"OUR AMERICAN COUSIN"

BY

CLARA E. LAUGHLIN

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS

FORTY years ago he was a poorly informed playgoer who was not fairly conversant with the history of that play which Lincoln witnessed the night of his assassination. But to most readers of this generation it means little or nothing that Good Friday night, April 14, 1865, was nearly the one thousandth performance of Miss Laura Keene as Florence Trenchard in "Our American Cousin," and the occasion of a benefit to her. And yet, quite apart from its connection with the tragedy of that night, Tom Taylor's play has a history of surpassing interest and variety. In brief, it is somewhat as follows:

During the years 1850–51, when the World's Fair in London was drawing throngs of visitors to the Crystal Palace, no nation was more strongly represented in the exhibits and among the sight-seers than the United States. "Yankees" were the rage in London, and Yankee products took precedence of all others. As one American newspaper writer said, in describing the Yankee mania:

"Hobbs' locks were placed on the doors of the Lord Chamberlain's offices; Colt's revolvers were in the holsters of every British cavalry officer; Connecticut baby-jumpers were in the royal nursery; and Massachusetts patent back-acting, self-adjusting, rotary-motion, open-and-shut mouse-traps were the terror of even aristocratic rats. Lord John Russell 'guessed' and 'calculated' on the Papal Aggression Bill; Palmerston and Disraeli 'whittled,' one on, the other around the Woolsack; and through the columns of the elegantly worded Court Circular we learned that at a particular fraction of an hour, on a particular day of the week, her most gracious Majesty Queen Victoria, aided by the Royal Consort, His Highness Prince Albert, together with the whole royal family, indulged in three half-pints of 'peanuts' and four and two sixteenths of our genuine 'pumpkin-pies,' while Cardinal Wiseman and the Bishop of London were seen playing 'poker' over two stiff 'Bourbon whisky-slings.'"

In those days the versatile Tom Taylor was a young barrister who had recently emancipated himself from his professorship of English at University College, London, and was just beginning to establish for himself that position as dramatic critic and adapter, humorist and all-round journalist, that led him, more than twenty years later, to the editorship of *Punch*. Taylor saw the humorous side of the Yankee craze, and wrote a play about it which he called "Our American Cousin." The leading character, *Asa Trenchard*, was virtually written to fit a Yankee comedian named Josiah Silsby, then playing in London, and when the play was sold by Taylor to Mr. Ben Webster, lessee of the Adelphi, for eighty pounds, it was with the distinct understanding that Silsby was to be featured in it.

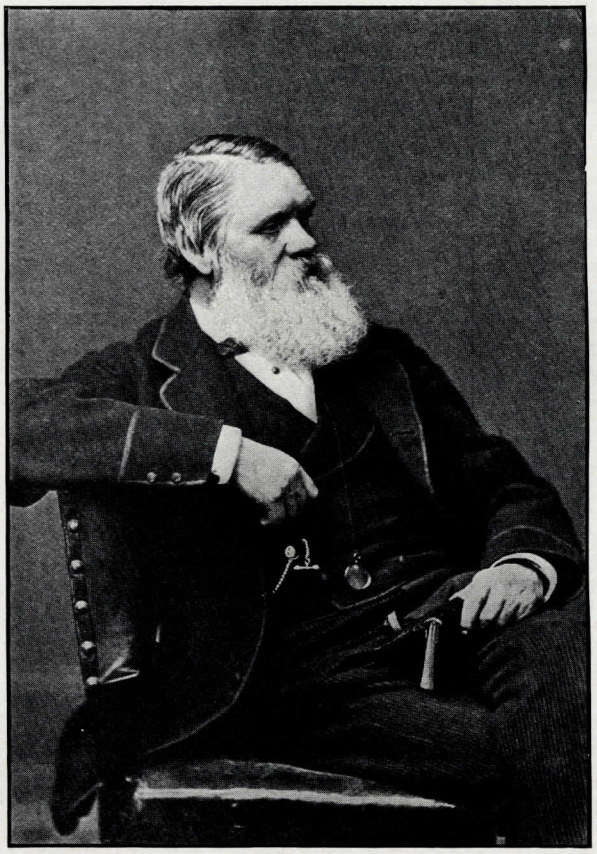
But before an opportunity to put the play on presented itself, the Yankee mania rapidly declined, and Mr. Webster, instead of producing "Our American Cousin," made a present of the piece to Silsby, who, on re-reading it, decided that it was ineffective and laid it aside. Some years later, in California, he found himself in need of a play, and rehearsed the Taylor comedy; but it was again deemed unlikely to please and he did not put it on.

