WITH JOHN WILKES BOOTH IN HIS DAYS AS AN ACTOR

The Story Of Two "Ifs" That Might Have Prevented Lincoln's Assassination.

THE REMINISCENCES OF JOHN M. BARRON

This is the ninth chapter of the memoirs of John M. Barron, the veteran Baltimore actor, who was intimately associated with all the principal players of America during the period 1855-1895. In his next paper Mr. Barron will discuss Charlotte Cushman, Mary Anderson and other famous woman stars.

Alas! poor country,
Almost afraid to know itself!

In the spring of 1860 George Kunkel came to me and we verbally agreed that I should return to Richmond for the theatrical season of 1860-61, and so in September I was again in the dear old town.

Little did I dream of the "dire combustion and confused events" that hovered over our beloved country. But already the war spirit was rampant, and men in commercial life sought to pierce the future to determine how and what to do. These sad forebodings materially affected business of all kinds, and ours was the most and first to suffer.

We had the usual list of stars and a good company. All the old Baltimoreans, with the exception of Byron and myself,

EDWIN BOOTH

had gone South. Charles Walcot (who was last here with Otis Skinner), Ed Lamb and Mrs Clementina De Bar (a sister of Ben, of New Orleans) were in the company. Sadie Partington was our "first chambermaid." She was the last to die of the three sisters—Kate, Mary (Mrs James Harrison) and Sallie. She passed away recently, aged 71 years. Mr. and Mrs Phillips were with us, and the company in general, though not so talented as that of 1857-58, was still a good one.

The Richings came and produced "The Enchantress"—the very best opera-drama ever written—under the supervision of Miss R. and Adam Rosenberger, our Baltimore leader, and his young brother Larry, who is now at the Academy of Music here. According to Miss Richings, who knew all about music, Adam entered into the spirit of "The Enchantress" with all the musical talent that was in him. I know he was a great leader.

A TABLEAU COMPANY.

There was at the time a company of French artists traveling through this country, called "The Kellers." Their entertainment consisted of tableaux of a Biblical nature, given upon a revolving platform occupying the entire stage, and the pictures were formed by the members of the company—perfect types of men and women. "The Battle of the Amazons," "The Birth of Flowers" were exceedingly beautiful, while the Biblical tableaux were of the most exalted nature and created a profound impression.

The revolving table moved slowly and stopped when a picture reached the center of the stage only for a minute or two; but during the pause another group would be formed on the part of the table at the back of the stage, so that new tableaux would be presented every few minutes. With the lighting effects we now have such an entertainment would be a novelty and an education.

Keller was a martinet, and during the company's stay at our Richmond theatre not one word was spoken while these tableaux were formed. Everyone knew where to go and what to do on the revolving platform.

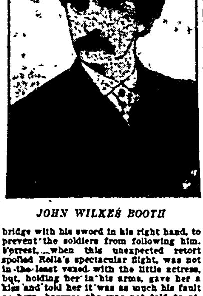
This season also brought us the usual stars and gave me my last glimpse of Edwin Forrest, who came, with his old repertoire. He played "Metamora," Rolla in "Pizarro" and "William Tell." We had as captain of supers one Peter Jackson, whose little daughter played all the children's parts—male and female. The night Forrest played Rolla he received a shock from this little miss that he never forgot.

AN UNEXPECTED RETORT.

In the third act of "Pizarro" Alonza, his wife, Cora, and the child are in the woods. During the scene Alonza and Cora stroll off, leaving the child sleeping on a bank. Two of Pizarro's men enter and, seeing the child, determine to steal it and carry it away to Pizarro's camp. Just as they are about to clasp the child in their embrace Rolla appears and, taking in the situation, exclaims: "By Heaven, it is Alonza's boy!"

When Forrest did this, little Miss Jackson arose and, shaking her finger at him, shouted in her shrill little voice: "Indeed. I ain't! I am Peter Jackson's little girl!"

