

## THE ASSASSINATION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

By WILLIAM H. DEMOTTE.\*

The following account of the assassination of President Lincoln was written by my father several years before his death at the earnest request of his family. His home was in Indianapolis and in 1864 he was appointed Indiana Military and Sanitary Agent by Governor Morton. He went at once to Washington and carried out the design and purpose of the Agency until the close of the war when there was no longer a necessity for such an office.

AMELIA DEMOTTE.

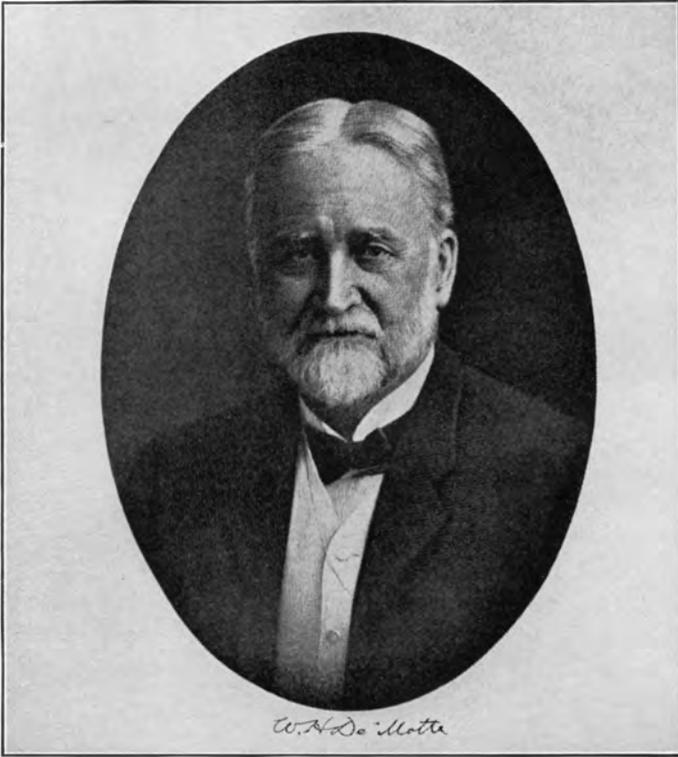
During my residence in Washington, it was my fortune to witness the crowning tragedy in the long list of terrible events which marked the efforts of the Government to suppress the Rebellion. It is a difficult task to make a record of this event. More than once I have attempted to describe the scene, and while my audiences have expressed gratification at my efforts, I have always known they were failures to reproduce in any adequate degree, the sensations and emotions of the reality. Indeed my mind was so stunned by the terrible import of the occurrence and impressions were so blurred and confused that now it is difficult to see in imagination a clear picture. To this fact can be attributed the discrepancies and disagreements of accounts given by eye-witnesses. I shall therefore be careful that in every point my narrative shall be accurately in accordance with the occurrences.

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\* William H. DeMotte, son of Daniel DeMotte and Mary Brewer DeMotte, born in Perryville, Kentucky, July 17, 1830. Educated in the schools of Covington, Rockville and DePauw University, Indiana. Graduated from the latter institution in 1849.

Married first to Miss Catharine Hoover of Darlington, Indiana who died——; second marriage to Miss Anna Graves of Jacksonville, Illinois. William H. DeMotte was a teacher of the Deaf for forty-two years of his life in Indiana, Wisconsin and Kansas; was president of the Methodist School for girls in Indianapolis, Indiana, and later president of the Illinois Woman's College, Jacksonville, Illinois, from 1868 to 1875.

Died at Indianapolis, Indiana, January 2, 1910. Buried in Diamond Grove Cemetery, Jacksonville, Illinois.



**W. H. DE MOTTE**

The office of State Military and Sanitary Agent was created by Governor Morton to minister to the needs of Indiana's men in the army in both military and sanitary matters. The Agent was able often to secure for them attention and consideration where they could not act. The inexperienced has no idea of the gulf which lies between the voluntary private and the regular officer. The Agent acted as counsel in cases of entanglement and in the prosecution of claims which soldiers or their heirs filed against the government. He was at once the representative of the governor of the state and the actuary of the State Sanitary Commission.

The office rooms were at the northwest corner of F and 10th streets. They were the rendezvous for Indiana men, a center of information where soldiers might freely come at any time or send for news or aid and to which letters or inquiry could be addressed and supplies forwarded for distribution.

