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PAUL COLLINS

A DEDICATED AMATEUR OF FASHION

It is hard to achieve greatness, but harder still to have the passions of greatness without the talents to realize them.

For those lacking great skill, the London stage during the reign of George III was a cruel and unforgiving place, as William Henry Ireland was once unfortunate enough to discover. Yet just a few years after that teen prodigy's spectacular flameout, there appeared on the boards of Drury Lane another doomed soul—a man both so seemingly bereft of talent and so monumentally confident of his abilities that he created an entire thespian tradition all to himself. This one lone soul had, in his middle age, the courage not only to move to a foreign land and reinvent himself as an actor, but to pursue this acting career through a driving hail of ridicule and spite—sustained only by his utter and unrequited love for the theater.

LIKE ANY FASHIONABLE trend in 1809, the Amateur of Fashion made his first appearance not in London, but in the wealthy resort spa of Bath. He was hard to miss. The residents of the opulent York House hotel could scarcely fail to notice the dark-skinned and queerly attired man who started showing up at morning breakfast and afternoon tea.

He was so deeply tanned that it was difficult to tell whether he had been entirely white to begin with; the exotic hue of his skin, in a room filled with ladies who had rendered themselves so fashionably pale with arsenic that their lips had turned blue, was only heightened by his attire: he was entirely covered in expensive furs and wielded a thick cane with a large diamond set into the top of it. At night, he would dress resplendently in a vaguely Hessian uniform and stud his entire outfit with diamonds: diamond buttons on his shirt, diamond buckles on his shoes, and the ever-present diamond cane. He was borne about town in a huge, gleaming carriage built in the shape of a scallop shell and emblazoned with the coat of arms of a crowing rooster. Written beneath the brazen fowl was this motto:

Whilst I Live Fit Crow

A pair of expensive matched white horses led the procession.

The nobles whispered among themselves in the breakfast room, trying to decipher the fellow, who all the while sat happily unaware in a corner of the room, scarfing down a hearty morning provision of muffins and eggs. Some thought that he might be an Eastern prince, a traveling rajah. Upon discreet inquiry, though, they discovered his

name was Robert Coates. But nobody was quite sure who he was or where he had come from.

ROBERT COATES WAS determined to soak in the world of Fashion, for it had already been denied to him for far too long. He was born on a sugar plantation in Antigua in 1772, where his father, Alexander, possessed twenty thousand acres of land and vast wealth; one time when His Majesty's representatives sheepishly asked for a £5,000 loan to protect the island from an impending Spanish and French raid, Alexander Coates blithely sent them away with a pledge of £10,000.

For all his wealth, Alexander was helpless against the appalling mortality rate among children of that time. Parents back then might wait months before even naming their offspring, and with good reason—it was not wise to pin too many hopes on the survival of any one child, not in a land racked with malaria, dysentery, and yellow fever. And so it came to pass that all of Alexander's nine children died in infancy or early childhood . . . except for one. It would not have been untoward for Robert Coates to think that, surviving against such odds, destiny had mapped out a special fate for him.

Alexander Coates dutifully sent his one remaining son back to the Old World at the age of eight so that he would receive the classical education expected of any young gentleman .of means. The effect of this change for little Robert was absolute and permanent. Although his father had accompanied him on the way over to London, there was nothing else familiar about the land before him. Robert had grown up among the sunny, fertile, and endlessly vast plantations of an island thousands of miles away. But he was now in the world's most densely populated city, mingling with boys who were classmates in both senses of the word—for beneath their childish fancies lurked the future aristocracy and governance of the country. He grew to love the sophistication and artistry of this new land, and was deeply unhappy to be recalled to Antigua upon the completion of his education.

After making the long and perilous voyage back home, Coates was asked by his father what he wished to do in life. Young Robert had a ready answer: he wished for a commission in a British regiment, so that he might serve alongside the Duke of York. Europe was engulfed in war at this time, though, and Alexander could not bear the thought of his only remaining child being mere cannon fodder, or even of his simple absence for yet another decade back in Britain. Instead, he sent him off on a shorter tour—just a few years, this time—of Britain and then the United States, so that his education might be complete.

Settling back down in Antigua by the turn of the century, Robert felt the provinciality of the place press upon him, and he eagerly grasped at any twig of culture or outside civilization that floated by. Among the island's thin fare of entertainments was a theatrical company composed of a few islanders, an orchestra drawn from soldiers from the island's British garrison, and any stray actors that happened to be passing

through the colony. Coates joined this company and became an enthusiastic participant in its productions of Shakespeare. The audiences of islanders and soldiers liked their Shakespeare rare and bloody rather than well done, and the troupe excelled at putting on crudely staged, high-body-count tragedies like King Lear, Macbeth, and Romeo and Juliet.