Rolla seizes the boy and, fighting off the two soldiers, escaped across the bridge with the wriggling child under his left arm, while he cuts away the end of the



JOHN WILKES BOOTH

bridge with his sword in his right hand, to prevent the soldiers from following him. Forrest,—when this unexpected retort spoiled Rolla's spectacular flight, was not in the least vexed with the little actress, but, holding her in his arms, gave her a kiss and told her it was as much his fault as hers, because she was not told to attend rehearsals.

Forrest was a massive Richard III and looked upon Cibber's acting edition as a burlesque, as did Edwin Booth. It does seem strange that Cibber, taking Shakespeare's "Henry IV," "Henry V," "Henry VI" and "Richard III," managed to compile an edition of "Richard III" which has held the boards for 120 years. Thousands of dollars have been spent on the original "Richard," but it has never been as successful in the same sense as Cibber's rapid action version.

Such phrases as "Off with his head; so much for Buckingham!" are not Shakespeare's, but Cibber's, and there are many of these sentences—made to catch the ear and evoke the applause of the groundlings. But with all its defects Cibber's "Richard" has made established reputations for scores of actors from Garrick's time down to the present day.

JOHN WILKES BOOTH.

What shall I say of thee,
Thou that knew'st the very bottom of my soul?
Treason and murder ever kept together
As two yoke devils sworn to either's purpose,
But thou, 'gainst all proportion, did'st bring in
Wonder to wait on treason and on murder.
But he that tempered thee, bade thee stand up,
Gave thee no instance why thou should st do murder
Show men dutiful?
Why so did st thou; come they of noble family?
Why so did st thou; seemed they religious?
Why so did st thou;
Free from gross passion, or of mirth, or anger,
Such, and so finely bolted did'st thou seem,
And thus thy guilt hath left a kind of blot;
For this act of thine, methinks, is like
Another face of man.

In all the four brothers—Junius Brutus, Jr., Edwin, John Wilkes and Joseph Booth—the strain of potent and determined will power reached the borderland of eccentricity, not to say of mild insanity. As Edwin said, insanity was in the makeup of the entire family, male and female, if I may except Asia Booth Clarke. It was more pronounced and "firmly fixed" in John than in any of the others.

They all differed, and in some things they were as wide apart as the points of the compass, but in other things they clung together. All four personified generosity. Junius was somewhat phlegmatic, slow of speech and most deliberate in action; Edwin was graceful and decisive; John was quick in action and had eyes that were piercing and most expressive, with a perfect physical beauty and stately bearing; and Joe was the embodiment of ease, comfort and good fellowship.

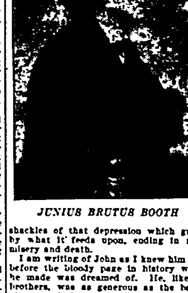
Of dramatic fire Joe had not one spark. Nature seems to have favored Edwin and John with all the charms that go to make perfect the exquisite art these two sons of an erratic genius adorned. Junius was a fairly good, reliable actor—great in nothing, but perfect in all he did to the limit of his abilities.

THE MADNESS OF JOHN.

I was acquainted with John before we were associated as brother actors, but not until I saw him every day and night did I know what manner of man he was.

John's madness has been ascribed to the environment in which he lived—to his reading, studying and acting the Roman plays in which assassination runs riot. This theory, however, does not hold good, for all who know the history of the Booths for two generations know that mental extravagance was hereditary in the family.

John, unlike Edwin, would not acknowledge or even mention the difference between himself and others, which to the minds of those like myself who knew him best only confirmed the fact of the inheritance of the unfortunate strain which Nature gave him. If we are what our environment makes us, that fact is a confession of a weak will. It shows, indeed, the lack of a mind determined to shake off the



JUNIUS BRUTUS BOOTH

shackles of that depression which grows by what it feeds upon, ending in ruin, misery and death.

I am writing of John as I knew him long before the bloody page in history which he made was dreamed of. He, like his brothers, was as generous as the balmy air on a glorious summer eve. Modest as a maiden, gentle, kind and considerate. While he was not much as a conversationalist, he was exceedingly companionable.

As to determination, he was the incarnation of all that the term implies, but so cool, so calm, that no man would dream of that "I will" as so predominant an element in the quiet, unruffled youth.

