

Abe Lincoln's Jack Ruby

Was Boston Corbett an Avenger or a Cabinet Conspirator's Dupe?

By Jane Raymond Walpole

THE PRESIDENT had been shot. His killer was caught, then gunned down in plain view of his captors. People wondered how this could have happened. They puzzled over a bullet that changed course in mid-flight. They whispered about high officials perhaps implicated in the assassination plot. The suspicions grew because there were no answers and probably never would be.

John Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby and the CIA? No—Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, Edwin Stanton and Boston Corbett. Lincoln and Booth are known to all. Stanton was Lincoln's secretary of war. But who was Boston Corbett?

Known by his admirers as "Lincoln's Avenger" and by his detractors as the "Glory-to-God Man," Boston Corbett was first sergeant of the cavalry detachment sent out to capture Booth. His professed shooting of Booth led to wild acclaim by Stanton, the press and the public—and to angry gibes that he was a religious fanatic and a liar.

Since no one doubts that Ruby shot Oswald, why the doubts that Corbett shot Booth? For one thing, Ruby pulled his trigger on national television and in plain sight of police. No one saw Corbett fire—though at least 10 men were close by. And then there was his defiance of orders . . . and the bullet's odd trajectory . . . and the nonexistent revolver . . . and the reward money. And, of course, Corbett himself.

Thomas Corbett seemed normal enough, living with his young wife in New York City. But her unexpected death drove him to the bottle and to vagrancy, until one night in Boston a band of evangelists offered him salvation. He accepted, and the event transformed his life. He changed his given name to Boston, let his hair grow in flowing tresses, castrated himself to lessen the temptation of sin and traveled the Eastern seaboard as an itinerant preacher.

In Richmond, Corbett was revolted by the sight of slave auctions. When the Civil War began, he quickly enlisted in the army, determined to punish slavery



SGT. BOSTON CORBETT FROM CRACKED GLASS PLATE IN BRADY-HANDY COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

by killing sinful Southerners. His sermons to fellow soldiers soon gained him the derisive title of the "Glory-to-God Man," but he was equally fanatical in shooting rebels.

Captured in May 1864, Corbett was sent to the hellhole of Andersonville; in November, body and mind sapped by the brutal conditions, he was exchanged and, in March, he was mustered out. But with Gen. U. S. Grant's final offensive straining the manpower pool, he volunteered for active duty with a promotion from private to sergeant. Boston Corbett was about to burst into the headlines.

After Booth shot Lincoln at Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865, he disappeared, fleeing through Maryland and hiding in a swamp. On April 23, Stanton and Col. Lafayette Baker, head of the Army Detective Bureau, learned that Booth had crossed the Potomac and was headed toward Richmond. A cavalry unit was scratched together and placed under Baker's cousin, Lt. Luther Baker, with orders to take Booth alive, if possible. Once more, Sgt. Corbett volunteered.

Early on April 26, the ragtag troop surprised Booth in a tobacco shed on a

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farm just west of Port Royal, Va. When Booth refused to surrender, the barn was surrounded and set afire. Suddenly a shot rang out. Booth lurched from the blazing barn and collapsed, a revolver in his hand and a bullet in his neck. Within two hours Booth died, never having regained full consciousness.

Baker, upset at not taking Booth alive, was certain someone had disobeyed orders and shot the assassin. Everton Conger, a detective who had been sent along to advise Baker, sized up the situation as suicide. But to placate Baker, Conger asked each of the 26 men in the troop if he had shot Booth. There were 25 denials. Then Corbett responded, "Yes sir, I shot him." Conger, taken aback, asked the sergeant why he had disobeyed orders. Gazing heavenward, Corbett replied, "Providence directed me!"

The other men snickered. But Conger, who already doubted Corbett's mental stability, relaxed. Clearly Booth had committed suicide. Conger rode off to Stanton with the news. But Baker wanted a scapegoat, and Corbett had admitted to disobeying orders. He gratefully arrested the sergeant, packed up Booth's body and returned to Washington.

