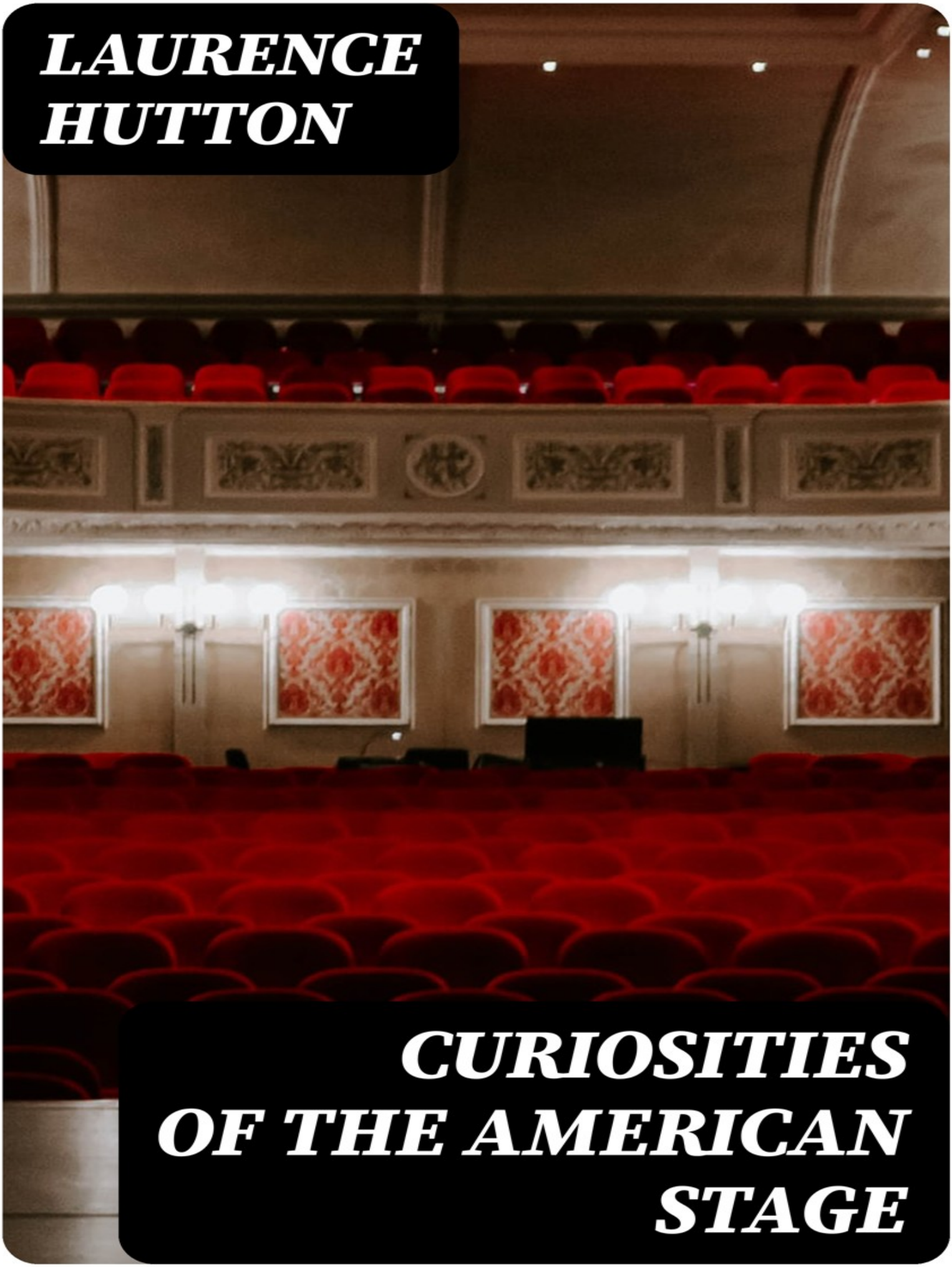