John, so far as I know, was not a devoted lover of nature as was Edwin, who—Heaven rest his soul!—could see beauty in every wavering leaf.

A QUEER INCIDENT.

I will recall an incident which happened at the old Marshal Theatre, Richmond. John and I boarded at the same house, with rooms adjoining, borrowed each other's wardrobe and were like all the rest of the company—jovial and happy

One day we had rehearsed "Much Ado About Nothing." John was Don Pedro and I was Don Claudio, parts of equal importance, though dissimilar in character. After rehearsal we wended our way homeward and fixed up our dresses for the evening's play. About 4 o'clock John suddenly turned to me.

"You play Don Pedro tonight," he said.

I looked at him in amazement.

"I do not," I replied. "I play Claudio, as I rehearsed it. What do you mean?"

"No matter what I mean," he exclaimed, "you go and tell 'Old Phil' (Stage Manager Phillips) that you play Don Pedro and he plays Claudio."

I was dumfounded, but I knew my man. To argue with him would have been as effective as trying to widen the Royal Gorge of the Colorado by whistling in it.

"I am going to Petersburg," he said, and he left me.

Phillips was about as much like Claudio then as I am now; but I played Don Pedro and Phillips read Don Claudio. Of course the performance was marred. We did not see John for two or three days, when he walked through the stage door as cool as if he had not absented himself.

My association with him as an actor was brief, but the man was like Edwin—born with the divine spark. He was the mold of form, delicately organized physically, with beautiful hands and small feet, graceful by nature, and in all a most effective actor. His eyes, like all the Booths, were exceedingly brilliant and expressive of all the phases of his characters.

Little did I dream while I was his companion that the time would come when those fingers, tapering like those of a 16-year-old maiden and with a touch as dainty, would pull the trigger which would put out the light of the gentlest of mortals, whose heart knew not guile, malice, envy or deceit—the best friend the South ever had, the most typical of Americans.

TWO PORTENTIOUS "IFS."

Shakespeare tells us that "there is much virtue in an if," and so there is; but oh, the ponderous import of two "ifs" that might have—nay, would have—changed the history of our country! With the first I had nothing to do, but will give its history.

The season of 1861 Manager Mat W. Canning organized a stock company for the South, with headquarters at Montgomery, Ala. In that organization were John W. Albaugh, Sr., leading man and stage manager, John Wilkes Booth, "stock star," and Samuel K. Chester, all of Baltimore. The season began at Columbus, Ga.

One day in a room of the hotel Mr. Canning, while examining a pistol, touched the trigger and it exploded. The shot struck John Wilkes Booth in the fleshy part of the thigh, inflicting a slight wound. "If" that shot had been fatal he would not have lived to plunge his country into the depths of despair and mourning, nor crushed with most poignant anguish those who loved him best; he would not have lived to "pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, to fire the shot that shook the foundation rock upon which his country lived.

The other "if" pertains to me alone. After leaving Richmond in April, 1861, I did not see John again until late in March, 1865. In the interim a great and bloody war had been fought, and the dawn of the end of that awful strife was breaking over our distracted country.

I had been through the war—from November, 1861, until Appomattox. After the second battle of Fort Fisher I was sent to the hospital at Key West, thence to New York, where I arrived in March, 1865.

The day was cold and cheerless, and I borrowed a civilian's overcoat from the pilot of the Nightingale, which brought me to New York and, placing a slouch hat upon my head, started up Broadway. At that time the Rialto was about the Metropolitan Hotel and Niblo's Garden Theatre, both of which were in one building. As I reached the steps of the hotel, who should be the first to greet me but John Wilkes Booth!

SUPPOSE HE HAD TOLD!

He seemed in a troubled mood and not a whit like his old self. I had not seen him in four years, and knew little of him, except that he was starring in the legitimate drama. There is no art which enables us to see the mind's workings in the face. This is true in general, but there are faces so mobile, so wrought with perplexity, so governed by the soul's turbulence that in a measure are real indices of what is in the mind. So it was with John. I knew

EDWIN FORREST,
As William Tell.

there was upon that mind a heavy burden, and I asked him if he had been or was ill.