On the evening of Friday, Good Friday, April 14, 1865, after dinner a number of us were seated about the door of the office when the cry of the newsboy, "Evening Star, President Lincoln and General Grant will attend Ford's Theatre tonight," started the suggestion that we make use of the occasion to see these noted men, Grant just from the surrender of Lee and Mr. Lincoln always and everywhere an object of popular interest and admiration. Finding that two of the men present, one from Indiana and one from Pennsylvania, had never seen either man I readily consented to go with them.

There had been four days and nights of most extravagant demonstration over the surrender of Lee and the close of the war. On Tuesday night, while the whole city was ablaze with illumination and fireworks, at 10 o'clock a great crowd, preceded by a brass band went up to the White House and called for the President. Mr. Lincoln soon appeared at the second story window under the porte-cochere and read a short speech to the crowd, closing with the sentence, "We've got at least one good thing from the Rebels, and that's Dixie.

Let the band play it!" And they did and the crowd cheered as he retired and the window was closed.

I still hold unspoiled by other sight, undimmed by lapse of years the image of that face ready to my call, so full of all that is noblest and best in human expression. It was the last view I ever had of Mr. Lincoln's face. When a few days later by invitation of Sec. McCullough I was among a favored few who were allowed to see the body as it lay in the East Parlor of the White House, prior to its removal to the Capitol to lie in state, I reached the entrance to the room I could not persuade myself to look upon it marred by death. I dropped out of line declining the opportunity. During the next week I had another opportunity at Indianapolis and again declined. And so it is today that the name of Abraham Lincoln brings to my mind only a most pleasing face, full of life and of the attractive expression of a good and great mind and heart.

We remained seated about the door of my office till 8 o'clock when fearing darkness would foil us in our purpose of seeing the great men, we went across the street diagonally to the door of the theatre. Soon a drizzle of rain made that place uncomfortable. I purchased tickets and we all went in, taking seats as nearly opposite the box the President and General Grant would occupy as we could get. The gallery was not full and there was no one in any of the other boxes. Soon after we were seated the play began. None of us were theatre goers. We had no interest in the play which was "Our American Cousin", and the occasion was a benefit to Laura Keene. We were closely occupied in watching for the President and General Grant. The box intended for them in easy view from where we sat, was draped in flags.

I will not attempt to say how long we waited. I remember a number of players, men and women in a lively scene, when the Presidential party entered and the orchestra struck up "Hail to the Chief". When the party was seated in the box, the play went on. General Grant did not come as was expected and Mr. Lincoln sat so behind the drapery that we could not see him. We decided to remain for a time hoping

General Grant would come in and President Lincoln would change his position so as to be visible. I supposed thirty minutes elapsed when, while Harry Hawk in the character of Asa Trenchard was alone on the stage, to the right a pistol shot was heard. I and, no doubt, most there for the moment thought it was in the play. In a moment a tall, dark man, neatly dressed in black, sprang lightly over the front of the box occupied by the President and party, holding to the front with his hands, lowered himself to the stage floor, some twelve feet below. As he passed, his foot caught in the flags which draped the box and he alighted upon the floor below with one foot bent under him in such a position as to strain or break the ankle. He rose instantly and hissing in a strong stage whisper, "*Sic semper tyrannis,*" stalked deliberately and in a highly tragic manner diagonally across the stage, going out through the flies at the northeast corner. I remember no other words. I have seen it stated that the assassin added, "The South is avenged." I did not hear it.

For an instant, it seems to me now like a much longer time than I am sure it must have been, there was a breathless silence. Some rose to their feet, others sat, all were startled. The screams of Mrs. Lincoln and perhaps words she spoke, I do not recall any, gave notice of the tragedy which had occurred. The man at my left said, "The President is shot," and the one on my right said, "That was Wilkes Booth. I saw him play here a few nights ago."

Mrs. Lincoln's screams continued and she leaned over the front of the box and said something and there was movement within the box which I could not see plainly on account of the flags.

The city was under military oversight. The Veteran Reserve Corps, consisting of men unfit for field service and yet competent for light duty, were stationed all over the city. Several were in the theatre and one of them immediately took position at the door of the box, which the assassin had fastened behind him, and another upon the stage directly below the box. In a minute or two the one upon the stage assisted

a man, whom we understood to be a surgeon, to climb up to the box, the same way the assassin had come down.