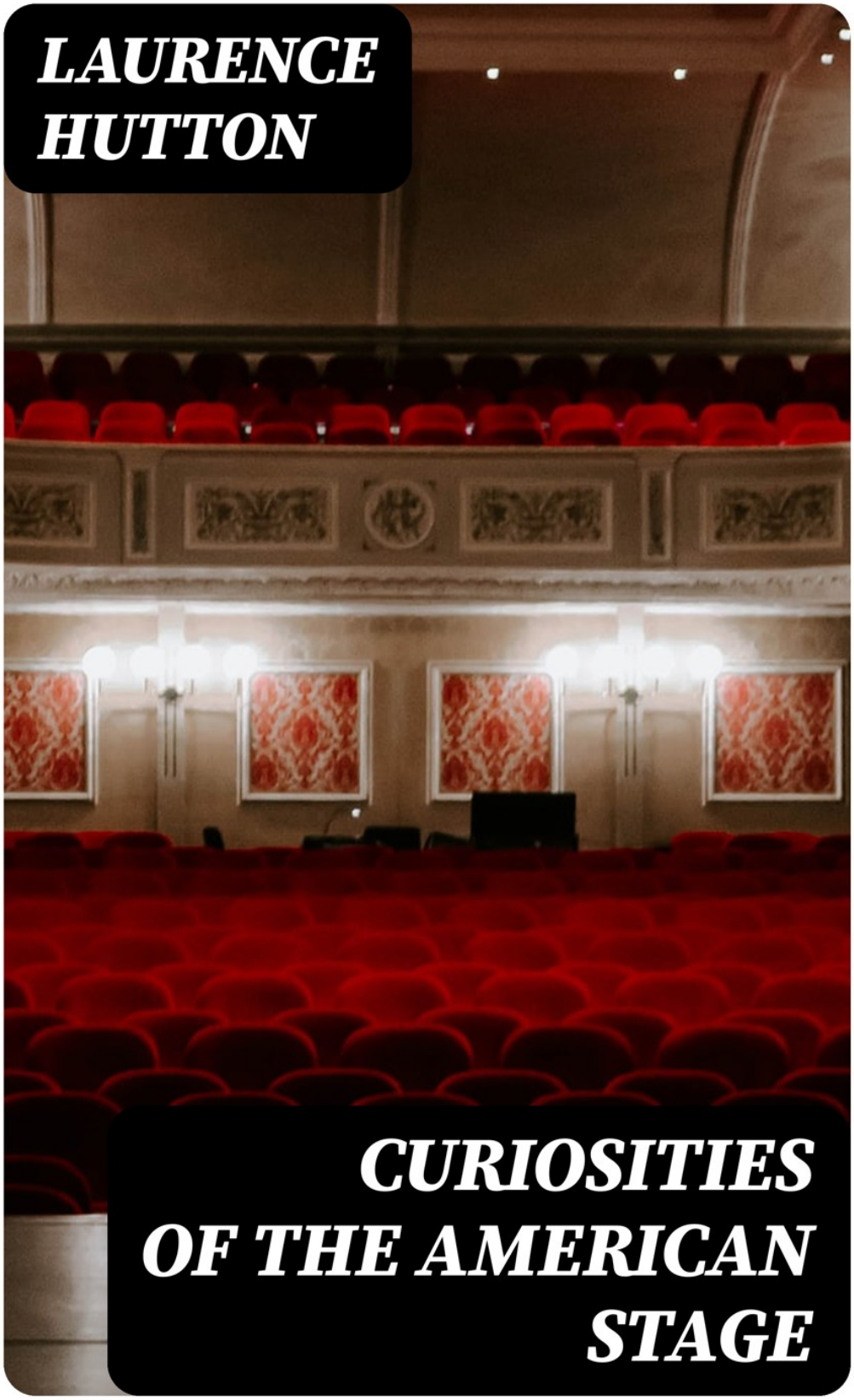