"No," he replied. "Where are you going?"

"Uptown," I said, "and so I'll say goodby."

We shook hands and I started to go up Broadway, when John called me back. Now here is where inadvertence changed history. As I turned to go to him I threw open my borrowed overcoat, showing two rows of United States brass buttons and the ends of two gilt shoulder straps. The instant those piercing eyes fell upon my uniform "all his visage waned;" distraction seemed in his aspect; the whole man was changed.

His face became pale, and it was with difficulty he could frame an excuse for calling me to him again, and when he did speak his voice was broken and discordant. He was suppressing as best he could his extremely wrought emotion. No one but a consummate actor could have controlled himself as did this wayward man on that occasion. The comprehension of the narrow escape he had made unnerved him, but he was soon himself, and after a brief chat we parted never to meet again.

I think it was the same day—perhaps the next—when a brother actor and a friend of both of us saw John at the same place. To this friend (who is still living, but wishes to be nameless, as he has striven to banish as best he can the entire episode from his life) John divulged his treasonable plot, which he had intended I should hear.

"If" I had not thrown open my overcoat and shown my uniform I would have heard all. That I would have been amazed and shocked beyond measure I know full well, but being of a calm temperament, I would have doubtless done nothing but listen, listen and determine. I would have thought of duty—the greatest word in any language. That duty would have been to hasten to the navy yard and report to the commandant what I had heard.

Thus I might have saved our President, saved the country from all the horrors that that act incurred and saved John from himself. To this mutual friend, to whom the plot was unfolded, there was no word implying assassination, but abduction, and I have often thought that at the last, finding abduction impossible, and tortured by his insane thought of aiding the South by striking a blow at the fountainhead of the Government, John was impelled to that awful deed he committed. In three weeks from the time I met him the shot was fired that shook the foundation of this republic.

LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION.

I had returned to Baltimore during that three weeks, and on the 15th of April had an engagement with my old engineer friend, Ferdinand Benner, to meet him on board the steamer Highland Light, of which he was chief engineer. I was early astir and had not seen a paper, nor did I meet a person that I knew.

When "Ferd" came on board he approached me and said: "What do you think of the awful news?"

"What awful news?" I asked.

"For God's sake, John, don't you know that your friend John Wilkes Booth has assassinated President Lincoln?"

To attempt to tell how I felt would have been futile, for an avalanche of terrible thoughts went rushing through my mind. Then, and not till then, did I comprehend what John wished to impart to me on that fateful day in New York.

I asked Benner to excuse me and call off the business we had in mind. Those who did not live in that period cannot conceive nor tell what Baltimore—nay, the whole country—was on the day Lincoln died. It was not safe to utter a thought, for no matter if in loyal terms it might be misconstrued.

Mr. Ford and John Sleeper Clarke were arrested. Even my old friend and brother actor, Harry A. Langdon, was taken into custody, being mistaken for J. B. Booth, Jr.

The capture, death and burial of John Wilkes Booth are written history and need no comment here. He sleeps in Greenmount Cemetery, surrounded by those who loved him in the days of his innocence, who reared him to cultured manhood and who sent him forth to make an era in dramatic art, for which art generous nature had lavishly endowed him.

Let him lie in the earth until the last trumpet shall sound, until the musical waves from that trumpet shall quaver over the ambient air and go out into inconceivable and vasty space; until the martyr and the madman shall, with all the rest of mankind, stand before the Almighty, the inexorable and impartial Judge, and take what is meted out to them.

Rest, rest, perturbed spirit.

THE PRINCE OF WALES.

During the Richmond season I have been describing we had that excellent organization, the Cooper English Opera Company, with us, and the Prince of Wales happened to be in Richmond during the engagement.

The regular company, with the exception of myself, was in Petersburg. I had been retained by the Coopers to play Zamiel. As I was in charge of the theatre, I felt it incumbent upon me to invite his Royal Highness to witness the performance given by his own countrymen. I had the interior of the auditorium tastefully decorated with American and British flags, in anticipation of the presence of the future King of England.

