

THE CURSE OF CAIN

THE UNTOLD STORY OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH

by Theodore J. Nottingham

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PREFACE

On the night of April 14, 1865 a gunshot from a small derringer interrupted the laughter at Ford's Theater and forever changed American history. Hardly a week after the Confederacy's surrender at Appomatox, with Washington lavishly decorated to celebrate the end of the bloody Civil War, Abraham Lincoln slumped down in his chair never to regain consciousness. The assassin leaped onto the stage crying out "*Sic Semper Tyrannis*" -- "Thus always to tyrants."

He was recognized immediately. Everyone in the theater knew him. Most had admired his charismatic presence on stage and hailed him as the finest actor of the era. A dozen members of the audience had chatted with him that very day. At twenty-six years of age, John Wilkes Booth, son of the great tragedian Junius Brutus Booth and brother to Edwin,

America's most acclaimed Hamlet, was the toast of Washington. His theatrical triumphs followed him from Richmond to Boston and his future was assured as a brilliant and beloved star. But in one terrible instant, it all vanished. Why did he throw his destiny away? Who was he behind the handsome face and winsome persona? What forces were at work at his side, opening the way for his entrance into the President's private boxseat and cutting the telegraph wires between the capital and surrounding army posts? Did his story really end at the burning farmhouse? What happened to the lives of those who loved him?

Our history books have been silent over mysteries kept hidden for generations. But strange tales have come down to us through the friends and family of John Wilkes Booth that have yet to be told. Tales of secret societies, escape to foreign lands, children fathered after the father's presumed death...And the shadow of a curse, one recognized by Booth himself while on the run in the swamps near the Potomac.

Behold, Thou has driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from Thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth. This ancient curse is strangely fitting to Booth's destiny as a result of his terrible deed. It may even have become a greater retribution than the accepted historical theory that his life was ended by a soldier's bullet. But the impact of his terrible deed also reverberated down through the generations, overshadowing the lives of his descendants. I am one of them, his great-grandson thrice removed. My great-grandmother was the granddaughter of the assassin of Abraham Lincoln. Her mother, Ogarita, was Booth's daughter. She was six years old when he pulled the trigger at Ford's Theater and became transformed from a revered matinee idol to a desperate fugitive and lonely wanderer upon the earth. Booth's great-grandson, C. Edward Clutts, my grandfather, has recently turned ninety-one years of age. For most of his life, he would not speak of our ancestor out of shame and concern for his own safety.

* * *

From earliest childhood, I had heard of the dark, brooding ancestor who left a bloody mark on American history. The tragic tale of John Wilkes Booth has intrigued me ever since. From my father's side of the family, I developed a great love for Abraham Lincoln with his homespun wisdom

and compassion. Through the writings of Carl Sandburg and the poems of Walt Whitman, Lincoln became for me a shining light of the American spirit at its best. On my mother's side, there was an altogether different influence. Carved in my grandfather's features were the dark, almond-shaped eyes and pitch black hair of the Booth family. His mother (my great-grandmother) was one of those powerful women of the theater who travelled across the country in the early part of this century presenting their art in the strangest places. She was theater incarnate, with the temper of Medusa and the glare of Zeus. In her later years, still full of fire, she ran a little theater in Keene, New Hampshire where she carried on the family tradition to the end of her life. That family tradition was both grand and tragic. For she was the granddaughter of John Wilkes Booth. Her mother, Ogarita, was also an actress who openly wore a picture of her father in a locket around her neck until she died at the young age of thirty-two. That locket has been passed down to me and I recently dusted it off to show it to my daughter while initiating her into the drama of our forefathers.

Throughout my youth, I felt particularly drawn to the twenty-six year old matinee idol whose destiny was aborted by the most horrific of acts. I too was drawn early on to the theater and thereby felt a sort of genetic connection with the Booths who in their day were the premiere American family of the theater. Also passed down through the generations was the brooding mood of the Booths whose Spanish ancestry and dramatic flair fused into intense character traits. For years, I heard the tale of the murder, of the lone killer, of the epic manhunt, and of the final capture and death scene. In my teens, I studied the book written by my great-grandmother's sister, the journalist Izola Forrester. *This One Mad Act*, published in 1937, was based on forty years of relentless research into the saga of John Wilkes Booth. My great aunt interviewed the actual participants in those terrible events, old men haunted by memories that no history book has recorded. Inspired by her efforts and discoveries, I undertook a similar research, studying all of the best historians on the subject. The result won a Lilly Historical Scholarship. More importantly, it convinced me that the stories our teachers taught us in school were not complete, and some were even falsified by those who had a stake in the retelling of American history.

It may be that no one will ever know the full truth on these matters. But

there is a powerful story here which Americans ought to know as part of their inheritance. Once the political issues and easy labels have been put aside, we are faced with a tragedy that would have made Shakespeare himself envious. I have therefore taken the solid research that can be traced all the way back to the day of the assassination and, based on feasible conclusions, have added dramatic narrative in order to convey the emotional tone of the human experience behind the pictures of the history books. I believe that the story is best represented in this way for it is more dramatic than any play in which the Booths displayed their mighty talents. Most of all, this is a drama of human beings who found themselves caught up in the hurricane of events that tore them from their cherished hopes and dreams. They deserve to have their story remembered.