LAURENCE HUTTON

CURIOSITIES OF THE AMERICAN STAGE


LAURENCE HUTTON
CURIOSITIES OF THE AMERICAN STAGE

Laurence Hutton

Curiosities of the American Stage

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THE ARGUMENT.

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This book, as its name implies, is a series of chapters from the annals of the American Theatre; and it considers Plays and Players more particularly in their less familiar aspects. It does not pretend to be critical; and the greatest care has been taken to verify all the facts it contains (many of them here presented for the first time), in order that it may appeal to the small but select band of specialists known as Dramatic Collectors, as well as to those influential members of the community who are glad to call themselves Old Play-goers.

The chapters upon “The American Stage Negro,” upon “The American Burlesque,” and upon a “A Century of American Hamlets,” appeared originally in Harper’s Magazine; the others have been printed, in part, in other periodicals, but as now published they have all been rewritten, elaborated, and extended.

The portraits with which the volume is enriched are in many instances very rare, and some of them, never engraved before, have been prepared especially for this work. They are from the collections of Mr. J. H. V. Arnold, Dr. B. E. Martin, Mr. Thomas J. McKee, Mr. C. C. Moreau, Mr. Evart Jansen Wendell, and The Players, to all of whom the author here expresses his sincere thanks.

A double Index—personal as well as local—makes the book easily available for reference; and it will lend itself readily to extra illustration. It is intended to instruct as well as to entertain.

LAURENCE HUTTON.
THE PLAYERS, 1890.

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ACT I.
THE NATIVE AMERICAN DRAMA.

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SCENE I.
THE INDIAN DRAMA.

"Do you put tricks upon 's with savages and men of Inde?"

The Tempest, Act ii. Sc. 2.

The American play is yet to be written. Such is the unanimous verdict of the guild of dramatic critics of America, the gentlemen whom Mr. Phœbus, in *Lothair*, would describe as having failed to write the American play themselves. Unanimity of any kind among critics is remarkable, but in this instance the critics are probably right. In all of its forms, except the dramatic form, we have a literature which is American, distinctive, and a credit to us. The histories of Motley and of Parkman are standard works throughout the literary world. Washington Irving and Hawthorne are as well known to all English readers, and as dearly loved, as are Thackeray and Charles Lamb. Poems like Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, Whittier's *Snow-Bound*, Lowell's *The Courtin'*, and Bret Harte's *Cicely* belong as decidedly to America as do Gray's *Elegy* to England, *The Cotter's Saturday Night* to Scotland, or the songs of the Minnesingers to the German Fatherland, and they are perhaps to be as enduring as any of these. Mr. Emerson, Mr.

Lowell, and Professor John Fiske are essayists and philosophers who reason as well and as clearly, and with as much originality, as do any of the sages of other lands. In our negro melodies we have a national music that has charms to soothe the savage and the civilized breast in both hemispheres. American humor and American humorists are so peculiarly American that they are *sui generis*, and belong to a distinct school of their own; while in fiction Cooper's Indian novels, Holmes's *Elsie Venner*, Mrs. Stowe's *Oldtown Folk*, Howells's *Silas Lapham*, and Cable's *Old Creole Days* are purely characteristic of the land in which they were written, and of the people and manners and customs of which they treat, and are as charming in their way as are any of the romances of the Old World. Freely acknowledging all this, the dramatic critics are still unable to explain the absence of anything like a standard American drama and the non-existence of a single immortal American play.

The Americans are a theatre-going people. More journals devoted to dramatic affairs are published in New York than in any European capital. Our native actors in many instances are unexcelled on any stage of the world; we have sent to England, to meet with unqualified favor from English audiences, J. H. Hackett, Miss Charlotte Cushman, Joseph Jefferson, Edwin Booth, John S. Clarke, Lawrence Barrett, Edwin Forrest, Miss Mary Anderson, Miss Kate Bateman, Augustin Daly's entire company of comedians, Mr. and Mrs. Florence, Richard Mansfield, and many more; while, with the exception of certain of Bronson Howard's comedies, "localized" and renamed, how many original American plays are known favorably, or at all, to our British cousins? *Rip Van*

Winkle, although its scenes are American, is not an original American play by any means; it is an adaptation of Irving's familiar legend; its central figure is a Dutchman whose English is broken, and its adapter is an Irishman. Yet *Rip Van Winkle*, Joseph K. Emmett's *Fritz*, and *The Danites* are the most popular of the American plays in England, and are considered, no doubt, correct pictures of American life.

That the American dramatists are trying very hard to produce American dramas all theatrical managers on this side of the Atlantic know too well, for shelves and waste-paper baskets are full of them to overflowing. Frequent rejection and evident want of demand have no effect whatever upon the continuous supply. How few of these are successful, or are likely to live beyond one week or one season, all habitual theatre-goers can say. During the single century of the American stage not twoscore plays of any description have appeared which have been truly American, and which at the same time are of any value to dramatic literature or of any credit to the American name.

By an original American play is here meant one which is the original work of an American author, the incidents and scenes and characters of which are purely and entirely American. In this category cannot be included dramas like Mr. Daly's *Pique*, or *The Big Bonanza*, for the one is from an English novel and the other from a German play; nor Mr. Boucicault's *Belle Lamar*, or *The Octoroon*, which are native here, but from the pen of an alien; nor plays like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which are not original, but are drawn largely, if not wholly, from American tales; nor plays like *A Brass Monkey* or *A Bunch of Keys*, which are not plays at all.

