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Dr. Mudd

His Return Home – A Drive to His Residence – Sketches on the Way – Booth's Ride – How the Doctor Looks and What He Says – His Account of Booth's and Harold's visit After the Assassination – What He Thinks of His Own Trial and Condemnation – His Reported Confession to Captain Dutton a Sham, which He says was Concocted by Secretary Stanton.

Washington, March 25, 1869.

It will be many, many years ere the tragic story of President Lincoln's assassination ceases to exercise its fearful fascination over men's minds. The thrilling horrors of the deed assumed by circumstances a characters that made it the most surpassing tragedy in the history of the world. The head of the nation shot dead in a public playhouse, in the centre of the capital, on Good Friday evening, and the assassin boldly escaping from the scene of his awful crime, make a subject of more terrible interest and weird influence than any tale fiction has ever furnished. The profound thrill of surprise, grief and indignation that shot through the hearts of thirty millions of people and went circling round the earth wherever humanity and civilization dwelt attested the magnitude of the offence and the desperate purpose of the assassin. It was no wonder, in the angry time that followed, with the nation's pulse at fever heat and the cry for vengeance ringing through the land, that all who were in ever so remote a manner identified with the chief conspirator should be rashly judged and summarily dealt with. In that period of lightning passion, when a storm cloud of wrath hung over the country like a pall, one was hurried to her account for whom no human restitution can ever be made, and yet, perhaps, it is a marvel that no other victims were immolated to the blind and reckless vengeance of the hour. Among those caught up in the prevailing maelstrom of suspicion at the time was Dr. Samuel Mudd, of whom the public have very fully heard as the surgeon that set the broken leg of Booth, and who was sentenced for life to the Dry Tortugas. Time, which removes us to a calm, unprejudiced standpoint from the exciting events of a past period, has brought to him his freedom from a living tomb, and has given him the fortune to outlive the clamor of false accusation and to rise above the ponderous weight of odium heaped upon his name. Men did not stop to inquire, to ponder, to investigate the possibility of perjury on one side or innocence on the other when judgment was silenced by the fierce demand for speedy retribution. To gratify this Mrs. Surratt was sacrificed and Dr. Mudd was consigned to an outcast felon's doom. In other and calmer times it is safe to presume neither result would have occurred; the one would have not passed into history the reproach of a great nation as being the victim of judicial murder, and the other would have escaped the torture worse than death of blighted name and hopes ever ruined. Your correspondent, anxious as well to see the returned prisoner of the Dry Tortugas as to ride over the thirty miles of ground that witnessed the mad and fearful flight of Booth, took a wagon and gallant team of bays and rattled away from Washington in the breezy air of yesterday morning. East of the Capital half a mile is a bridge that crosses a branch of the Potomac – an old bridge, very unevenly floored and altogether rudely constructed. The night of the 14th of April, 1865,

sentinels stood at either end of this causeway and saw Booth flash past them, followed by Harold, the first announcing himself as a doctor rushing to a sick call, the latter as the messenger sent in haste for the doctor. The conspirators were in no mind to observe the rule that all other equestrians have to follow of walking their horses across the bridge. They flew with the wind, wheeled to the left through the village of Uniontown and clattered over a broad [unintelligible] road into Maryland. We followed the trail of the assassin's ride up hill and down hill for several miles until we reached a point on the road called Good Hope. Standing here you take your last glimpse of Washington, the silvery Potomac and the [unintelligible]-like dome of the Capitol, and having made up your mind to the enterprise you plunge unto the most heaven-forsaken country within a hundred miles of Washington. Yet this is a portion of "My Maryland," where the very landscape is supposed to call forth poetic and patriotic enthusiasm and every root of soil supports a freeman bold and brave. We roll down a great billowy incline of red earth, cross a tremulous bridge of rotten boards and mount a steep ascent of furrowed mud at the other side. No fences anywhere, no green thing in sight, no trim farm houses, no people with white faces, save ever and anon a bankrupt and hopeless looking farmer stretched on a load of manure and cornstalks and gazing dejectedly at a team of palsied ponies. By the wayside every few miles a blacksmith blows his bellows for the edification and delight of a few forlorn loafers, who seem to sustain themselves between watching the sickly blaze of the furnace and poking fun at the impecunious son of Vulcan. Each a perfect terra incognita so near Washington and civilization could hardly be dreamed of; and now we begin to understand why Booth, be it known, had long previous to the night of the assassination mapped out this part of Maryland as the course by which he intended to abduct President Lincoln into the confederacy. After a thirty-five miles journey he intended to strike the Potomac and, crossing over, hold on his journey through the least known and wildest portion of Virginia. Giving up his abduction scheme and resolving on assassination, he still found the route serviceable as a means of escaping capture. No better could be selected, for no man unacquainted with the country could follow a fugitive through it without being lost, and yet there are no dense forests or impassable steams in the way, but there is a constant dipping of the soil united with low broken ridges of hills, overspread by a Sahara-like loneliness and an utter absence of wayfarers on the highway, that make it admirably adapted for the purposes of a fleeing criminal. Eight or ten miles from Washington we passed Surrattsville, once the happy country residence of the unfortunate family of Surratt. This was a favorite resort of Booth. Here the girl was supposed to live to whom he was accustomed to say he was affianced, and whenever the business of the conspiracy took him from Washington he generally accounted for his absence by saying that his marriage was near at hand, and he had been making preparations for its consummation. Surratt's house, painted white and standing by the roadside with its fresh green shutters and wide, shady verandas, looked the only redeeming feature of the road. It was once a tavern, in the good old times before the war, when the chivalry of Maryland lived in clover and niggers abounded on every tobacco plantation in the state. But there it stands, untenanted, and all its former inmates have left its neighborhood forever.