It came to the ears of Taylor, in 1858, that Silsby was dead, and also that he had never used the "American Cousin" play; and having a copy of it among his manuscripts, Taylor put it in the hands of his friend, John Chandler Bancroft Davis, secretary of the United States legation in London. Mr. Davis, on arriving in New York, took the play first to Lester Wallack. That admirable manager saw in it no possibilities for his company, but advised Mr. Davis to take it to Miss Laura Keene, then managing a theater of her own on the east side of Broadway, between Bleecker and Houston Streets, and to say to her that there

was a part in the play that might be excellently adapted to Mr. Jefferson, of her company.

Mr. Joseph Jefferson, although of distinguished stage ancestry and a personal stage experience covering nearly his whole life, had not yet made any considerable mark for himself. He was not far from thirty years old, and most people thought he had ability,— as for him, he felt sure of it!— but, so far, his chance had not presented itself.

Miss Keene, when approached with the Taylor play, was not much interested. She was preparing a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and all her energies and resources were directed thereunto. It happened, however, that work on the Shakspere play went forward tardily, and, owing to some disappointments by costumers and scene-painters, the date of the first performance had to be postponed two weeks. Miss Keene was sufficiently in need of something to fill the interim to buy — on the recommendation of her business manager and of Mr. Jefferson — the Taylor play outright for one thousand dollars.

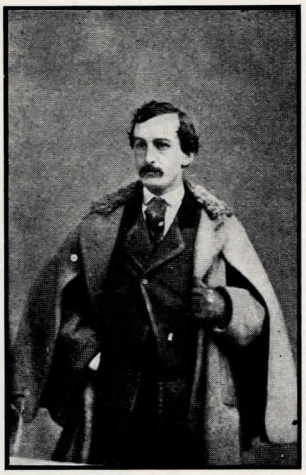


TOM TAYLOR

THE AUTHOR OF "OUR AMERICAN COUSIN"

Jefferson, in his "Autobiography," has vividly described the scene when the stop-gap play that was to make fame and fortune for three of those present was read to Miss Keene's company.

"The reading," he says, "took place in the green-room, and many were the furtive glances cast at Mr. Couldock and me as the strength of *Abel Murcott* and *Asa Trenchard* were revealed. Poor Sothern sat in the corner, looking quite disconsolate, fearing there was nothing



From the collection of F. H. Meserve

LAURA KEENE EDWARD A. SOTHERN JOHN WILKES BOOTH

in the play that would suit him; and as the dismal lines of *Dundreary* were read, he glanced over at me with a forlorn expression, as much as to say, 'I am cast for that dreadful part' — little dreaming that the character of the imbecile lord would turn out to be the stepping-stone to his fortune. The success of the play proved the turning-point in the career of three persons — Laura Keene, Sothern, and myself."

Perhaps it is not quite comprehensible to the play-going world how the play-acting world is ever alert for that "chance" which every actor feels is all he needs to make him rich and famous. Each new play is full of potentialities — until it is read or the parts are apportioned; then it is seen to be quite fiendishly calculated to keep nearly or quite every one in the company from doing what nature designed him for and art calls him to do. Either the playwright went malevolently about this repression business, or the stage-manager schemed it out and achieved his ends by giving everybody exactly the wrong part.

"Poor Sothern," as Jefferson called him, may well have been disconsolate over the forty-seven silly lines allotted him. It was only one more disappointment in a long list, but Sothern felt that the list was already too long, and that the profession he had chosen for himself against all the traditions of his family was ill-chosen and were better abandoned. He had been acting for nine years — all but two years of the time in America — and had met with small success indeed. About the time of that reading in Laura Keene's green-room, Sothern was writing home to one of his English friends about "a long, struggling tear" that forced its way down his "cheek, that fate had done naught but cuff for years," and telling of gray hairs which "have been forced through the hotbed of my weary skull."

