

# RECOLLECTIONS OF A LIFETIME

BY  
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nouncement that in company with the President he would be at Ford's theater that night.

From want of inclination, or want of time, I have never been much of a theater-goer myself, but I had a couple of friends who had never seen General Grant. Therefore, for the first time, in Washington, I concluded to go with them. We went early in order to select our position. The night was dark, for there was no moon until after ten o'clock, and my recollection, also, is that it was cloudy, with a gloomy mist in the air. At any rate as we came down the avenue from the war office and passed E. street, we noticed in front of Grover's theatre, which was a little distance to the left, a large transparency, and as it was the only one visible, we gave it attention; but as the air was misty or smoky we could not make out the inscription distinctly. At each end, however, there was a separate inscription: that on the left was "April, 1861, the cradle." That on the right was "April, 1865, the grave."

"Rather ominous, that," said one of the party. "They must be rebels," said another. Of course it meant the cradle and grave of the rebellion, but its indistinctiveness confirms my recollection of the mistiness of the night. We remembered it afterwards as an omen of evil.

We passed on to Tenth street, and having entered the theater, we took seats diagonally opposite the President's box, and upon the same floor. The President's box was upon the second floor, which was twelve feet eight inches above the stage. The two boxes upon that floor had been thrown into one by removing the partition between them. The box was festooned with flags, so that we knew it was the President's.

The play commenced and had been in progress quite a while, perhaps half an hour, when the President came in.

He was greeted with a storm of applause as he passed on to his box. He was accompanied by Mrs. Lincoln, Miss Harris and Major Rathbun. General Grant had concluded not to come and was then on his way to Philadelphia.

Mr. Lincoln took a seat in an armchair (a rocking chair) at the side next to the audience. Mrs. Lincoln was at his right, near the center of the box, and Miss Harris at the further side. Major Rathbun was seated on a sofa near Miss Harris, a little back from the front. Mr. Lincoln, for the first time during my knowledge of him, seemed cheerful and happy. I had seen him often during his presidential term, commencing with his inauguration in 1861, and a sadder face I never saw. But now the load seemed lifted and every vestige of care and anxiety had passed away. He seemed to enjoy the play very much. The play was the American Cousin, and Laura Keene was the star of the evening.

Everything passed on very pleasantly until about ten o'clock or a little later. It was in the third act, in the milkmaid scene, when one of my friends called my attention to the President's box, with the remark, "there's a reporter going to see Father Abraham." I looked and saw a man standing at the door of the President's box, with his hat on, and looking down upon the stage. Presently he took out a card case, or something of that kind, from his side pocket and took out a card. It is said he showed it to the President's messenger outside, but I saw nothing of that kind, in fact I saw no other man there aside from those seated in the audience. He took off his hat, and put his hand upon the door knob, and went into the little hall or corridor, back of the box. I then turned to the play. Presently, I cannot say how soon, it may have been two, three or five minutes, I heard a pistol shot. I turned to the President's

box and saw a man flash to the front, with face as white as snow, and hair as black as a raven.

My first impression was that it was a part of the play. The man put his left hand upon the front railing and went over, not with a clean sweep, but with a kind of a scramble, first one leg and then the other. It evidently was his intention to swing over as we swing over a fence, but his spur, as appeared afterwards, caught in the flag, and hence the scramble.

As he went over, or possibly after reaching the stage, he shouted very clearly and distinctly, "*sic semper tyrannis*," and then for the first time it flashed upon me that the whole thing meant assassination. The Virginia coat of arms, with its device, had been familiar to me from childhood, and of course with "*sic semper tyrannis*" ringing clearly through the hall, I understood it at once. The man struck the floor, and sunk down partially, but immediately rose up and brandishing a double-edged dagger, which glittered in the gas light, he passed diagonally across the stage, with his face to the audience, and went out. He did not run, it was a swift stage-walk, and was evidently studied beforehand, like everything else he did, for effect. It is said his leg was broken by the fall, but I saw no evidence of it in his gait.

For a moment there was a stillness of death. The audience seemed paralyzed. No sound whatever came from the box that I heard. It is said in the various accounts that Mrs. Lincoln shrieked. I heard no shriek. Major Rathbun testified that he shouted "stop that man." I heard nothing of that kind, and I believe I could have heard a whisper. I saw Mr. Lincoln sitting in his chair with his head drooped upon his breast, but in all other respects he retained the position he had before he was shot.

Quite a little interval passed before anything was said

or done. By interval I mean twenty, thirty or forty seconds, which under such circumstances seem a long time. Then some of the audience rose up, others sat still. Here and there inquiries came as to whether the President was hurt.

