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PHILIP HONE

Walt Whitman's distaste for Edwin Forrest's robustious style of performance was a minority report. By the mid-1840s, Forrest was lauded as the very model of the native American tragedian, not just in Shakespeare but in plays he had commissioned or inspired: as the Indian chief *Metamora* and the mutinous slave *Spartacus*, his stentorian voice and muscular physique roused the groundlings. A tour of England sparked a rivalry with the restrained and intellectual actor-manager William Charles Macready, and what began as a histrionic competition became a full-fledged grudge match. When Macready visited New York in 1849, Forrest fanned the flames of anti-British feeling among the Irish working class and helped foment a riot in which 31 people were killed and a large number were wounded.

Among those who spoke out against Forrest's demagoguery and its results were Washington Irving, Herman Melville, and Philip Hone (1780–1851). Hone, the son of an immigrant German joiner, made a fortune as an auctioneer and became a local celebrity who preferred the company of other celebrities. He was briefly mayor of New York. The Whig Party relied on him as a sagacious counselor and Manhattan society's old families valued his exquisite manners and impeccable taste. The diary Hone kept from 1826 until his death is richly detailed and observant, but regularly displays a backward-looking regret that things are going to hell in a handbasket.

The Astor Place Riot

MAY 8.—Mr. McCready commenced an engagement last evening at the Opera-House, Astor place, and was to have performed the part of "Macbeth," whilst his rival, Mr. Forrest, appeared in the same part at the Broadway theatre. A violent animosity has existed on the part of the latter theatrical hero against his rival, growing out of some differences in England; but with no cause, that I can discover, except that one is a gentleman, and the other is a vulgar, arrogant loafer, with a pack of kindred rowdies at his heels. Of these retainers a regularly organized force was employed to raise a riot at the Opera-House

and drive Mr. McCready off the stage, in which, to the disgrace of the city, the ruffians succeeded. On the appearance of the "Thane of Cawdor," he was saluted with a shower of missiles, rotten eggs, and other unsavoury objects, with shouts and yells of the most abusive epithets. In the midst of this disgraceful riot the performance was suspended, the respectable part of the audience dispersed, and the vile band of *Forresters* were left in possession of the house. This cannot end here; the respectable part of our citizens will never consent to be put down by a mob raised to serve the purpose of such a fellow as Forrest. Recriminations will be resorted to, and a series of riots will have possession of the theatres of the opposing parties.

MAY 10.—The riot at the Opera-House on Monday night was children's play compared with the disgraceful scenes which were enacted in our part of this devoted city this evening, and the melancholy loss of life to which the outrageous proceedings of the mob naturally led.

An appeal to Mr. McCready had been made by many highly respectable citizens, and published in the papers, inviting him to finish his engagement at the Opera-House, with an implied pledge that they would stand by him against the ferocious mob of Mr. Forrest's friends, who had determined that McCready should not be allowed to play, whilst at the same time their oracle was strutting, unmolested, his "hour upon the stage" of the Broadway theatre. This announcement served as a fire-brand in the mass of combustibles left smouldering from the riot of the former occasion. The *Forresters* perceived that their previous triumph was incomplete, and a new conspiracy was formed to accomplish effectually their nefarious designs. Inflammatory notices were posted in the upper ward, meetings were regularly organized, and bands of ruffians, gratuitously supplied with tickets by richer rascals, were sent to take possession of the theatre. The police, however, were beforehand with them, and a large body of their force was posted in different parts of the house.

When Mr. McCready appeared he was assailed in the same manner as on the former occasion; but he continued on the stage and performed his part with firmness, amidst the yells and hisses of the mob. The strength of the police, and their

good conduct, as well as that of the Mayor, Recorder, and other public functionaries, succeeded in preventing any serious injury to the property within doors, and many arrests were made; but the war raged with frightful violence in the adjacent streets. The mob—a dreadful one in numbers and ferocity—assailed the extension of the building, broke in the windows, and demolished some of the doors. I walked up to the corner of Astor place, but was glad to make my escape. On my way down, opposite the New York Hotel, I met a detachment of troops, consisting of about sixty cavalry and three hundred infantry, fine-looking fellows, well armed, who marched steadily to the field of action. Another detachment went by the way of Lafayette place. On their arrival they were assailed by the mob, pelted with stones and brickbats, and several were carried off severely wounded.

Under this provocation, with the sanction of the civil authorities, orders were given to fire. Three or four volleys were discharged; about twenty persons were killed and a large number wounded. It is to be lamented that in the number were several innocent persons, as is always the case in such affairs. A large proportion of the mob being lookers-on, who, putting no faith in the declaration of the magistrates that the fatal order was about to be given, refused to retire, and shared the fate of the rioters. What is to be the issue of this unhappy affair cannot be surmised; the end is not yet.

MAY 11.—I walked up this morning to the field of battle, in Astor place. The Opera-House presents a shocking spectacle, and the adjacent buildings are smashed with bullet-holes. Mrs. Langdon's house looks as if it had withstood a siege. Groups of people were standing around, some justifying the interference of the military, but a large proportion were savage as tigers with the smell of blood.

MAY 12.—Last night passed off tolerably quietly, owing to the measures taken by the magistrates and police. But it is consolatory to know that law and order have thus far prevailed. The city authorities have acted nobly. The whole military force was under arms all night, and a detachment of United States troops was also held in reserve. All the approaches to the

Opera-House were strictly guarded, and no transit permitted. The police force, with the addition of a thousand special constables, were employed in every post of danger; and although the lesson has been dearly bought, it is of great value, inasmuch as the fact has been established that law and order can be maintained under a Republican form of government.

1849