Coates spent years devoted to such pursuits, giving extra zeal to learning the part of Romeo, while assiduously avoiding any hint of gainful employment. But he didn't really need any: he was his father's son, and there would be a job open for him when his father died. When his father's end finally did come, though, his son found that he had absolutely no inclination to oversee the family business. With a fortune now at his disposal—£40,000 a year, an astronomical sum back then—he decided to leave management of the plantation to an underling; after a suitable period of mourning for his father, he boarded a vessel bound for his true homeland: England.

ONE GUEST AT York House, Pryse Gordon, finally did gather up the audacity to acquaint himself with the strange inhabitant of the breakfast room:

He shortly attracted my notice by rehearsing passages from Shakespeare during his morning meal ... I could not help complimenting him on the beauty of his recitations, although he did not always stick to his author's text. On one occasion I took the liberty of correcting a passage from Romeo and Juliet. "Aye," said he, "that is the reading—I know, for I have the play by heart—but I think I have improved upon it."

This stranger, Gordon discovered, was so devoted to the character of Romeo that he kept a character costume packed with him on all his travels. Then why not, Gordon asked him, play the part of Romeo here in Bath?

"I am ready and willing to play Romeo to a Bath audience, if a manager will get up the play and give me a good Juliet," Coates said grandly. "My costume is superb and adorned with diamonds."

Gordon gave him the address of a local theater manager and offered himself as a reference. Coates hurriedly tucked in his breakfast, invigorated by the prospect of treading the boards once again, and set off in his grand coach. But when he reappeared an hour later, he was clearly outraged.

"That fellow," he huffed, "has treated me in a manner I am not accustomed to ... I will show him I can play Carte and Tartel"

Snapping up his diamond cane like a fencing sword, he thrust and cut it straight at the heavy wooden door into the dining room, driving his point home with an earsplitting crack against the baize that sent an old man jumping out his seat.

Perhaps a flash of the diamond scepter was all that was ever needed, for soon afterward the Bath Theatre made an announcement to the public that the next week, on February 9, 1809, would bring them:

ROMEO, BY AN AMATEUR OF FASHION

The Bath Theatre was sold out that night; ladies of fashion and rascals alike had packed the seats and boxes to peer at the lavish man whose every detail seemed to be known to one and all—save for who he was and where he'd got his money from.

When, late in the first scene, Coates swept upon the stage, there was an eruption of applause and perhaps a gasp of consternation. He was indeed, one witness recalled, wearing his very own Romeo costume, and moving in his own unique way:

He came forward with a hideous grin, and made what he considered a bow—which consisted of thrusting his head forward, and bobbing it up and down several times, his body remaining perfectly upright and stiff, like a toy mandarin with a moveable head. His dress was outre in the extreme: whether Spanish, Italian, or English, no one could say; it was like nothing ever worn. In a cloak of sky-blue silk, profusely spangled, red pantaloons, a vest of white muslin, surmounted by an enormously thick cravat, and a wig a la Charles the Second, capped by an opera hat, he presented one of the most grotesque spectacles ever witnessed upon the stage.

For full effect, his hat was topped with ostrich feathers and a liberal sprinkling of diamonds; still more diamonds were sewn into his pantaloons and his shoe buckles, and gold spangles had then been slathered onto the leather of these shoes. The whole glittering costume was so tight upon his body that his limbs bulbed out like sausages, and he jerked across the stage in a tight-wrapped transport of delight. Every word he pronounced was wrong—histrionically rising and falling, with the wrong emphasis, and apt to simply dispense with the Bard's script altogether. Coates would occasionally turn to the audience with a ghastly grin, glorying in the moment.

And then his pants burst.

It was something that only a few in the front row might have noticed at first, but Romeo's pants were so tight that the seat blew out. Audience members watched in disbelief at "the sudden extrusion through the red rent of a quantity of white linen sufficient to make a Bourbon flag, which was visible whenever he turned around." Ladies in the crowd were scandalized, and then, when it became clear that Coates had no idea what had befallen him, it became increasingly difficult to suppress the giggling.

And so the crowd watched in a sort of horrified fascination for all the first act, until finally some miscreants began to yell at him.

"Off! Off!"

Apple cores and orange peels, the favored weapons of theater ruffians, rained down from the balconies and onto the stage. A hissing filled the room.

Coates paused from his scene, still blissfully unaware of his bunnytail of undergarments, and glared witheringly at his critics Then, undaunted, he finished, and allowed the curtain to fall. He continued on, lurching through until he reached the climax of the play.