We pull up to learn the bearings of the road at an old fashioned grocery, a mile or so beyond Surrattsville, and a whole party who have been engaged playing cards and drinking whiskey come forth to give the desired information. Such a team as ours is seldom seen in that vicinity, so we immediately become the centre of much curious observation. Where we are going

it a theme of varied speculation and there are many meditative mouths wondering if our visit means a treat for all hands round. Here we learned that Booth stopped to replenish his brandy flask, riding up to the door on his horse and waking up the inmates by a loud knocking with the handle of his whip or the stock of his revolver, can't say which. We leave very soon. The roads are in a terrible condition, mud holes on every side, and our objective point is still afar off. Now we pass a school house sixteen feet long by twelve. Six of the scholars are out at play, chopping wood, and two of the female pupils are engaged in milking cows for pastime no doubt. Now we come in a swollen stream with a very uneven bed; the wagon keels partly over, and the horses struggle fearfully to extricate it. All right again; but Booth must have had a rough experience hereabouts. A few miles more and we reach the village of T.B. – a curious name, truly, which is explained by the oldest inhabitant as being the initials of some belated pioneer who carved the letters on a huge beech tree and then laid himself down to die. The village so called sprung forth from his ashes.

Still on the trail of the assassins we find Booth made another halt here and sent Harold to Johnson's tavern to procure a strap of leather to fasten the broken buckle on the girth of his saddle. The country is very desolate at this point; stumps of trees, hideous as midnight ghouls, dot the fields all over. To the right is the road to Beantown and to Dr. Mudd's. It is the roughest highway outside of the corduroy causeways of old Virginia. The wheels sink to the hubs in mucilaginous mud and the road runs through forest, field and swamp without any attempt at regularity. Five miles from T.B. the route to Dr. Mudd's strikes off from the main road. It is extremely narrow, barely wide enough for two horsemen abreast. Once out of the wood, through which it leads, it assumes wider proportions and stopes obliquely across the shoulder of a hill and past a Catholic church. We drive over to the church to call on Father Lenaghan, who has a world of anecdote about everything, including the chase after the assassins. "Two officers called here in search of Harold," says the priest, "and asked me if I did not know and if I had not frequently met him. I told them I never heard of him and never met nor knew any Harold. The only one of the name I remembered was Childe Harold, whereat the officers laughed, said they were simply performing a duty, and felt convinced no one of the class they were looking for was harbored in the house." We drive back again, rattle across half a dozen fields, through which the track of the road lies, and finally came out at the base of an elevated plateau, on top of which in the centre stands the residence of Dr. Mudd. After struggling up the ascent we come in a few minutes in view of a white painted, high frame building, surrounded by pine trees and cedars and standing about 400 yards from the road. The face of the country has undergone a vast change. Cultivated fields be all around, while fences are the rule and not the exception. It was four o'clock on an April morning, in the year 1865, when Booth and Harold, with their guilty souls steeped in the blackest infamy and eternal despair staring them in the face, rode their horses up here and bent their fatal steps to the doomed domicile of Mudd. In the meantime we can tell our own story. Guessing, in the absence of reliable information, that the white frame house standing over in the fields was the one we were in quest of, we drove across, and having hitched the horses to a fence took a leisurely survey of the ground, noting especially the beauty and seclusion of the situation. There were several outhouses, one a barn, the other a stable, standing at a distance of a few hundred feet from the dwelling. A garden in which nothing appeared to be growing, a semi-circular area in front of the house planted in low wide spreading cedars, an

extensive strip on one side of rolling meadow land, and on the other a long irregular line of pine trees constituted the chief features of the scene.