The first purely American play ever put upon a regular stage by a professional company of actors was *The Contrast*, performed at the theatre in John Street, New York, on the 16th of April, 1787. It was, as recorded by William Dunlap in his *History of the American Theatre*, a comedy in five acts, by Royall Tyler, Esq., a Boston gentleman of no great literary pretensions, but in his later life prominent in the history of Vermont, to which State he moved shortly after its admission into the Federal Union in 1791. Mr. Ireland and Mr. Seilhamer preserve the original cast of *The Contrast*, which, however, as containing no names prominent in histrionic history, is of no particular interest here. Not a very brilliant comedy—it was weak in plot, incident, and dialogue—it is worthy of notice not only because of its distinction as the first-born of American plays, but because of its creation and introduction of the now so familiar stage-Yankee, Jonathan, played by Thomas Wignell, an Englishman who came to this country the preceding year. He was a clever actor, and later, a successful manager in Philadelphia, dying in 1803. Jonathan, no doubt, wore a long tailed blue coat, striped trousers, and short waistcoats, or the costume of the period that nearest approached this; certainly he whittled sticks, and said “Tarnation!” and “I vum,” and called himself “a true-born son of liberty” through his nose, as have the hundreds of stage-Yankees, from Asa Trenchard down, who have come after him, and for whom he and Mr. Wignell and Royall Tyler, Esq., were originally responsible. Jonathan was the chief character in the piece, which was almost a one-part play. Its representations were few.

This Jonathan is not to be confounded with another and a better Jonathan, who figured in *The Forest Rose*, a domestic opera, by Samuel Woodworth, music by John Davies, produced in 1825, when Tyler's Jonathan had been dead and buried for many years. Woodworth's Jonathan was originally played by Alexander Simpson, and later by Henry Placide. It was long a favorite part of the gentleman known as "Yankee Hill."

The American Drama—such as it is—may be divided into several classes, including the Indian Drama, and the plays of Frontier Life, which are often identical; the Revolutionary and war plays; the Yankee, or character plays, like *The Gilded Age*, or *The Old Homestead*; the plays of local life and character, like *Mose*, or *Squatter Sovereignty*; and the society plays, of which Mrs. Mowatt's *Fashion*, and Bronson Howard's *Saratoga* are fair examples. Of these the Indian drama, as aboriginal, should receive, perhaps, the first attention here.

The earliest Indian play of which there is any record on the American stage was from the pen of an Englishwoman, Anne Kemble (Mrs. Hatton), a member of the great Kemble family, and a sister of John Kemble and of Mrs. Siddons. It is described as an operatic spectacle, and was entitled *Tammany*. Dedicated to, and brought out under the patronage of, the Tammany Society, it was first presented at the John Street Theatre, New York, on the 3d of March, 1794. Columbus and St. Tammany himself were among the characters represented. The Indians who figured upon the stage were not very favorably received by the braves of that day, a large party of whom witnessed the initial

performance of the piece; and *Tammany* was not a success, notwithstanding the power of the Kemble name, the good-will of the sachems of the Society, and the additional attraction of the stage-settings, which were the first attempts at anything like correct and elaborate scenic effects in this country.