Juliet appeared dead, and so he, the grieving Romeo, was to pick her up and carry her in grief away from her tomb. Coates picked up the unfortunate actress like a sack of laundry and tossed her aside. Then, whipping out a handkerchief from his pocket, he carefully dusted the floor of the stage, and gently took off his massive sparkling hat and set it on a convenient pillow. Only now was he, Romeo, ready to die; but for reasons known only to Coates, he decided to address his entire dying soliloquy in a whisper to a single box by the stage.

Here's to my love! [He drinks the poison.] Oh true apothecary, Thy drugs are quick! Thus with a kiss I die.

His speech may have been inaudible to the puzzled patrons of the theater, but Coates was not a man to let his hero die without a fight. He took minutes to die—gasping and grimacing over and over again as he lay writhing on the floor, groaning his way through every stage agony imaginable. The crowd began to shriek with laughter now, and one wag's voice rose above the din:

"Die again, Romeo!"

Coates, lying sprawled out on the stage, decided this was a splendid idea. And so he miraculously resurrected himself to a full standing position, took another swig of the prop vial of poison, and then proceeded to die all over again.

No sooner had Romeo completed his final death-shiver than another cry went up.

"Die again, Romeo!"

Delighted, Coates stood up again, and would have gone through it a third time, had not his costar, Juliet, so appalled that she rose up from her grave as well, stepped in to put a stop to it. The tumult in the audience became deafening. Arguments were arising on all sides, and the panicked manager let loose the stage weight so that the curtain came crashing down on the scene, never to rise again.

Patrons sat stunned, unable to decide whether what they had witnessed was comically tragic or perhaps just tragically comic. It was certainly unique.

The Bath Theatre exploded in applause.

ODD REPORTS OF Coates's appearances surfaced over the next couple years: a show in Brighton, and dazzling recitations to assemblages of noble friends at dinner parties. When Coates finally arrived in London and took up lodgings in the Strand, it could only be a matter of time before Drury Lane fell before his diamond cane.

Coates soon became as famous on the streets of London as he had been in Bath, jaunting about Pall Mall and Bond Street in his blue scallop-shell chariot, glittering from head to toe with diamonds. His passage was marked by the shouts of onlookers as he a passed by: "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

Coates, as proud as ever with the cock logo on the side of his carriage, was very pleased by all this. Local papers gossiped and jested over the man they called "Romeo Coates" and "Diamond Coates," and he developed a crowd of hangers-on, many of whom would have been glad to have but a single diamond button pop off his shirt and into their pockets. Coates lent them money freely, rarely expecting to see it back. The more desperate their straits and the less likely that a loan would ever see any gain to Coates's social standing, the more generous he was. In the back-stabbing world of London social climbers, Coates was guileless.

When a poor widow came to him to ask for help, there was but one action he could take: a benefit play. But first he had to warm up, and that meant playing off-Soho: in Richmond, to be precise. He held a one-night stand at the Theatre Royal on the night of September 4, 1811, reprising his role of Romeo. His reputation much preceded him; ladies in the audience came prepared to defend their glamorous hero, and drunken young bucks arrived with pockets stuffed with fruit ripe for throwing.

Coates was ready for them. There was the usual fracas during Romeo's death scene, with supercilious young men sniggering ironically at Romeo's prolonged death throes. But Coates concluded his show by strolling to the center of the stage and reciting a poem to his audience:

BUCKS, HAVE AT YE ALL

Ye social friends of claret and of wit, Where'er dispersed in social groups ye sit. Damn me, I know you, and have at ye all . . .

If you with plaudits echo to renown,

Or urged with fury tear the benches down,

'Tis still the same, to one God ye prate,

To show your judgment and approve your taste.

'Tis not in nature for ye to be quiet. No, damn me, Bucks exist in but a riot.

For instance now — To please the ear and charm the adoring crowd,

Your Bucks of the boxes sneer and talk aloud,

To the green-room next with joyous speed you run.

Hilly ho! ho! my Bucks! Well, damn it, whafs the fun?

Though Shakespeare speaks, regardless of the play

Ye laugh and loll the sprightly hours away

For to seem sensible of real merit,

Oh! damn me, it's low, it's vulgar, beneath us lads of spirit!

You Bucks of the pit are miracles of learning,

Who point out faults to show their own discerning;

And critic like, bestriding martyred sense,

Proclaim their genius and vast consequence.

The actor wheeled and pointed straight into a theater box of his greatest tormentors:

Ye Bucks of the boxes there, who roar and reel,

Too drunk to listen and too proud to feel!

