

EDWIN BOOTH

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Edwin Booth by Laurence Hutton

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LAURENCE HUTTON

EDWIN BOOTH



To
Lawrence Hunter

from his friend

Frederick, 89.

The best photograph, I think, ever taken of me

EDWIN BOOTH

BY
LAURENCE HUTTON

ILLUSTRATED



NEW YORK
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
1890

EDWIN BOOTH



YOUNG man, the only son of his mother and she a widow, sat alone with his dead one awful night a good many years ago, when there entered the room a dear friend of them both. The newcomer, placing his warm hand upon the cold hands of her who was gone, laid his wet cheek against the wetter cheek of him who was left, and said simply, "My poor boy, my poor boy!" There were volumes of sympathy and affection in the words and in the action, and even a little comfort. They both knew that it was merely the natural, unaffected expression of a very warm feeling of pity for the mourner, and of genuine, almost filial, love for her whom they thus mourned together. The man of tender heart and more

than kindly nature was Edwin Booth ; "the poor boy" is the man who pens these lines.

The friendship between them, of many years' standing, cemented if possible more strongly by what is here for the first time narrated, was never broken until Mr. Booth himself laid down the burden of his life, and went — by no means unprepared — to solve the great problem of the future ; carrying with him, perhaps, a direct message to the mother from the son.

Only those who have known Edwin Booth in trouble and in sorrow have known Edwin Booth at all ; and even his few intimate friends, and the members of his own immediate family, have not known of half the good he has done. He never made any public expression of his personal feeling. He gave lavishly with both hands, concealing from the left hand the gifts of the right ; and, if possible, keeping even the right hand itself ignorant of its own well-doing. I have known him to pay all the funeral expenses, and to attend the funeral, of a woman he

had never seen, simply because her daughter was a member of his company, and without means or a friend. I have seen him receive in his own home, and on a footing of perfect social equality, the black servant who had called to pay her respects to him, and deny himself, during her visit, to men and women of the highest social distinction, who were permitted only to leave their cards at his door. I have discovered accidentally, and from outside sources, of his unbounded generosity to superannuated actors, who had no claim upon him whatever, except that they were old and poor. I have heard him say that a certain worn-out comedian had a fixed income for life, and that a certain broken-down tragedian's mortgage had been paid, without the expression of the slightest hint that he himself had taken up the mortgage or had bought the annuity. I have seen him blush like a girl at the receipt of a letter of thanks, and run away like a coward from the gratitude of those he had helped.

A story which Lawrence Barrett used to tell upon himself may not be out of place here, as illustrating what I have tried to say. The wreck of a brilliant actor came to Mr. Barrett once at the stage entrance of a Western theatre and asked for the loan of half a dollar. His miserable condition was entirely his own fault. He had lost his self-respect, if he had ever possessed any, and he was utterly ruined by liquor and by the results of a bad life. Mr. Barrett, who had by hard work, by untiring industry, by close study, and by uniform good conduct raised himself from nothing, had but little patience with those who had fallen from high estates down to nothing because of their lack of the qualities which he himself possessed, and he refused the beggar money to buy the drink he craved. "If Mr. Barrett could not and would not help him to a pittance, would Mr. Barrett cash the check in his ragged pocket, received that day, and useless to him where he was not known?" The check was produced, and bore the signature of Edwin

Booth. "And so," said Mr. Barrett one evening in Mr. Booth's presence, and to Mr. Booth's great distress, "to the wretched creature to whom I had refused fifty cents Edwin had given fifty dollars!"

It must not be inferred from this incident that Mr. Barrett was not himself a man of sincere soul and of large bounty. Few members of an ever-generous profession have been more ready and more willing to help those who could not help themselves. The long association existing between the two men was as intimate in a personal as it was in a business way. A few years Mr. Booth's junior upon the stage of the world, Mr. Barrett was his excellent support at the very outset of Mr. Booth's career as a star performer, and for many seasons, and in many parts of the country, have they played together, under all conditions, and in every variety of tragedy and comedy, going home together many hundreds of nights to a simple supper of bread and milk in some provincial hotel, or to an equally frugal repast.