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

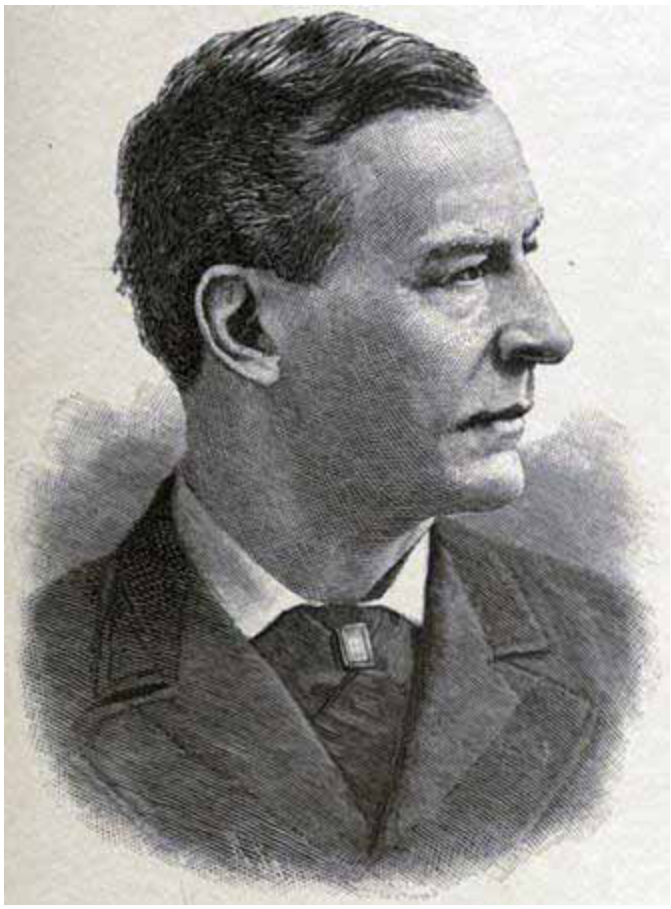
At the Park Theatre, June 14, 1808, was presented the next Indian play of any importance, and, as written by a native American, James N. Barker, of Philadelphia, it should take precedence of *Tammany*, perhaps, in the history of the Indian drama. It was entitled *The Indian Princess*, was founded on the story of Pocahontas, and, like *Tammany*, was musical in its character. It was printed in 1808 or 1809; the versification is smooth and clear, the dialogue bright, and the plot well sustained throughout.

Pocahontas has ever been a favorite character in our Indian plays. George Washington Parke Custis wrote a drama of that name, presented at the Park Theatre, New York, December 28, 1830, Mrs. Barnes playing the titular part. James Thorne, an English singer, who died a few years later, was Captain John Smith; Thomas Placide was Lieutenant Percy; Peter Richings, Powhatan; and Edmund Simpson, the manager of the Park for so many years, played Master Rolf. Robert Dale Owen's *Pocahontas* was produced at the same house seven years later (February 8, 1838), with Miss Emma Wheatley as Pocahontas; John H. Clarke, the father of Constantia Clarke, the Olympic favorite in later years, as Powhatan; Peter Richings, an Indian character, Maccomac; John A. Fisher, Hans Krabbins; his sister, Jane M. Fisher (Mrs. Vernon), Ann; and Miss Charlotte Cushman, at that time fond of appearing in male parts, Rolf. As these several versions of the story of the Indian maiden are preserved to us, that of Mr. Owen is decidedly the best in a literary point of view. It has not been seen upon the stage in many years. The *Pocahontas* of John Brougham cannot be claimed as a purely American production, and it must be reserved for future discussion and under a very different head.

EDWIN FORREST.

Unquestionably, Mr. Forrest’s great success with *Metamora*, a prize drama for which he paid its author, John Augustus Stone, five hundred dollars—a large sum of money for such an effort half a century ago—was the secret of the remarkable run upon Indian plays from which theatre-goers throughout the country suffered between the years 1830 and 1840. Forrest, even at that early period in his career, was the recognized leader of the American stage, the founder of a peculiar school of acting, with a host of imitators and followers. Metamora was one of his strongest and most popular parts; its great effect upon his admirers is still vividly remembered, and, naturally, other actors sought like glory and profit in similar roles.

Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags, was produced for the first time on any stage at the Park Theatre, New York, December 15, 1829. Mr. Forrest, Peter Richings, Thomas Placide, John Povey, Thomas Barry, Mrs. Hilson (Ellen Augusta Johnson), and Mrs. Sharpe were in the original cast. As Metamora Mr. Forrest appeared many hundreds of nights, and in almost every city of the American Union. Wemyss, at the time of the first production of the play in Philadelphia (January 22, 1830), wrote of him and of *Metamora* as follows: “The anxiety to see him crowded the theatre [Arch Street] on each night of the performance, adding to his reputation as an actor as well as to his private fortune as a man. It is a very indifferent play, devoid of interest; but the character of Metamora is beautifully conceived, and will continue to attract so long as Mr. E. Forrest is its representative. It was written for him, and will in all probability die with him.” Mr. Wemyss’s prophecy was certainly fulfilled. No one after Mr. Forrest’s death, with the single exception of John McCullough, and he but seldom, had the hardihood to risk his reputation in a part so well known as one of the best performances of the greatest of American actors; and Metamora and Mr. Forrest have passed away together.



JOHN McCULOUGH.