By this time there was an increase of stir among the occupants of the theatre but no loud talking. People began to go out. A number of the play people came forward upon the stage. I do not remember any rush or crowd toward the box. I do not recall any authoritative statement or announcement. I think none was made. Quite a number of people remained quietly awaiting the result. The fact soon spread among them that the President had been shot in the back of the head or neck, and that the wound was serious. In a short time, men came out of the box along the aisle toward the steps and outer door carrying the apparently lifeless body of the President, denuded of the upper clothing, not only his face and neck exposed but his breast and arms. His coat or cloak was thrown loosely over his chest.

They passed out the door and directly across the street into a small brick house, since known as the Peterson house. A slight rain was falling. As they passed into the door a soldier took his place on the landing without and a close guard was kept there till after the removal of the body the next morning.

By this time a crowd had been collecting on the street in front of the Peterson house and soon Tenth Street from F to E was packed. And though the rain fell continuously all night there was no diminution. People wandered away in the dark only to return in a few minutes to ask anxiously if there was any information. But no word came from that guarded chamber and we knew of the fatal result only when an undertaker arrived next morning about seven.

At intervals during the night the clatter of horses' hoofs was heard as squads of cavalry galloped about the city. Each time there would be quiet and listening of the vast crowd till the direction was determined and as the sound always died away from us we knew the assassin was not found.

It was impossible for the authorities to know in what direction to look for Booth, and the intense feeling was not favorable to the clearest action of judgment. Since Booth

had made his plans for the execution of his desperate purpose and laid his lines for escape, great events had occurred. The surrender of Lee and the consequent change of "lines" made his escape by the route originally laid impossible. The injury to his foot made it necessary for him to stop not only wasting precious time, but leaving a mark by which his after-course could be traced.

Booth's presence in Washington for some days previous to the assassination was not observed, as he was accustomed to spend considerable time there. He was not such an actor as to command constant engagement. He had plenty of "leisure," and chose to spend much of it between Washington and Baltimore, where he found congenial society. He was not a desperado in that larger sense which made the Guerilla leaders whose bands harassed the border during the war, but in that smaller and more despicable acceptation of the term which strikes from the hidden place in the dark and runs to the safety of supposed protection.

The extent of the assassin's plot was not surmised and as soon as it became known that attacks had been made upon others, the wildest rumors were circulated until it was decided that all the heads of the civil government were killed and the military power would have to take matters in charge. It was suggested and believed by many that this would so encourage the South that the Army would repudiate the terms of Lee's surrender and renew the fighting. The absolute silence of those who knew the truth added a mystery to all which helped the imagination to all sorts of wild and unreasonable speculations.

The reaction of the terrors of the night were appalling. As business hours approached on Saturday morning the banks, stores and shops were not opened or if a door stood half open here and there one saw few customers and few salesmen. I remember going into a dry goods store near the corner of Seventh and Pennsylvania Avenue, one of the largest stores, to get something black to drape our door and passing down the long room to quite the rear to find some one to wait on me and then it was difficult to make him understand

just what I wanted. I saw it only in Washington but I knew afterward as the wires carried the information all over the country it was the same everywhere.

At once every fabric which could be used to designate sorrow and mourning, from finest crepe down to black muslin, was sought for. Foolish prices were paid. But the demand was for days far beyond the supply. As I passed about Washington there was some token of sorrow everywhere, on government buildings, on many of the better residences occupied by government officials, on shacks and tents.

The terrible scenes of the long war had accustomed the people to the reports of battles and of carnage and had hardened them somewhat to the knowledge of thousands slain and in many homes the sense of personal loss so filled the mind and heart that other's loss was not considered. The papers almost every day contained accounts of skirmishes and battles and there were long lists of "casualties" embracing names of the "killed," "wounded," "captured." Thousands of homes were already in mourning for their own dead. It would seem they would have no space for this great national calamity. But they had. They suddenly saw their loss, however great it had seemed, dwindle into nothing at this greater loss. The core of the grief was that *such* a man should meet *such* a fate. The expression everywhere was as if each had suffered a great personal loss, the appearance as if a father, a guardian, a protector lay dead in every house.