It was to this ambitious, hard-working, but almost through-hoping young Englishman of two-and-thirty that the silly lines of *Dundreary* fell. At first he said he could do nothing with the part; "and certainly," as Jefferson testifies, "for the first two weeks it was a dull effort and produced but little effect." Then Sothern asked permission to rewrite *Dundreary,* and, this being granted, he began to feel his way with his audiences by introducing little extravagances of speech and action. Some of these were the result of marvelously minute studies he had made from real types,— he used to contend, when charged with the exaggerations of *Dundreary,* that there was nothing in the portrayal he had not taken direct from life,— and some of them were happy accidents, like the famous skipping walk. Of this walk it is told that at a rehearsal of the play, Sothern, to keep warm in the cold theater, was hopping and skipping about the outer confines of the stage, to the no small amusement of his fellow-actors, when Miss Keene called sharply to him and asked if that were part of his rehearsal. He replied promptly that it was, and in a spirit of bravado kept on. In the same spirit, he introduced the skip into his entrance that night, and found that it was an instantaneous success, bringing a tre-

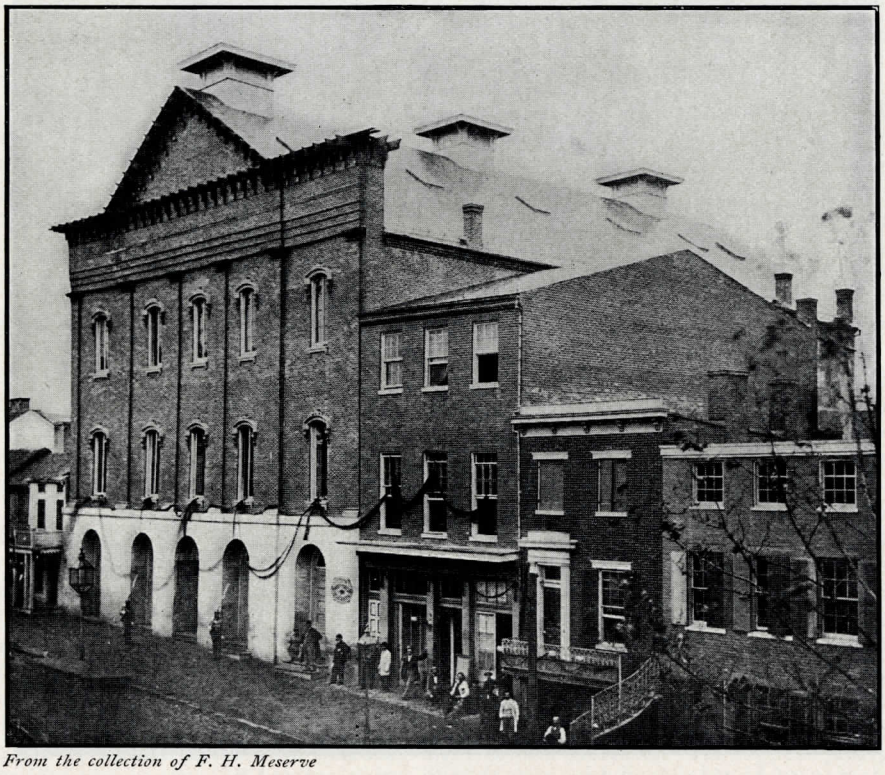
EDWARD SOTHERN THE YOUNGER, IN HIS REVIVAL OF LORD DUNDREARY

mendous laugh for *Dundreary* where before there had been only tolerance. Cautiously, artistically, he proceeded to elaborate the part until, as Jefferson magnanimously says, "Before the first month was over he stood side by side with any other character in the play; and at the end of the run he was, in my opinion, considerably in advance of us all."

The piece, put on for a fortnight, ran for one hundred and forty consecutive nights — a phenomenal run for that epoch — and thoroughly established, in New York at least, the fame of Jefferson and Sothern, and transformed them both from more or less discouraged young "members of stock" to men with ambition — and confidence — to "star."

When the curtain descended the first night on Jefferson's immediately successful presentation of *Asa Trenchard*, "visions of large type, foreign countries, and increased remuneration" floated before him, and he was already resolved to be a star.