Metamora owed everything to the playing of Forrest; if it had fallen into the hands of any other actor it would no doubt have been as short-lived as the rest of the Indian dramas generally—a night or two, or a week or two at most, and then oblivion. As a literary production it was inferior to others of its class; not equal to *The Ancient Briton*, for which Mr. Forrest is said to have paid the same author one thousand dollars; or to *Fauntleroy* or *Tancred*, dramas of Mr. Stone's, which met with but indifferent success. John Augustus Stone's history is a very sad one; in a fit of insanity he threw himself into the Schuykill, in the summer of 1834, when barely thirty years of age; after life's fitful fever sleeping quietly now under a neat monument

containing the simple inscription that it was “Erected to the Memory of the Author of *Metamora* by his friend, Edwin Forrest.” With all of his faults and failings, the great tragedian was ever faithful to the men he called his friends.

The Indian of Fenimore Cooper is the father of the stage Indian; and both have been described by Mr. Mark Twain as belonging to “an extinct tribe which never existed.” A full list of the Indian plays more or less successful, known in other days and now quite forgotten, would be one of the curiosities of American dramatic literature. A few of them are here preserved:

Sassacus; or, The Indian Wife, said to have been written by William Wheatley, then a leading young man at the Park Theatre, New York, where *Sassacus* was produced on the 8th of July, 1836, Wheatley playing an Indian part, Pokota; his sister, Miss Emma Wheatley, then at the height of her popularity, playing Unca, and John R. Scott *Sassacus*. This latter gentleman, as a “red man of the woods,” was always a great favorite with the gallery, and he created the titular roles in *Kairrissah*, *Oroloosa*, *Outalassie*, and other aboriginal dramas with decided credit to himself. In the course of a few years, while the stage-Indian was still the fashion, were seen in different American theatres *The Pawnee Chief*; *Onylda; or, The Pequot Maid*; *Ontiata; or, The Indian Heroine*; *Osceola*; *Oroonoka*; *Tuscalomba*; *Carabasset*; *Hiawatha*; *Narramattah*; *Miautoumah*; *Outalissi*; *Wacousta*; *Tutoona*; *Yemassie*; *Wissahickon*; *Lamorah*; *The Wigwam*; *The Manhattoes*; *Eagle Eye*; and many more, not one of which lives to tell its own tale to-day.

The reaction against the Indian drama began to become apparent as early as 1846, when James Rees, a dramatist, author of *Charlotte Temple*, *The Invisible Man*, *Washington at Valley Forge*, but of no Indian plays, wrote that the Indian drama, in his opinion, "had of late become a *perfect nuisance*," the italics being his own.

SCENE II.

THE REVOLUTIONARY AND WAR DRAMA.

> "List him discourse of War, and you shall hear
> A fearful battle rendered you in music."
> *Henry V.*, Act i. Sc. 1.

The first of the purely Revolutionary plays presented in New York was, probably, *Bunker Hill; or, the Death of General Warren*, and the work of an Irishman, John D. Burke. It was played at the John Street Theatre in 1797; and it was followed the next year by William Dunlap's *André*, at the Park. Mr. Brander Matthews, in his introduction to a reprint of *André*, published by "The Dunlap Society," for private circulation among its members, enumerates a number of plays written shortly after the Revolution upon the subject of the capture and death of the British spy, many of which, however, were never put upon the stage. André had been dead less than twenty years when Dunlap's *André* was first produced, in 1798, and Arnold was still living; and, curiously enough, *The Glory of Columbia*, also by Dunlap, in which Arnold and André both figured, was played at the old South Street Theatre, Philadelphia, in 1807, with scenes painted by André himself, who had superintended amateur

theatricals at that house, and had played upon that very stage.

After *Bunker Hill* and *André* came at different periods in New York *The Battle of Lake Erie*; *The Battle of Eutaw Springs*; *A Tale of Lexington*; *The Siege of Boston*; *The Siege of Yorktown*; *The Seventy-Sixer*; *The Soldier of ’76*; *Marion; or, The Hero of Lake George*; *Washington at Valley Forge*; and many more of the same stamp—all of which were popular enough during the first half-century of our history, but during the last half they have entirely disappeared.

MAJOR ANDRÉ.—From a pen-and-ink sketch by himself.

