

Transcription, A Story of a Great Crime
By Richard S. Collum, Captain U.S.M.C., January 11, 1888
Paul Collection of Civil War Papers and Related Ephemera, Collection 3689

Capt. Richard S. Collum was in attendance at Ford's theatre the night of the assassination. This eye witness account, written twenty three years after the fact, details the events of the evening Lincoln was shot. It also describes the arrest and incarceration of Booth's co-conspirators as well as the fate of Booth's remains.

So much has been said, so much has been written in relation to the man who stood at the helm when our country was struggling in the throes of the mightiest conflict in the History of the World, that it is difficult for one who was but an humble unit in the Great Army which fought for the maintenance of our union of States, to write anything pertaining to that dark hour on the night of the 14th of April, 1865, which would not be characterized as a plagiarism.

Nevertheless it was the great and sorrowful misfortune of your ~~comrade~~ companion to have been an eye-witness of the greatest tragedy of modern times.

On the 8th of April 1865, I arrived, with my company of fifty marines at Philadelphia, from Turkey Bend on the James River, where I had been ordered after the Fall of Fort Fisher.

We left for Washington the next day at 11 AM. I remember well with what pride and exultation, I marched my little command through the streets of this loyal city to the Depot at Broad and Prime. We received an unexpected ovation from the good citizens along the route, and you can readily appreciate, ~~comrades~~ companions, how the innermost recesses of my heart were stirred (for it has been the experience of all), as we marched proudly along, welcomed by the bright smiles of fair women and the cheering words of brave men. We reached Washington in due time and were assigned to duty at the Barracks in the Navy Yard.

On the morning of the 14th of April the daily papers announced that the President, General Grant, and other distinguished men, would be present that evening at a representation of "Our American Cousin" in Ford's [sic] Theatre.

I determined to go, and in the company of a brother officer, a native of Washington, left the Barracks at 6 P.M. We walked leisurely down Pennsylvania Avenue, until we reached the old Kirkwood House, where Vice President Johnson was then living. We entered and seated ourselves in the reading-room, and my attention was soon directed to an individual who came in, dressed in dark clothes, a slouch hat, trousers inside of his boots and mexican [sic] spurs strapped to his heels. He spoke to my friend and passing on, entered the barroom, where I saw him distinctly refresh the [Times-man (?)]. In response to my natural query in regard to this man, the answer was, "his name is [Herold]," a "neer [sic]-do-well," whose father formerly occupied a clerks [sic] position in the Navy Yard for many years, but who is now dead."

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This was about 7 P.M.

At the proper time we entered the theatre, having secured seats, three rows from the stage, on the left-hand side. The Presidents box was on the right, so that we had an uninterrupted view of the occupants of the box from our position.

Soon the President came in with his wife, Major [Rathbone] and Miss Harris. Mr Lincoln sat in a rockingchair, close to the front of the box and next to the front row of seats outside. A person sitting in that row could have easily touched the President. Mrs Lincoln sat directly opposite her husband, Miss Harris in rear of Mrs Lincoln and Major [Rathbone] in rear and to the right of the President.

The house was, of course, crowded from pit to dome. The three rows of seats directly in our front remained vacant during the first act. During the first act ensued an incident, which did not seem of particular moment at the time, but viewed from the light of the subsequent event became of terrible and significant import when recalled.

John Wilkes Booth walked down the left-hand aisle to the proscenium box, and leaning his arm on the projection of the stage, took in the situation with an apparently cool and critical eye. He was dressed in an evening suit, with white satin waistcoat, which was the fashion in those days. Directly he sauntered out as deliberately as he had entered, and the incident passed out from our minds, only to be recalled vividly when the tragedy was consummated. Soon the curtains fell and immediately afterwards a crowd of men came in completely filling the rows of seats described as vacant.

The President sat chatting during the interval, and all careful observers concurred in the opinion that he exhibited a buoyancy of spirits greatly in contrast with his usual manner. He seemed to fully appreciate that he was surrounded by sympathetic and loyal hearts; that the dark clouds were dissipated, and that a regenerated nation had arisen, Phoenix like, from the ashes of internecine war.

But, alas! The dread shadow of death was even then insidiously approaching, and soon its icy hand would blot out forever a noble life.

Why was not that occult power, so often discussed by learned men, that premonition of sudden calamity, vouchsafed to the illustrious victim, or to some of us in that crowded assembly, to warn us of his impending doom? A few moments before the rise of the curtain on the second act, Mr Lincoln arose laughingly from his chair, retired to the rear of the box, put on his overcoat and resumed his seat. At this period of time it is almost impossible to recall the incidents of the play.

The curtain rose slowly on the second act, and while all were enjoying the eccentricities of Asa Trenchard, "Our American Cousin," who was alone upon the stage, a muffled pistol shot was heard. It seemed at the first second of time to have come from behind the scenes; then the stillness of death

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succeeded, an overpowering sense of something awful pervaded every mind; when suddenly a woman's piercing shriek rang out, a noise of scuffling in the President's box was heard, and immediately an agile form sprang upon the rail of the box. He poised himself for a second, long enough to shout in stentorian tones those memorable words "Sic Semper Tyrannis," jumped to the stage, his spurs tearing the flags with which the rail was decorated, and fell upon one knee. Like lightning he arose, and with a bowie-knife in his uplifted right hand, glided rapidly across the stage to the left, facing the audience as he passed, his eyes glaring with the wild light of insanity, and disappeared from view. Miss Harris, with frantic cries endeavored to seize the assassin by the tails of his coat, but they were torn from her grasp, and she could only exclaim "he has shot the President."

Major [Rathbone] was disabled by a stab in the arm, and Mrs Lincoln had fainted at the feet of her husband. Thus the great tragedy was accomplished.