Accordingly, when at the end of March "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was put on,— not because the demand for "Our American Cousin" had abated, but because Miss Keene had grown tired of her part and tireder of hearing her two comedians praised above herself,— Jefferson, who had not got on well with Miss Keene and who was of no mind to abandon *Asa Trenchard*, told her that he would not rejoin her company next season. She reproached him with lack of gratitude; to which he replied that he thought the honors were about even, and that, "anyway," he was going to "star"; at which Miss Keene sniffed her contempt and inquired in what play he would storm the country. He replied that, with her permission, he purposed to act "Our American Cousin." Miss Keene indicated that he "had another purpose coming to him," so to speak. And there the matter rested for a time, until she deputed her business manager to speak to Mr. Jefferson — she herself not being on speaking terms with that hoity-toity young man — and require him to resign the part of *Bottom*



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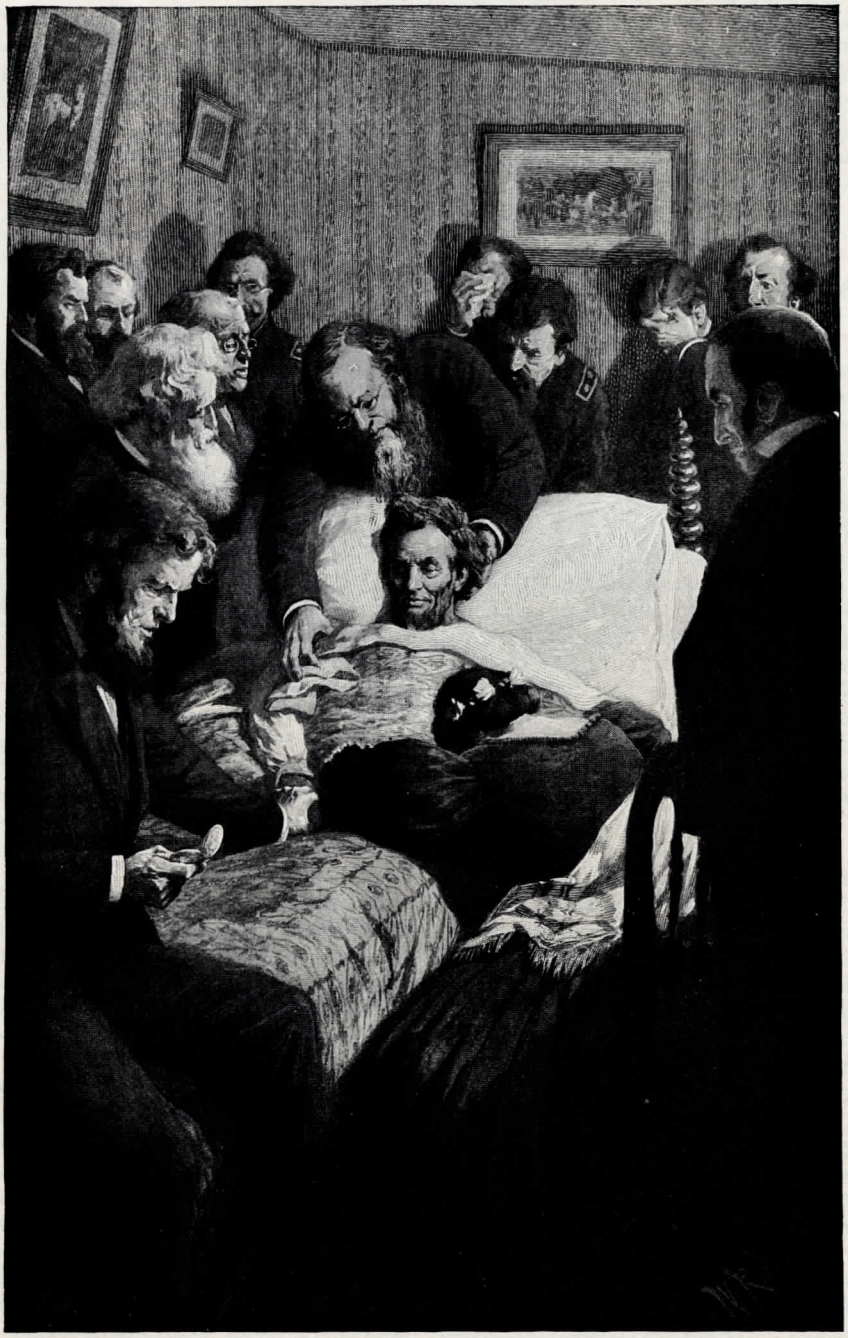
FORD'S THEATER, WHERE LINCOLN WAS ASSASSINATED