In company with Major Potter (a paymaster in the army) I started for the box, but before we got there others had found that it was barred inside. In the meantime Miss Keene had gone into the box from the stage entrance, and perhaps one or two others; at any rate an inquiry was made for a surgeon, and a crowd gathered around the box. There was no uproar or confusion at any time. After a few moments the door was opened and Mr. Lincoln was carried out along the back side of the dress-circle and out at the front. I was close behind, and as we went down stairs I noticed a splash of blood on every step. His face was very pale, and the stamp of death upon it, which once seen rarely deceives us.

As we reached the street the news began to come of other assassinations. The vice-president had been killed; Mr. Seward had been murdered, also Mr. Stanton. In fact the air was full of rumors of blood, and for a short time it looked as if there might be a second Saint Bartholomew in progress. I immediately passed down Tenth street for a sight of the signal station upon the Winder building, and soon saw signals to the army and answers from the fortifications, and knew that any uprising would be quickly suppressed. Mr. Lincoln was taken into a dwelling house across the street from the theater, where he lingered until the morning of April 15, and then died. This closing stanza of his favorite poem illustrates his ending:

“ 'Tis the wink of an eye—'tis the draught of a breath,  
From the blossom of health to the paleness of death,

From the gilded saloon to the bier and the shroud;  
Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud !”

As to the impelling causes of a deed so desperate, yet so useless, as the assassination of Mr. Lincoln, it is difficult to answer. Booth, himself, doubtless, was actuated by various motives. He was steeped to the lips in the spirit of the rebellion, but I am inclined to think that ambition was the strongest influence. A wise poet has said:

“Ambition has but two steps: the lowest, blood; the highest, envy.”

Booth loved notoriety as he loved life, and notoriety he must have, good or bad. Like Erastus, he “yearned for immortality,” and doubtless he remembered the old couplet:

“He who burned the Ephesian dome outlived in fame the pious  
fools who reared it.”

It may be that Booth had worked himself into the idea that Mr. Lincoln was a kind of representative tyrant, and that in killing him he was playing the role of Brutus, but I think not, for the entire affair was entirely too stagey, at least for the spirit of Brutus. He was acting a premeditated part from beginning to end, it is true, but it was entirely for stage effect, and for the glorification of the actor. His “*sic semper tyrannis*” was stagey. His whole attitude and walk before the audience at the theater were stagey. His double-edged gladiatorial dagger had been prepared purposely for stage effect. In fact, it was all a part of a play which was to make John Wilkes Booth immortal in history.

Booth had a certain kind of reckless physical courage, and was a gamey looking fellow, but there was no moral basis to his character, and hence I cannot find any motive in him to do this deed except vanity, and a mor-

bid love of notoriety. He showed these traits in his death, the circumstances of which were related to me by Colonel Conger, who was in command of the soldiers who captured him.

Conger was a native of Richland county, Ohio, and was the son of Rev. Enoch Conger, one of the founders of the Congregational Church in the city of Mansfield, and was as brave a man as ever went into battle. At this time he was lieutenant-colonel of the First D. C. Cavalry. Conger was especially friendly to me for the reason that I aided him with Governor Dennison, in 1861, in securing his commission as first lieutenant.

Booth and Harold were driven into a barn, in Maryland, and surrendered. Harold gave himself up, but Booth refused. He knew it was death, anyhow, and, therefore, true to his instincts of notoriety, he determined to put himself in an attitude suitable for the final close of the play and the fall of the curtain. To the summons to surrender he replied: "If you withdraw your men in line, one hundred yards from the door, I will come out and fight you." He was told that they did not come to fight, but to capture him. He then proposed that if the soldiers would withdraw fifty yards he would come out and fight them. Upon receiving the same reply as before, he replied, in a theatrical voice: "Well, my brave boys, prepare a stretcher for me!"

After all the necessary dispositions had been made of the troops, with orders to take him alive, if possible, Conger made a final demand of Booth to give himself up. He refused. It was a rough night, and dark as a wolf's mouth, so that nothing could be seen thus far. Conger then took a match from his pocket, and lighted some hay through a crevice in the barn. The flames at once rushed up the side of the barn and rolled over the hay-mow in a vast volume of light. Booth was revealed

standing in the center of the barn-floor, leaning upon crutches, with a carbine in his hand, and in a stage attitude of a robber at bay. He looked all around, but seeing no audience he started for the door, but before reaching it he was shot by Sergeant Boston Corbett.

Thus died John Wilkes Booth, the puppet of the Rebellion and the slave of his own vanity. Thus the tragedy ended. Each went to his reward. Lincoln to an immortality of honor, Booth to an immortality of infamy.

“ Duncan is in his grave;  
After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well;  
Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison,  
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing  
Can touch him further.”