Part Three

The Research

(sample)

SET-UP FOR MURDER

It was in all the papers: Tonight Ulysses S. Grant and his wife would be accompanying the President to Ford's Theater to enjoy a performance starring Laura Keane. (23) The Secretary of War had also been invited but had refused. (24) According to the manager of the theater, there was never much of an attendance on Friday nights. But the unusual appearance of the colorful Supreme Commander had drawn a full house of curious admirers. That night, however, as people entered the theater, they must have been sorely disappointed. Hardly any soldiers were present. When a general, let alone the Supreme Commander, comes to a public function, he is always accompanied by hordes of armed men. At the last moment, Grant had taken an evening train to go visit his children up north. (25) Even though he already had a strained relationship with Lincoln, he had suddenly changed his mind after accepting the presidential invitation. But the fact is that not even Ulysses S. Grant was that unmannered. That afternoon the Secretary of War had come to see him and explained that going to the theater with the President would invite disaster. (26) Apparently Grant found this concern to be logical despite the fact that he played right into the hands of the murderers. Without Grant's escort for protection, and given a

soldier on record for his unreliability (27), Abraham Lincoln was left entirely at the mercy of his enemies.

STRANGE OCCURENCES

Within fifteen minutes, all telegraph wires around the city of Washington D.C. are severed (from 10:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m.), except for a secret government wire which leads to Fort Old Point. Two wires in the main battery had been crossed and all service shorted. (28) Almost immediately. John Wilkes Booth's name is heard coming from the shouts of the hysterical crowd. Yet efforts are made to withhold his name from the press and for some hours after the assassination it is ruled out of military dispatches. (29) By one in the morning of April 15th, his name is released. Alarms are sent to Winchester, Harper's Ferry, Cumberland, Baltimore, Annapolis, Acquia Creek, Relay House -- but none go to the fat foot of Maryland which lies between the Potomac and the Patuxent where Booth is spurring on his horse. (30) The Port Tobacco road leading southward is left unguarded the entire night. (31)

THE CAPTORS

General James R. O'Beirne has been considered by historians as the one man to deserve the credit for discovering the route taken by Booth. Why did he not receive the credit officially? When O'Beirne thought he had cornered the fugitive, he sent a telegram to Washington reporting the direction they were headed and asked for orders. He was told to return to his command in Maryland. (32) The final honors were given to Lieutenant Luther Baker, cousin of Lafayette C. Baker, the head of the Secret Service, along with Colonel Everton J. Conger, Major Edward P. Doherty and the twenty-two men of the 16th New York Regiment. The capture was taken from the hands of a first class general and put into those of two reward-hungry Secret Service detectives leading the most motley crew ever assembled to assist in a historical event. Thus began one of the strangest sagas of contradictions, exaggerations, mistakes, and lies ever produced in our history.

As told in the history books, Private Boston Corbett finally ended the affair by shooting the man in the barn because he was told that the murderer was aiming at him (according to his testimony). (38) Robert Garrett, the twelve year old son of the farmer whose property was the scene of the killing, agrees that Corbett fired the fatal shot, but he adds

that the soldier was only six feet from the barn and that the man inside never moved. He was visible because of a fire set by Conger who lit a small pile of brush that he had piled against the rear corner of the warehouse. (39)

This brings up the question of whether John Wilkes Booth was wanted dead or alive. The official orders were very clear: he was wanted alive. With sixteen hundred men on the chase, the largest manhunt in history, there was no reason why these orders could not be carried out. (40) Yet the detectives placed around Dr. Mudd's home, in case Booth returned, were ordered to shoot anyone who entered the garden. (41) As for Boston Corbett, no one is positive that he pulled the trigger. According to eye-witnesses, it was not until after Baker had demanded to know which member of the troop had disobeyed orders, and Conger had said he thought it had been suicide, that Corbett announced his deed. (42) A religious fanatic who had castrated himself after a night with prostitutes, Corbett said that God had directed him to do so. (43)

The real confusion does not begin until the dying man is brought out of the barn. According to the testimony of the Garrett family, the man dragged onto the porch was wearing a Confederate uniform. Townsend also agrees and adds that the Garretts never deviated from their first testimony that the man who had been brought to their house was a Confederate soldier named John Howard Boyd. (44) However, Major Ruggles and Bainbridge, whom Booth had met as he crossed the Potomac River, said that he was wearing black. In an article in The New York World, Townsend explains that he must have changed clothes at Dr. Mudd's home. But Thomas A. Jones, who met Booth the day after he left the doctor's house, describes him as wearing black as well. (45)

