

The Diary of Laura Keene

Dear Diary,

Never did I think that a theatrical artist would ever encounter such a frightening scene while performing. Many a time have I watched a fellow actor or actress fall to the ground in a performance, or scream in terror as someone roars and intimidates others with their heavy makeup and a frightening costume. I've seen many fake horrors that have been rehearsed to come across as realistic. Nevertheless, no one that came to Ford's Theatre the night of April 14th, 1865 would have ever expected to witness perhaps one of the most important and frightening deaths in all of American history.

April 14th, 1865

I was sitting in front of my dressing table, admiring my powdered, stiff costume. A constricting canvas bodice was wrapped around my chest and stomach, covered by a slightly off white blouse. A wine-red shawl was draped over my shoulders with a string of lace around the edges. Layers of crinoline underneath my long, pleated skirt bloused around my hip area. My chalky-white acting slippers were barely visible. Down the hall, I could hear the dull roar of laughter as one of my fellow cast members portrayed a funny line. I took one last look in the mirror, walked down the hallway, and waited backstage for my cue to enter.

I was absolutely stunning on stage if I do say so myself. I bellowed my lines for all to hear and had the audience listening intently to my every word. I especially pleased the crowd when I noticed Abraham Lincoln and his guests slip into the president's box. I waved my hand to where he sat, improvising a line by stating, "Anyone can see *that*." Heads turned to look at the thin figure in his seat and the whole crowd broke into

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applause. The orchestra picked up an interpretation of “Hail to the Chief” and Lincoln stood in recognition of the crowd’s welcome. When the applause and music died down, Lincoln seated himself and the show proceeded. When the scene was over, I made my way to a couch backstage that was there from a previous show.

I plopped myself, and the tons of fabric weighing me down, onto the fluffy couch. I sat there, replaying that moment in my head. When Lincoln raised his tall body, and swept his knowing eyes over the crowd, they locked with mine for a single second. They were a pale grey color with a twinkle of the stage lights reflecting off them. Who knew that I would be one of the last people to see them open?

I sat for many moments as the hours passed and the show slowly crept along. I had found peace in just thinking about my marvelous performance, when I snapped back into reality and realized the actress playing Mrs. Mountchessington, Mrs. H. Muzzy, was reciting my favorite line. This line was quite the crowd-pleaser and always had everyone laughing. I pressed my ear to the curtain to hear well.

Mrs. Mountchessington: *(to Asa)* “I am aware Mr. Trenchard, you are not used to the manners of good society, and that, alone, will excuse the impertinence of which you have been guilty!” *(Sweeps off stage leaving Asa alone)*

Asa Trenchard: “Don’t know the manners of good society, eh? Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal- you sockdologizing man-trap!”

The crowd roared with laughter. Even I chuckled after hearing it many times. I just wish I had a line as funny as that! I went to congratulate Muzzy, when Harry Hawk burst through the curtains, his face whiter than the powdered wig he wore. I tried to ask him what happened, but just then, the sound of tearing fabric and a voice shouting, “Stop

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that man!" broke the silence. I poked my head out towards the audience, and with a loud thud, a man landed on the stage. He faced the audience, held up a dagger and shouted "*Sic Semper Tyrannis!*" as he limped off stage. William Withers from the orchestra accidentally got in the man's way, and he shouted and slashed his dagger at Withers, yelling, "Let me pass! Let me pass!" William let him pass after the sharp knife ripped his jacket sleeve. That's when I heard moaning and crying in the President's box. I turned my attention in that direction to see Lincoln slumped over in his chair with blood streaming down his face. Mrs. Lincoln had her head cradled in her hands, with Clara Harris trying to control her weeping. Major Rathbone was clutching his arm as he tried to help Lincoln.

The backdoor slammed, and all at once the audience broke out of shock. It became a madhouse at Ford's Theatre. Several men and women were weeping, while others were screaming. Many tried to reach the president's box to help Lincoln who was still unconscious in his seat.

Although I was quite afraid I realized I needed to try to calm the crowd. I pulled back the curtains and promptly walked to middle stage and shouted to the crowd, "For God's sake have presence of mind, and keep your places, and all will be well."

Most didn't listen to me. They already had doctors helping carry Lincoln to a house across the street. I ran out the door with them to the small room where Lincoln died the next morning. It was the most horrifying sight in all of history. But one thing I will never forget is the knowing eyes that I was lucky enough to see, the very night our 16th president left us.

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