



FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 1865

Washington, D. C.

8:05 P.M.

WOULD YOU HAVE US BE LATE?" Mary Lincoln chides her husband, standing in his office doorway. Speaker of the House Schuyler Colfax dropped by a half hour ago and was granted a few minutes of Lincoln's time. But those few minutes have



stretched into half an hour. The curtain has already risen on *Our American Cousin*. Making matters worse, the Lincolns still have to pick up their theater guests. They'll be lucky to arrive at Ford's in time for the second act.

Next, former Massachusetts congressman George Ashmun wants to see Lincoln. But Mary's pleas against any additional delay finally have an effect.

Schuyler Colfax.

Lincoln hastily pulls a card from his jacket pocket and jots a short note inviting Ashmun to return at nine in the morning.

Finally, Lincoln walks downstairs and out onto the front porch, where the presidential carriage awaits.

Personal assistant Charles Forbes helps Mary up the steps of the carriage as Lincoln says a few final words to Ashmun and Colfax, who have followed him outside. The president hears footsteps on the gravel and the familiar voice of former Illinois congressman Isaac Arnold calling his name.

Lincoln is about to follow Mary into the carriage, but he waits. Arnold was a faithful supporter of Lincoln during the war's darkest hours, and the resulting dip in the president's popularity cost Arnold his seat in the House. The least Lincoln can do is acknowledge him. He bends his head to listen as Arnold whispers in his ear.

Lincoln nods. "Excuse me now," he begs. "I am going to the theater. Come see me in the morning."

The Harris residence, at H and Fifteenth Streets, is almost right across the street from the White House, so the Lincolns are able to quickly pick up their guests.

Isaac Newton Arnold.

As the carriage travels the seven blocks to the theater, Major Rathbone, with his muttonchops and broad mustache, sits facing Lincoln, talking about his experiences in the war. Finally, they reach Ford's.

Driver Francis Burns steps down and walks the horses the final few feet to the theater. The two cavalry escorts trailing the carriage wheel their horses back to their barracks. They will return and finish their guard duty once the show ends.

It is eight twenty-five when Lincoln steps through the front door of the theater. Now rejoined by bodyguard John Parker, the Lincolns and their guests climb the stairs to their box. Onstage, the actors are more than aware that the audience is in a foul mood.



Having bought tickets in hopes of seeing Lincoln and Grant, the theatergoers have monitored the state box, only to find it empty.

So when Lincoln finally arrives, there is relief onstage. Laura Keene improvises a line that refers to Lincoln, making the audience turn toward the side of the theater in order to witness his appearance. William Withers, the orchestra director, immediately stops the show's music and instructs the band to play "Hail to the Chief."

Lincoln allows Rathbone and Harris to

Laura Keene as Portia, from the William Shakespeare play The Merchant of Venice.



*The Ford's Theatre state box, restored to how it looked on the night of the assassination.
President Lincoln's rocking chair is on the left.*



Ford's Theatre as seen from the stage.

enter the state box first, followed by Mary. Then he walks to the front of the box so the crowd can see him. The audience members rise to their feet and cheer, making a noise that Withers can only describe as “breathtaking.” Lincoln bows twice as the audience cheers.

Only when the applause dies down does Lincoln ease into the rocking chair on the left side of the box.

A single door leads into the state box. On the other side of the door is a narrow, unlit hallway. At the end of the hallway is yet another door. This is the only route to and from the spot where Lincoln is sitting. It is

John Parker’s job to pull up a chair and wait in front of this hallway door, making sure that no one goes in or out.

But on the night of April 14, 1865, as Abraham Lincoln relaxes in his rocking chair and laughs out loud for the first time in months,



The rocking chair that was placed in the state box when President Lincoln was in the audience.

John Parker gets thirsty. He is bored, and he can't see the play. Taltavul's Star Saloon next door calls to him. Pushing his chair against the wall, he leaves the door to the state box hallway unguarded and walks outside. Charles Forbes is taking a nap on the driver's seat of Lincoln's carriage, oblivious to the fog and drizzle.

"How about a little ale?"

Parker asks, knowing that Forbes will be an eager drinking buddy. The two walk into Taltavul's and make themselves comfortable. The show won't be over for two more hours—plenty of time to have a few beers before the Lincolns need them again.



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9:30 P.M.

BOOOTH GUIDES HIS HORSE into the alley behind Ford's Theatre. The night is quiet, except for the peals of laughter coming from inside the theater. He dismounts and shouts for Ned Spangler to come hold his horse. The stagehand appears at the back door, visibly distressed about the possibility of missing an all-important stage cue. Booth doesn't care. He demands that Spangler come outside and secure the animal. The last thing Booth needs is for his escape to be ruined by a runaway horse.

Spangler insists that he can't do the job. Booth persists. Spangler says he is willing to do anything for a great actor such as Booth—anything but lose his job. He dashes back into the theater and returns with Joseph Burroughs, a young boy who does odd jobs at Ford's Theatre and goes by the nickname "Peanut John." Booth hands Peanut John the reins and tells him to stay at the back door with the horse until he returns.

Peanut John, hoping that Booth will give him money for the



In the weeks following Lincoln's assassination, artists drew many imaginary scenes of the event. Here the artist John L. Magee shows Satan encouraging Booth to kill the president.

effort, agrees. He sits on the stone step and shivers in the damp night air, his fist clutched tightly around the reins.

Booth slides into the theater. The sound of the onstage actors speaking their lines fills the darkened backstage area. As he removes his riding gloves, he makes a show of saying hello to the cast and crew, most of whom he knows well. His eyes scrutinize the layout, memorizing the location of every stage-hand and prop, not wanting anything to get in the way of his exit.

There is a tunnel under the stage, crossing from one side to the other. Booth checks to make sure that nothing clutters the passage. When he reaches the far side, Booth exits Ford's through yet another backstage door. This one leads to an alley, which runs down to Tenth Street. There's no one there.

Ford's Theatre is flanked on either side by taverns—the Greenback Saloon to the left and Taltavul's Star Saloon to the right. Theatergoers often go to one or the other for a drink at intermission. Now, feeling very pleased with himself, Booth pops into Taltavul's for a whiskey. He orders a whole bottle, then sits down at the bar. Incredibly, Lincoln's bodyguard is sipping a large tankard of ale just a few feet away.

At ten o'clock, Booth finally lowers his glass and walks back to Ford's Theatre.



A painting of the inside of the state box at Ford's Theatre.