The theater leaped into an ovation. With this one speech Romeo Coates, the most outlandishly bad actor in existence, had shamed his detractors. For he had something that scarcely anyone else in the theater has had before or since: complete sincerity.

BY THE TIME Coates gave his benefit performance at the Haymarket Theatre, his fame had grown so that well before the six-thirty curtain call, more than a thousand Londoners were turned away at the door; the theater was already packed. Desperate

ticket seekers pounded on the stage door and offered bribes of much as £5—an enormous sum for a ticket in those days—just to sneak in through the back door. They too were turned back.

Inside the theater, trouble was already brewing. The young men who had come to pillory Coates were hooting and hollering at Coates's friends as they filed in; the rest of the audience fidgeted as six-thirty came and went and as the clock ticked past seven. At long last, the curtain rose, and when eventually Coates strolled onstage, the Haymarket resounded with whistling, applause, and shouts of Cock-a-doodle-doo! Coates wore a grand mantle of pink and silver silk, jewels flashing throughout his person. His hat was once again topped with high plumes of white feathers, and his shoes sported large diamond buckles. The audience came to such an uproar over him that the curtain came down during the fourth act.

The next day, on December 10, London papers attacked the performance with a disdain that Coates could not ignore; cartoonists feasted upon his outrageous dress, and there was much sniggering about the dark-skinned and gay Romeo. His country of origin was a tempting target: darkened by years in the sun, Coates's skin was a little like that of a black man—and indeed, some whispered, maybe was that of black man.

His enemies had a point. Given the secret bloodlines of slave-holding islands like Antigua, the only real surprise might have been to find that Coates was not somewhat black. And as for the suspicious dandiness of his apparel, which was outlandish even for 1811, the following day a letter in Coates's hand arrived at the offices of the Morning Herald, the one paper that all of fashionable London was sure to read:

In regard to the innumerable attacks that have been made upon my lineaments and person in the public prints, I have only to observe, that as I was fashioned by the Creator, independent of my will, I cannot be held responsible for that result, which I could not control.

Coates would neither confirm nor deny anything. But whatever he was, he would also never apologize for it—for like Quentin Crisp over a century later, he didn't know how he could be anything else.

COATES APPEARED IN only one more performance the following year, but by 1813 he was reinvigorated, and in the first four months of the year he headlined at least half a dozen shows. Some patrons arrived primed to heckle him, and others to shout on his ever-increasing flights of histrionics. So when an appearance by "the Celebrated Amateur of Fashion" was promised after a performance of Othello, curious audience members waited past the end of the play to see just exactly what was promised to them.

The curtain rose to reveal Coates sitting at a table set upon the stage, a decanter

before him, drinking his wine contentedly. He looked up and smiled at his audience, and then strolled over to the edge of the stage, glass in hand, where he "drank to the health of his enemies, whom he desired might live to see him prosper." He then launched into a poetic recitation.

The strange sight before them—a single actor onstage drinking wine and inviting the audience down for a drink, as it were—was unlike any stage performance seen at the Haymarket before. Whatever was left of the fourth wall of drama was gone now, with Coates simply refusing to recognize it, and addressing the audience as if he were having a drink with each one of them personally.

The crowd roared its approval, and when he exited, it begged for him to return. Coates, however, had vanished.

THE PUBLIC HAD embraced Coates, but it was his dearest wish to be close to royalty. Despite his friendships with dukes and barons, including some he had known since his childhood, Robert had gone all these years in England without securing a meeting with the Prince of Wales. His hopefulness that such a meeting would take place was touching, even pathetic, and could hardly fail to be noticed by those around him.

That spring of 1813, an engraved invitation card arrived at 38 Craven Street, addressed to Coates. Upon opening it, he could scarcely contain himself: he was invited to a royal party the following night! The next day was a whirlwind of activity, as he spared no expense in fitting himself out for the royal bash. He bought new diamond buttons, a diamond brooch, and a diamond ring for the occasion; his personal tailor was set to work assembling a new outfit of the finest silk, and a bootmaker brought in to create a new diamond-buckled creation.

As Coates made his way to Carlton House that fateful night in his magnificent carriage, the Prince's entourage, courtiers, and officers had already made their way inside, through the vestibule and up the crimson-carpeted staircase, and into the grand salon where the Prince was holding court. A steady procession of military officers, court officials, posh dandies, and ruffled ladies arrived.

As the Prince amused himself by listening to a performance by the court musician, a member of his staff came forward bearing a card tray.

"What is it, Bloomfield?"

The Prince picked up the invitation card from the tray and peered at it through a gold eyeglass.

"A manifest forgery!" Eyebrows rose in the room. "Someone has taken an unpardonable liberty in concocting this."