WATCHING AT THE BEDSIDE OF THE DYING PRESIDENT ON THE NIGHT OF APRIL 14, 1865

in favor of Mr. Blake, a comedian of her company who had had no part in the Taylor play. This Jefferson refused to do, saying that if Mr. Blake wanted to play in "A Midsummer Night" he could play *Puck*. As Mr. Blake weighed two hundred pounds or thereabouts and was unwieldy to boot, this suggestion did not meet with favor in any quarter, and there was a bitter quarrel, which finally came to an end by Jefferson's offer to lend his far slenderer and sprightlier person to *Puck* if Miss Keene would let him star in Taylor's play, and give her, for the use of it, one half the profits. His starring venture was not a success, and in September he joined Boucicault's forces at the Winter Garden. But during the years 1861–65 he toured Australia and South America, playing *Asa Trenchard* with some little success.

The part was never again so prominent in his career as during that first run in New York; but *Asa* had done something for him which put his performance of that character, and even the confidence it gave him in his abilities, quite among the lesser results, for him, of Tom Taylor's play: it led him to Rip Van Winkle! The success he achieved as *Asa* was of a sort he longed to duplicate, and in his attempts to analyze it he evolved the idea of a Rip Van Winkle play, three or four bad dramatizations of which had already been acted without any considerable success. So much for Jefferson's fortune as indebted to Taylor's play.

I have not been able to find out by just what arrangement with Miss Keene Sothern got the rights to *Dundreary*, but he played it in this country for months after she discontinued the piece, and in November, 1861, he opened with it at the Haymarket, London, where, after a month of discouraging business, it suddenly caught on, and played to crowded houses for four hundred consecutive nights.

The part continued to be Sothern's most famous characterization, and he acted in it with undiminishing success until he died. Nothing else he ever did created such a furore; indeed, few things that anybody ever did on the stage have been so great popular achievements or have belonged so solely to their creators. The fortunes *Dundreary* earned for Sothern were princely; the fame he made for Sothern was not eclipsed by that of any other comedian of his day; the fashions he set for all the world were comparable to nothing in recent stage history: Dundreary coats, Dundreary whiskers, Dundreary vests and monocles, had almost as universal vogue as "Dundrearyisms" — some of which latter remain to us yet in the oft-quoted "Birds of a feather gather no moss" and similar perverted parables.

It was amid the laughter of this piece — which he knew by heart — that John Wilkes Booth planned to accomplish the murder of Lincoln. When, on the morning of April 14, as he sat reading his letters in Mr. Ford's office, he heard that the President was going to attend the performance that night, he determined on a plan of action that came incredibly near allowing him to affect his escape and leave the deed, done in the sight of hundreds, shrouded in mystery.

I am indebted — after having interviewed every discoverable survivor of the audience at Ford's Theater that fateful Good Friday night, and being told that the presidential party arrived at 8.30, at 9.00, at 9.30, and at all the times between — to Mr. George C. Maynard for a definite statement. Mr. Maynard, then of the War Telegraph Office and now of the National Museum, was in the habit of keeping his theater programs. On the margin of the long play-bill of that night he made a note of the point in the play at which Mr. Lincoln came in, and wrote down the lines being spoken as the presidential party entered the box. *Florence Trenchard* was trying to tell a joke to *Dundreary*, who — of course — did not see it.

"Can't you see it?" she said.

"No, I can't see it," he assured her.

Just then Mr. Lincoln entered the state box on the upper right-hand side of the house, and Miss Keene, catching sight of him, said, "Well, everybody can see *that!*" nodding toward the box. And the orchestra struck up "Hail to the Chief," the audience cheered, and the play was at a standstill for a minute.

In the elder Sothern's prompt-book (preserved by his son) this incident occurs late in the first act; whether it was the same in Miss Keene's version I have been unable to learn, but it probably was, and that would fix the time of Mr. Lincoln's entrance at about half-past eight or a quarter to nine.

The shot was fired during the second scene of the third act. It was during the scene when *Asa* is alone on the stage that Booth fired, jumped, and made his frantic rush across the front of the stage to the "prompt entrance" on the opposite side and out through that to the stage door.

The play, interrupted at that point, was never again presented in Washington until December 12, 1907, when the younger Sothern revived it at the Belasco Theatre, on the site of the old Seward house where Secretary Seward was nearly done to death by Booth's accomplice, Lewis Payne, on the same fatal night of Lincoln's murder.