A play of Revolutionary times which deserves more than passing notice here was *Love in ’76*, by Oliver B. Bunce, produced at Laura Keene’s Theatre in New York in September, 1857; Miss Keene playing Rose Elsworth, the heroine; Tom Johnstone Apollo Metcalf, a Yankee school-

teacher—a part that suited his eccentric comedy genius to perfection; and J. G. Burnett Colonel Cleveland of the British Army, a wicked old soldier, in love with Rose, and completely foiled by the other two in the last act. *Love in ’76* was unique in its way, being the only “parlor play” of the Revolution, the only play of that period which is entirely social in its character; and a charming contrast it was to its blood-and-thunder associates on that account—a pretty, healthy little story of woman’s love and woman’s devotion in the times that tried men’s hearts as well as souls. It was not put upon the stage with the care it deserved, and was too pure in tone to suit a public who craved burlesque and extravaganza. It has not been played in some years. Mr. Bunce was the author of other plays, notably the *Morning of Life*, written for the Denin Sisters, then clever little girls, which they produced at the Chatham Theatre, New York, in the summer of 1848. George Jordan and John Winans, the latter a very popular low-comedian on the east side of the town, were in the cast. At the same house, two years later, was played *Marco Bozzaris*, a melodrama in blank verse, with very effective scenes and situations, written by Mr. Bunce, and founded not on Halleck’s poem, but on the story of Bozzaris as related in the histories. James W. Wallack, Jr. (then known as “Young Wallack”), was the hero; Susan Denin was his martyred son; John Gilbert was the villain of the piece; and Mrs. Wallack the hero’s wife. *Marco Bozzaris* was very popular, and was not withdrawn until the end of the Bowery season.

But to return to the drama particularly devoted to war. *The Battle of Tippecanoe* related to the Indian wars, as *The*

Battle of New Orleans was founded on the War of 1812, and *The Battle of Mexico* on our Mexican difficulties some years later. The contemporaneous literature of the stage inspired by the War of the Rebellion was not extensive or worthy of particular notice. It was confined generally to productions like *The Federal Spy; or, Pauline of the Potomac*, at the New Bowery Theatre, New York, and *The Union Prisoners; or, The Patriot's Daughter*, at Barnum's Museum. During the struggle for national existence war on both sides of the Potomac was too serious a business, and too near home, to attract people to its mimic representations on the stage, and it was not until *Held by the Enemy* and *Shenandoah* were produced, a quarter of a century after the establishment of peace, that American play-goers began to find any pleasure in theatrical representations of a subject which had previously been so full of unpleasantness. These later war dramas, however, are so much superior in plot, dialogue, and construction to any of the plays founded upon our earlier wars, so far as these earlier plays have come down to us, that they may encourage the optimist in theatrical novelties to believe that there is some hope for the future of that branch of dramatic literature at least.

SCENE III.
THE FRONTIER DRAMA.

“Here in the skirts of the forest.”

As You Like It, Act iii. Sc. 2.

The drama of frontier life in this country may be described as the Indian drama which is not all Indian; and even this variety of stage play is fast disappearing with the scalp-hunter, and with the Indian himself, going farther and farther to the westward every year. It may be said to have been inaugurated by James K. Paulding, a native of the State of New York, who wrote the part of Colonel Nimrod Wildfire, in *The Lion of the West*, for J. H. Hackett, in 1831. Wildfire, afterwards put into a drama called *The Kentuckian*, by Bayle Bernard, wore buckskin clothes, deer-skin shoes, and a coon-skin hat; and he had many contemporary imitators, who copied his dress, his speech, and his gait, and stalked through the deep tangled wild woods of east-side stages for many years; to the delight of city-bred pits and galleries, who were perfectly assured that *Kit, the Arkansas Traveller*—and one of the best of his class—was the real thing, until they saw Buffalo Bill with actual cowboys and *bona fide* Indians in his train, and lost all further interest in *The Scouts of the Prairies*, or in *Nick of the Woods*, which hitherto had filled their idea of a life on the plains.

J. H. HACKETT.

Only two modern plays of this character are worthy of serious attention here—Augustin Daly's *Horizon* and the *Davy Crockett* of Frank E. Murdoch. *Horizon*, one of Mr. Daly's earliest works, was produced at the Olympic Theatre, March 22, 1871, and ran for two months. In the advertisements it was called "a totally original drama, in five acts, illustrative of a significant phase of New York society, and embodying the varied scenes peculiar to American frontier life of the present day." It was certainly an American play. In no other part of the world are its characters and its incidents to be met with. Complications of plot and scenery and certain surprises in the action were evidently aimed at by the author rather than literary