The affidavits made by Colonel Pedgram and others who saw the actor's remains in Baltimore in 1869, testify that he was dressed in black and wearing a high riding boot. Two soldiers at the Garrett farm, Joseph Ziegen and Wilson D. Kenzie state in affidavits that the man shot in the barn was wearing a Confederate uniform and soldier's boots. In other words, John Wilkes Booth fled dressed in a black suit; did not change at Dr. Mudd's; was supposedly taken from the barn in a Confederate uniform; was placed on the battleship Montauk for examination dressed in a black suit. And there is another matter: one of the assets of this man considered "the most handsome man in America" was his long, curly

black hair. Testimony shows that the doctor who nursed the dying man on the Garrett porch cut off a lock of hair and gave it to a Miss Holloway, a visiting friend of the Garretts. Later, on the Montauk, General Baker talks of chasing some young lady away who was trying to snip off some of the dead man's hair. At the undertaker's the witnesses notice the long hair, and Miss Blanche Chapman, Booth's cousin, cuts some off and gives it to Mary Ann Booth, the actor's mother. (46)

Yet, it is an accepted fact among all historians who have studied the episode, that the testimony at the trial is correct: Booth shaved off his mustach and cut his hair short at Dr. Mudd's house! There are several conclusions to this fact. As we will discover later, many believe that there were three men in the barn: Booth, Herold, and a Confederate soldier who may have been initiated the same night as the actor into the Knights of the Golden Circle. There have been many dramatic dialogues written which were said to occur between the man in the barn and Lieutenant Baker in the various descriptions of the scene. Conger, who was commended on the floor of the House of Representatives as the one member of the trio to have any regard for the truth, stated that the man in the barn spoke only three times: to ask who the captors were; to ask that Herold be allowed to come out; to ask that he be given a fighting chance for his life. (47)

Some historians have tried to depict an insane actor arrogantly reciting Shakespearean lines as he savagely eyed the Union soldiers. It is quite possible that the man spoke to save time. Time for another man to escape. John Garrett, in his testimony, said that he and his brother had slept in a corn crib near the barn before the soldiers came, to make sure that Booth and Herold did not steal the horses. After it was all over, no horse could be found on the Garrett farm, and it was necessary to get a neighbor who lived nearby to take the remains to the ferry in his wagon. (48)

An interesting item which has seldom been brought up is that the barn had double doors on all four sides, and large windows in the upper story. Lieutenant Baker testified on June 20, 1867: "The barn was about fifty by sixty feet. Only one door of the barn was opened. The door opened looking towards the house." (50) The third man never expected to die. He was just trying to save time for Booth's escape. Historians who have followed this theory believe that he was the man who came to warn the

actor of the approaching regiment and remained with them.

THE SILENCE IS BROKEN

As the years went by, and important men passed away, oaths of sworn loyalty began to fade. The secrecy of the moment began to crack under the strain of time. On March 31, 1922, because of a surge of opinion on the fate of the infamous actor, Joseph Ziegen and Wilson D. Kenzie, two of the soldiers at the Garrett farmhouse, swore in affidavits that when they saw the body carried from the barn, they stated that it was not Booth. They had seen him perform in New Orleans. Their testified that they were ordered to keep their mouths shut by the officers in command. (86)

In Forestville, California, Izola Forrester met with Elisha Shelburn Shortridge, the eighty-four year old grandson of Richard Garrett. Asked who the man was who was shot in the barn, he replied: "Always heard my folks say it was a Confederate soldier sent to warn the two men the troops were coming after them. Mosby's command wasn't far off, and it was some of his officers that brought Booth and the young feller to my grandfather..." "There must have been three (in the barn) because one gave himself up and one got shot and one got away. But it isn't good to talk about it to outsiders. My mother always said he must have had plenty of help." (87)

Asked about the testimony given by the Garrett family at the Conspiracy Trial, the old man chuckled: "Everyone was looking after his own skin, wasn't he? I can tell you this much. In those days and in my time up here, there was something bigger and mightier in this land than the law or government; something that bound men together in a tie of secret brotherhood stronger than family or country, even to the death. It stretched everywhere. You couldn't get away from it even if you wanted to...You never knew who belonged to it and who didn't, but it held the Southerners together." (88) On June 22, 1900, Major Benton, commanding officer at the Washington Arsenal, lectured to the Army and Navy Club at New London, Connecticut. "We were requested by Secretary Stanton to remain silent, and no man during these thirty-five years has yet told." (89)

General O'Beirne, in his later years a judge presiding in City Hall Park in New York City, also talked with Mrs. Forrester in October of 1908: "I

can tell you something that has never been published in this case, and never even mentioned, something you will never find on any record. There were three men in that barn and one of them escaped...Think of how that place was padlocked carefully, and the key mislaid up at the house. It never was brought out in the testimony that there was another exit from the barn, but there was. Opening on the lower level at the rear was a small door, which gave direct egress to the ravine and woods. "This was apparently overlooked while attention centered on the locked door in front...I intend to write a book around my early experiences some day. Maybe it will never be published until after I am dead, but that won't matter. We were all pledged to secrecy in those days. It was not safe to tell anything. Everyone was after a share of the reward. I received two thousand dollars myself." (90) Judge O'Beirne never lived to write his memoirs.

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