We knocked for admission at the same door that Booth did after his six hours' ride –it took us eight - and were promptly answered by a pale and serious looking gentleman, who, in answer to our inquiry if he were Dr. Mudd, replied, "That's my name." It was gratifying after so long a journey to find the man you sought directly on hand and apparently prepared to furnish you will the amplest stores of information regarding his connection with Booth, &c. Having stated the object of our visit – that the Herald led an interest in learning some particulars of his experience in the Dry Tortugas and his recollections of the assassination conspirators – his face grew extremely serious and he answered that of all things he wished to avoid it was newspaper publicity, simply because nothing was ever printed in connection with his name that did not misrepresent him.

"A burned child dreads the fire," he exclaimed, "and I have reason to be suspicious of every one. It was in this way Booth came to my house, representing himself as being on a journey from Richmond to Washington, and that his horse fell on him. Six months or so from now, when my mind is more settled and when I understand that changes have taken place in public opinion regarding me, I shall be prepared to speak freely and fully on these matters you are anxious to know about. At present, for the reason stated, I would rather not say anything."

Having, however, convinced the doctor that it was with no motive to misrepresent his statements that we paid him this visit and tat between Booth's case and ours there was no analogy, he invited us to pass the evening at his house and postpone our return to Washington till the morning. Left alone for a while in the parlor, an ample, square apartment, with folding doors separating it from the dining room, we began to feel an irresistible inclination to imagine two strangers on horseback riding up to the door in the dim gray of an April morning, the younger of the two lifting the other from his saddle and bother like evil stars crossing the threshold of an innocent and happy household to blast its peace forever, Dr. Mudd's return disturbed our reveries.

The Doctor says he is thirty-five years of age, married in 1860 [sic], built the house in which he now lives after his marriage, owned a well stocked farm of about thirty acres, and was in the enjoyment of a pretty extensive practice up to the time of his arrest in 1865. The word went well and smoothly with him previous to that unhappy event. His house was furnished with all the comfort of a country gentleman's residence. He had his horses and hounds, and in the sporting season was foremost at every fox hunt and at every many outdoor sport. He had robust health and a vigorous, athletic frame in those days, but it is very different with him now. Above the middle height, with a reddish mustache and chin whisker, a high forehead and attenuated nose, his appearance indicates a man of calm and slow reflection, gentle in manner, and of a very domestic turn. He says he was born within a few miles of this house, and has lived all his life in the country. His whole desire now it to be allowed to spend the balance of his days quietly in the bosom of his family. In his sunken, lustreless eye, pallid lips and cold, ashy complexion one can read the words "Dry Tortugas" with a terrible significance. In the prime of his years, looking prematurely old and careworn, there are few indeed who could gaze on the wreck and ravage in

the face of this man before them without feeling a sentiment of sympathy and commiseration. "I have come home," said the Doctor sorrowfully, "to find nothing left me but my house and family. No money, no provisions, no crops in the ground and no clear way before me where to derive the means of support in my present [unintelligible] condition." There was no deception here. In the scanty furniture of the house and in the pale, sad countenance of the speaker there was evidence enough of poor and altered fortune. It was not evening and growing rapidly dark. A big fire blazed on the ample hearth, and Mrs. Mudd, an intelligent and handsome lady, with one of her children, joined the Doctor and ourselves in the conversation over the events of that memorable April morning after the assassination.

"Did you see Booth, Mrs. Mudd?" we inquired with a feeling of intense interest to hear her reply.

"Yes," she replied, "I saw himself and Harold after they entered this parlor. Booth stretched himself out on that sofa there and Harold stooped down to whisper something to him."

"How did Booth look?"

"Very bad. He seemed as though he had been drinking very hard; his eyes were red and swollen and his hair in disorder."

"Did he appear to suffer much?"

"Not after he laid down on the sofa. In fact, it seemed as if hardly anything was wrong with him then."

"What kind of a fracture did Booth sustain?" we inquired, addressing the Doctor.

"Well," said he, "after he was laid down on that sofa and having told me his leg was fractured by his horse falling on him during his journey up from Richmond, I took a knife and split the leg of his boot down to the instep, slipped it off and the sock with it; I then felt carefully with both hands down along his leg, but at first could discover nothing like crepitation till, after a second investigation, I found on the outside, near the ankle, something that felt like indurated flesh, and then for the first time I concluded it was a direct and clean fracture of the bone. I then improvised out of pasteboard a sort of boot that adhered close enough to the leg to keep it rigidly straight below the knee, without at all interfering with the flexure of the leg. A low cut shoe was substituted for the leather boot, and between five and six o'clock in the morning Booth and his companions started off for a point on the river below."

"How did Booth's horse look after his long ride?" we inquired.