The day after Conger had reported to Stanton, Baker and his unrepentant sergeant were called to the secretary's office. Corbett entered a prisoner and emerged a hero. "The rebel is dead. The patriot lives," proclaimed Stanton.

And now Lincoln's avenger had his moment of fame. Newspapers around the world vied for interviews. Cards bearing his photograph sold by the thousands. He moved to a Washington hotel to be closer to reporters and admirers and farther from jeering soldiers in camp.

Conger was not alone in discounting Corbett's claim. None of the troopers at the flaming barn believed his story. No one had seen him aim at Booth or had heard a shot from outside the shed. And the shot itself would have needed a fantastic trajectory. As he defiantly rejected Baker's surrender demand, Booth was standing at the barn door with his left shoulder facing Corbett 20 yards away. But the bullet had struck Booth in the right side of the neck, angling downward and backward. Corbett shrugged off any doubters: "It wasn't

*To Dr. Mc Knight.
from STERN*

strange—God directed that bullet.

And what about the gun that fired the bullet? According to the autopsy report, Booth was killed by a "conoidal pistol ball," the kind used in revolvers. Booth had two revolvers in the barn; whether either had recently been fired and whether Booth had powder burns

around his wound are not recorded. Corbett, on the other hand, had been issued a carbine; only the officers carried revolvers. Yet Stanton, after reading the autopsy report, sent a memo to the Army's chief of ordnance stating that Corbett had lost his Colt revolver and should be issued a replacement.

Possibly Boston Corbett had found an unauthorized revolver and did use it to kill Booth. Possibly he did believe that God had chosen him to strike down Lincoln's assassin. And possibly he wanted the \$75,000 reward. He pressed his case before the Committee on Claims but received only the \$1,653.85 awarded to each of the 26 troopers. To the unimpressed committee members, Corbett was merely "that insane man."

So why, then, did Stanton believe (or profess belief) in his patriot? Why would he swallow such an improbable story told by such an unbalanced man? Here, facts give way to conjectures.

Maybe Stanton hoped that Booth's death would quiet the nation. Maybe he wanted to plant the idea that Booth was part of a large Confederate conspiracy, thus justifying harsh retribution against the South. In either case, Booth couldn't be allowed the honor of suicide. Far better that Sgt. Corbett had shot him.

Or perhaps Stanton feared that a talkative Booth could implicate the secretary himself in Lincoln's death; circumstances had fueled such suspicions almost immediately. Stanton strongly disagreed with Lincoln's desire to wel-

come the South back into the Union with minimum penalties, and Vice President Andrew Johnson of Tennessee would prove as lenient. But if Booth's band of conspirators had succeeded in killing Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward as well as Lincoln that April 14, Stanton would have had substantially more influence over the course of Reconstruction. As it happened, the plans went awry and Johnson and Seward survived. But this did not stop Stanton from taking temporary charge of the government—and the hunt for Booth.

Then there is the ease with which Booth rode out of Washington through a military checkpoint. And Booth's pocket diary, supposedly intact when Baker turned it over to Stanton but missing more than a dozen pages when Stanton gave it back—pages dated shortly before and after April 14. And the papers burned by Robert Todd Lincoln some 50 years after his father's death, papers that he reportedly stated contained evidence of treason in his father's cabinet. Suppositions all—the truth will never be known.

Boston Corbett the hero proved a nine-days' wonder. He left the army, but had trouble adjusting to civilian life. After receiving several threats signed "Booth's Avenger," he moved to Kansas and tried his hand at farming. The Kansas legislature, recognizing Corbett's erstwhile fame, appointed him sergeant-at-arms. One day, taking umbrage at horseplay by idle page boys, he sprayed the Senate chamber with bullets—and was sent back to the farm. His uncertain mind finally snapped, and in 1887 he was committed to an insane asylum. A year later he escaped, headed toward Mexico and vanished.

— But the myth of Boston Corbett remains—the myth of an officially sanctioned hero and patriot, a myth no one can truly believe or totally disprove.