As soon as Booth disappeared many gentlemen jumped upon the stage and hastened to the rear entrance which opened into an alley.

Nothing could be seen; the alley was deserted, the assassin and his confederate, Harold, had disappeared in the dark shadows of the night. Within the theatre the wildest confusion for a time prevailed; strong men wept and breathed vows of vengeance. Laura Keane appeared in front and with uplifted hands to Heaven cried in impassioned tones, "Kill him! Kill him!" You all know the attending circumstances of the removal of the poor President to the house opposite, and that he died the next morning.

The first issue of the daily papers contained a request from the Secretary of War to all officers, who had witnessed the assassination, to report at the Department.

In obedience to this order the writer presented himself at the Department and was interviewed by the Assistant Secretary. The same story was told, substantially as related to you, with the remark, that "could I have been possessed of that necessary characteristic of a soldier, presence of mind, which I doubted under the circumstances, – and had I been armed, I could easily have shot Booth." The reply was made, that the men referred to as having occupied the three front rows were supposed to be Booth's confederates, and an attempt to have arrested his progress in the manner indicated would have resulted disastrously. Another significant feature in the connecting incident of the tragedy, was the fact that all of the proscenium boxes and the front rows of seats next to the President's [sic] box, were secured but not occupied, thus lessening the chances of anyone observing the execution of the deed.

On the 13th, and for several days afterwards, the wildest rumors were circulated in the City of Washington; the sentinels at the various Posts were doubled and the indefatigable and untiring energy

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of General Augur, and his able subordinate, Brevet Brig. General Gile, a comrade whom we all know and respect, brought order out of chaos and allayed the fears of the timid citizens.

The guard under the writers temporary command at the Navy Yard was strengthened, sentinels were doubled and two monitors, the Saugus and the Montauk, were moored at the Navy Yard wharf, head and stern, upon which a strong detachment of marines were stationed under the command of Captain Munroe, with Lieutenants Young, Mannix, Miller and Bigelow (?) as his subordinates, to provide for contingencies.

The first man arrested was Paine, who was brought, at midnight, to the Navy yard in a closed carriage. He was received from the detectives and transferred to the monitor, where he was confined in double irons, in a cell closely guarded. The next one received was Azterodt, then came Spangler, Arnold, O'Laughlin and a Portuguese gentleman whose name I cannot recall. This latter person exhibited the utmost terror, crying bitterly, protesting his innocence and praying to be released. Finally, Harold [sic] was brought in with Booths body, and we had all of the prisoners under care with the exception of Mrs Surratt. Paine, in the extremity of his despair, attempted suicide by beating his head against the iron walls of his cell. To prevent any future attempts, a padded hood was constructed, which completely covered his head leaving nothing but his mouth and nostrils exposed, and secured under his chin by a throat latch securely locked. The other conspirators were secured in the same manner. These men were kept on the monitors for a period of a week after the autopsy on Booth's body, and were then transferred to the arsenal.

After their arrival at the arsenal the Portuguese referred to was suddenly released.

Booth's body, as I have said, was brought to the Navy Yard, and placed upon a carpenter's bench on the monitor Montauk, securely guarded. Visitors were excluded, no one being permitted to enter except with a pass signed jointly by the Secretaries of War and Navy. An autopsy was performed upon the body of Boot, by distinguished medical officers of the Army and Navy and Dr May an eminent civilian, in the presence of the other officials; also in the presence of the ubiquitous Col. Baker, Chief of the Detective Force of the United States.

This gentleman who sometimes permitted his zeal to outrun his discretion imagined, I suppose, that some of the distinguished officers engaged in the autopsy were disloyal, reported the writer (?) to the Secretary of War for neglect of duty in permitting rebel sympathizers to cut locks of hair from the assassins head and carry them away as sacred relics. It is needless to say that no difficulty was experienced in establishing the loyalty of the accused officers, nor that the young officer had failed in his duty, although it entailed a slight correspondence through through the usual red-tape channels.

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It now became a question with the authorities how to dispose of the body of ~~the~~ Booth. It was at first determined to place the remains in the hands of Col. Baker, with orders to sink it at sea; this idea was abandoned at the eleventh hour, and at midnight, after the autopsy was performed, the body was delivered to the Chief of Detectives. He conveyed it to the old penitentiary in the arsenal grounds, where it was buried in a cell. Subsequently, it was recovered and buried at the foot of the fallows with the other malefactors who were executed. Some years afterwards, Edwin Booth, who was always known as a loyal man, and who went into dignified retirement immediately after the tragedy, requested permission from the government to remove his brother's remains. This request was granted and the dust of John Wilkes Booth [repose (?)] in the family lot in a cemetery in Baltimore.

This important narrative is written entirely from memory, and after a lapse of nearly twenty-three years, some important incidents may have been forgotten, yet, ~~in the main,~~ that which has been related are facts which came under the observation of a subordinate actor in the events of that period. I cannot close without referring to the gallant chieftian [sic], "Le Beau Soldat", whose picture adorns our walls. Called to Washington, subsequent to the events I have narrated, by his wisdom, knightly bearing and consummate skill as a soldier, he preserved order during the trial and execution of the conspirators. With a stern sense of duty, his gentle heart bled that a woman should be sacrificed, and, to the last moment, hoped that Executive clemency would be exercised in [sic] behalf of Mrs Surrat.

To one other I would also refer, a distinguished and gallant officer, detailed as provost marshal of the great military court. From the hour of the removal of the prisoners from the Navy Yard to the arsenal, the faithful and conscientious discharge of this most important duty by General [Hartranft] merited that which he received and deserved, the commendations of his superiors and the respect and thanks of his countrymen.

Richard S. Collum

Captain U.S.M.C.

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