"The boy, after putting him up in the stable," the Doctor replied, "reported that his back underneath the forward part of the saddle was raw and bloody. This circumstance tallied with Booth's account that he had been riding all day previous from Richmond, and no suspicion arose in my mind for one instant that the man whose leg I was attending to was anything more than what he represented himself."

"You knew Booth before, Doctor?"

“Yes,” replied the Doctor. “I was first introduced to Booth in November, 1864, at the church yonder, spoke a few words to him and never saw him afterwards until a little while before Christmas, when I happened to be in Washington making a few purchases and waiting for some friends from Baltimore who promised to meet me at the Pennsylvania House and come out here to spend the holidays. I was walking past the National Hotel at the time, when a person tapped me on the shoulder and, on turning round, I discovered it was the gentleman I was introduced to at the church about six weeks previously. He asked me aside for a moment and said he desired an introduction to John H. Surratt, with whom he presumed I was acquainted. I said that I was. Surratt and I became almost necessarily acquainted from the fact of his living on the road I travelled so often on my way to Washington, and having the only tavern on the way that I cared to visit. Booth and I walked along the avenue three or four blocks, when we suddenly came across Surratt and Weichman [sic], and all four having become acquainted we adjourned to the National Hotel and had a round of drinks. The witnesses in my case swore that Booth and I moved to a corner of the room and were engaged for an hour or so in secret conversation. That was a barefaced lie. The whole four of us were in loud and open conversation all the time we were together, and when we separated we four never met again.”

“You told the soldiers, Doctor, the course the fugitives pursued after leaving your house?”

“I did. I told them the route that Booth told me he intended to take; but Booth, it seems, changed his mind after quitting here and went another way. This was natural enough; yet I was straightway accused of seeking to set the soldiers astray, and it was urged against me as proof positive of implication in the conspiracy.”

“You must have felt seriously agitated on being arrested in connection with this matter?”

“No, sir. I was just as self-possessed as I am now. They might have hanged me at the time and I should have faced death just as composedly as I smoke this pipe.”

“What did you think of the military commission?”

“Well, it would take me too long to tell you. Suffice it to say that not a man of them sat on my trial with an unbiased and unprejudiced mind. Before a word of evidence was heard my case was prejudged and I was already condemned on the strength of wild rumor and misrepresentation. The witnesses perjured themselves, and while I was sitting there in that dock, listening to their monstrous falsehoods, I felt ashamed of my species and lost faith forever in all mankind. That men could stand up in that court and take an oath before Heaven to tell the truth and the next moment set themselves to work to swear away by downright perjury the life of a fellow man was a thing that I in my innocence of the world never thought possible. After I was convicted and sent away to the Dry Tortugas a confession was got up by Secretary Stanton, purporting to have been made by me to Captain Dutton on board the steamer, and was afterwards appended to the official report of my trial. This was one of the most infamous dodges practiced against me, and was evidently intended as a justification for the illegality of my conviction. I never made such a confession and never could have made it, even if I tried.”

“How did their treat you down to the Dry Tortugas?”

“Well, I feel indisposed to say much on that head. If I made disclosures of matters with which I am acquainted certain officers in command there might find themselves curiously compromised.”

“You did good service caring the fever plague, Doctor?”

“Well, I can say this, that as long as I acted as post physician not a single life was lost. My whole time was devoted to fighting the spread of disease and investigating its specific nature. I found that the disease does not generate the poison which gives rise to the plague. The difference between contagion and infection which I have discovered is that one generates the poison from which the fever springs and the other does not. Contagion, such a smallpox, measles, &c., generates the poison which spreads the complaint of yellow fever, typhoid fever and other such infectious diseases. It requires contact with the poison and not with the disease to infect a person, and if a thousand cases of fever were removed from the place of the disease no danger whatever need be apprehended. The Fever in the Dry Tortugas was of the same type as typhoid, and the treatment on the expectant plan – that, is watching the case the treating the symptoms as they manifest themselves.”

“Were you untrammelled in your management of the sick?”

“No, sir; there’s where I felt the awkwardness of my position. I was trammelled and consequently could not act with the independence a physician under such circumstances should have.”

The Doctor talked at considerable length on many other topics connected with his imprisonment. In replying to the remark that his feelings must have been greatly exercised at coming within sight of his old home and meeting his wife once more he said, with visible tremor, that words were entirely inadequate to express the overwhelming emotions that filled his mind. It appears that a few days before he left the Dry Tortugas a company of the Third artillery, who were on board a transport about being shipped to some other point, on seeing the Doctor walking on the parapet, set up three cheers for the man who periled his life for them in the heroic fight with the dread visitation of fever. We talked along till midnight, then retired to a comfortable leather bed, and, rising with the sun in the morning, started out homeward journey to Washington.

Transcribed by Dave Taylor of BoothieBarn.com, July 9, 2018