, fully serve this end.