**The Lincolns and the Booths**

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Over a year before firing the shot that killed Abraham Lincoln, the assassin John Wilkes Booth began to stalk his victim by worming his way into Lincoln’s social circles. But even as the young actor pressed in, Lincoln’s friends and acquaintances began to cross his path through a series of bizarre, random personal encounters. Fate, it seemed, was stalking the stalker.

By late 1863, Booth’s rage against the Union government and its president was at a full boil. His frequent, intemperate outbursts had already resulted in a brief arrest in St. Louis and strained relations with his staunchly pro-Union brother Edwin Booth. Wild words aside, the actor began taking concrete action to aid the Confederate cause by smuggling quinine to the South, and was showing signs that he was contemplating yet more extreme action directed at the president himself, increasingly the focus of his anger at the North.

A significant, public warning of Booth’s metastasizing intentions came in a face-to-face encounter with Lincoln on Nov. 9, 1863. That night, President Lincoln went to Ford’s Theater to see a production of Charles Selby’s play “The Marble Heart.” In the starring role: John Wilkes Booth.

Speaking through his stage persona, the play’s villain, Raphael, Booth managed to make a pointed, personal statement straight to Lincoln. “Twice, Booth in uttering disagreeable threats in the play came very near and put his finger close to Mr. Lincoln’s face,” wrote Mary Clay, who accompanied the Lincolns that night, “When he came a third time I was impressed by it, and said, ‘Mr. Lincoln, he looks as if he meant that for you.’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘he does look pretty sharp at me, doesn’t he?’”

Another odd coincidence happened about a year later, when Booth’s brother Edwin rescued a man at a train station in Jersey City, hauling him back up onto the platform from which he had fallen into the path of an oncoming train. “Upon turning to thank my rescuer I saw it was Edwin Booth, whose face was of course well known to me,” the rescued man wrote years later, “and I expressed my gratitude to him, and in doing so, called him by name.”

Booth, for his part, did not recognize the man he had saved. Some time later, Col. Adam Badeau, a friend of Booth’s assigned to the staff of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, wrote Booth to inform him that the man he had rescued was a fellow staff officer: Robert Todd Lincoln, the oldest son of the president.

Incidentally, John Wilkes himself had saved a uniformed Union officer from mob violence during New York’s Anti-Draft Riots in 1863. That man was Adam Badeau.

The strange dance between these two fatally enmeshed families grew even closer in the early weeks of 1865 when John Wilkes Booth became secretly engaged to Lucy Lambert Hale, a 24-year-old Washington socialite who lived at the National Hotel in Washington, where Booth also was living.

Booth, the fanatically pro-Southern partisan, had made an interesting choice of future in-laws. Hale’s father, Senator John Parker Hale, was an abolitionist senator from New Hampshire and a two-time candidate for president with the antislavery Free Soil Party. He was also an old acquaintance of Abraham Lincoln’s from their time of service together in Congress back in the 1840s. The Hales were not thrilled with their daughter consorting with a stage actor, who stood quite a bit lower in that generation’s social pecking order.

Despite Booth’s potential liabilities, he persisted and won Lucy’s affections. Doing so required Booth to bat away quite an array of competing suitors, including the Union officer and future Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and John Hay, one of Lincoln’s private secretaries. Another, more formidable threat to Booth’s affections, and one more favored by Lucy’s parents, was Robert Lincoln, who sent her flowers from the White House conservatory. But no evidence suggests that the two were ever more than good friends.

Booth saw things otherwise. His sister Asia Booth Clarke reported that Booth had become enraged when he saw Lucy dancing with Robert Lincoln one evening at the National Hotel. Around this time, the spring of 1865, Asia said that Lucy and Booth were quarreling, perhaps as a result of jealousy.

The courtship continued. Securing an invitation through Lucy, John Wilkes Booth attended Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural ceremony on March 4, 1865, standing less than 100 feet away from the president during his inaugural address. Later that evening, Lucy and Booth went to the inaugural ball.

Six weeks later, Abraham Lincoln was dead.

A frenzy of post-assassination hysteria briefly swept many of Booth’s family and close associates into prison. Anyone with a Booth connection, no matter how remote, quickly distanced themselves from the Booth family in self-defense.

John Hale soon after gave statements to the press denying Lucy’s relationship with Booth. A June 18, 1878 article in The Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean newspaper, suggesting that the romantic rivalry between Booth and Robert Lincoln for the affections of Lucy Hale had pushed Booth over the edge, elicited a similar denial from Robert Lincoln. Lincoln would not even acknowledge that he knew Lucy Hale at all, even though she allegedly spent the afternoon studying Spanish with Lincoln and Hay on the day of the assassination.

Lucy herself remained faithful to her fiancé to the end. Through the intercession of sympathetic army officers, she was allowed aboard the ironclad the Montauk at the Washington Navy Yard to view Booth’s body after his autopsy, though even then, it was done under the cover of night. (The body had been brought back by the ship from Virginia, where Booth had been killed trying to escape.)

With both Lincoln and Booth gone, the spider web of personal connections that had so greatly complicated the grief of the survivors of the ordeal now quickly unraveled. The principal players went their separate ways, most never associating with one another again.