Late in the afternoon a messenger came to me from the Duke of Newcastle, thanking me for the courtesy shown his Royal Highness and regretting that circumstances had arisen which would prevent the acceptance of my invitation.

Cooper was mad and expressed himself in terms more forcible than elegant, for the house was crowded in expectancy of hearing a delightful opera and seeing the Prince at the same time.

There was some friction between the Prince's party and the city officials, and this was construed into an affront to royalty. As a result the Prince decided to leave Richmond instanter, which he did.

MY ESCAPE FROM RICHMOND.

When South Carolina seceded from the Union in January, 1861, the whole South was in a frenzy of excitement and ablaze with the war spirit, and it did not require a profound intellect to see that war was but a question of very little time. Still we kept on the even tenor of our way, discussing nothing. But when on that fateful morning of April 14 the news was flashed around the world that from Moultrie a shot had been fired against Sumter and Old Glory we knew the time had come either to go with or against the South.

Before that shot was fired I had determined what my course would be. My fighting would be for the old flag, but this fact I kept to myself, for those were trying hours in Richmond. No pen picture can convey an idea of what was transpiring. Next to Charleston, Richmond was the storm center. The war spirit seemed to permeate every living soul — white and black, male and female.

The theatre was soon closed, and we were informed that the season was over. I saw that if I wished to get to Baltimore I must use the utmost celerity, and so on the morning of April 16 I engaged passage on the old steamer Belvedere, with the same noble Captain Keene with whom Albaugh and I first went to Richmond in 1857. Sending my trunks on board that day, I was told to come myself in the early evening, as the ship sailed at 9 P. M.

The day had been and still was exceedingly unruly. A drenching rain had prevailed since the night before. I had a few personal belongings tied in a bundle, and with it suspended from the end of one of my swords over my shoulder I started from the hotel toward "The Rockets," the landing place of the steamer, fully a mile distant.

As I passed through Capitol Square on that stormy night, wet to the skin though I was, I could not resist the impulse to stop and take one parting glance at that magnificent creation of Crawford, the equestrian statue of Washington, which I had seen unveiled February 22, 1858.

"You, at least," I thought, "are safe, for no hand of vandalism North or South would stoop so low as to mar your beauty."

Hurrying toward Main street, I paused again, for there in white marble stood the statue of the immortal Henry Clay. Was the great fabric of which he was a component part to be rent asunder after all his matchless eloquence, tact and genius had been used to save it?

IN A ROWBOAT AT NIGHT.

Upon arriving at "The Rockets" I found the water fully four inches deep on the wharf where I expected to find the Belvedere. The river was rising and in seeming rage propelled surges against the banks. The boat was anchored in midstream; the wind was howling, and a scene of rude commotion prevailed. I began to despair—to doubt my ability to reach the ship.

But presently I saw an old bateau made fast to one of the posts of the shed, and at once decided to appropriate it, leaky and rickety as it was. I pushed off in that dismal, rainy, stormy, inky-black night and rowed to the Belvedere. A friendly hand threw me a line, and in a little while "once more on the deck I stand." I was warmly welcomed by the captain, who gave me dry apparel.

When Otis Skinner was last here I asked Walcot, of his company, who was in Richmond with me, how he escaped.

"By rail," he said, "through the kindness of Mrs. Magill, owner of the theatre, and the influence of the French Consul, M. Myer. But I was stopped at Harper's Ferry."

We on the Belvedere were halted at Fort Monroe by General Wool, but were permitted to resume our trip, and arrived in Baltimore in time to see the Lexington of the Civil War—in the streets of Baltimore.

In November, 1861, I received my commission as engineer in the United States Navy, witnessed the destruction of the Cumberland and Congress off Newport News, was alongside the Minnesota during the battle between the Monitor and Merrimac, thence went South with the North Atlantic squadron and participated in all its actions, culminating in the second battle of and fall of Fort Fisher, in January, 1865.

That actors went to the war in the same proportion to numbers as men in any other profession is well known. Good soldiers they made. Hard, long marches and trials were theirs, but they murmured not. Like myself, all remained on deck until the dawn of Appomattox.

J. M. BARRON