Guests drifted forward to look at the spurious card.

"Do you know this person, Brummell?" asked the Prince of one court dandy as he passed the card to him.

Brummell gave a look of horror.

"I know him! Why, he makes sugar and sells coffee—in short, he is a sort of grocer. How could I know such a man?"

The card was passed to another court dandy.

"Do you know him, Alvaney?"

"Is it the black fellow who played Romeo," Alvaney passed the card along. "Of course, I don't know him in the least."

"Is he a friend of yours, Sherry?"

"Not that I know of. But were it possible for the poor man to patronize me handsomely, I couldn't be so hard-hearted as to object to his presence."

The assembled crowd had a good laugh at Coates's generous ways, whereupon Sherry turned serious.

"The person is not presentable; that style of thing cannot be permitted here, positively."

The Prince, though perhaps a little sorry for the fellow waiting at his gate, had to agree.

"I do not like this affair at all."

He summoned Colonel Bloomfield.

"Go to this gentleman, and undeceive him in a way not to hurt his feelings—taking care to express the extreme regret of the Prince of Wales that such an accident should have occurred."

And so Bloomfield glided out to dispatch Romeo Coates, who, still waiting patiently to enter Carlton House, was imagining the grandeur that awaited him.

AT SEEMINGLY EVERY block on his way home, Coates's magnificent coach was halted

by the wave and Hallo! of some fashionable man about town.

"My dear sir! Let me congratulate you on your well-deserved distinction! Of course you found His Royal Highness a most charming host?"

"Oh, there was some irregularity... I do not understand what. But the Prince sent a most kind message. I have no doubt that His Royal Highness will speedily set it right."

And as the Amateur of Fashion passed onward, each man sniggered. It seemed that everyone but Coates knew that he had been the victim of cruel hoax. Or rather, it would have been cruel had its intended victim ever come to realize what had happened. But Coates never seemed to entertain any such notion. He was not a man who imagined the worst of the people around him, though he might have been justified to do so with London's aristocracy. Instead, he truly believed that there had been some sort of misunderstanding, and that sooner or later his proper invitation to meet His Royal Highness would come.

Days and weeks passed without an invitation, and still he did not suspect.

HIS RIDICULE AND fame increased with each month. At Home, a spoof of Coates's acting, was already running nightly at the Covent Garden Theatre, and this travesty of a travesty actually inspired a thoughtful defense of Coates and his work by a most unlikely ally, the magazine The European. An essay in its March 1813 issue featured an engraving that gives us one of the few portraits of Coates that is not a comic caricature. It followed with this spirited defense of his work:

However we may esteem MR. COATES for the liberality with which he has, upon many trying occasions, come forward to succour the distressed, we are not yet such dupes to our credulity as to believe that he would, or could, have braved the horrors of a series of theatric storms, or smiled at the illiberal absurdities of a series of theatric imitation, had he not been strongly possessed with the histrionic passion; but as this, although, unprofessionally, perhaps, not a very laudable propension, is certainly, when applied as he applies it, very innocent; therefore, when exercised in the cause of humanity, it ought rather to have been praised than censured....

We will venture to say, that Mr. Coates, as an actor, is infinitely more amusing than the generality of any of these critics. He is, in his way, quite as accomplished an artist; and infinitely more disinterested.

This hardly silenced audiences. They were now coming to the theater expecting, even demanding, to see Romeo and Juliet fall apart before their eyes. The motive was still so inchoate that nobody even had a word for it yet, but we certainly do today.

Robert Coates had, in utter innocence, invented Camp.

THOSE AROUND COATES did not bear the brunt of this new artistic experience with such panache. At the April 23 benefit performance, the beneficiary, Miss FitzHenry, had agreed to take on the part of Juliet; after the marriage scene she was almost reduced to tears by the crowd's booing and hissing, and she fearfully threw her arms around a stage pillar.

A few weeks later, during the May 10 performance, one wag in the audience smuggled in a rooster under his coat; just as the duel between Romeo and Tybalt was about to begin, the clucking and flapping fowl was tossed up on the stage, where he strutted around the scenery amid shouts of Cock-a-doodle-doo! Coates at long last lost his patience—he turned to the patrons of one offending box and shook his sword at them, a clear provocation to a duel. They bawled out angry demands for an apology, which he would not give. Orange peels proceeded to rain down upon him and the other actors. Then the hecklers dispensed with the courtesy of peeling altogether; after the death scene of Paris, one patron whipped an entire orange across the theater and belted the slain Paris on the nose, whereupon the "dead" man stood up, angrily pointed at the offending fruit, and stormed offstage. When Romeo's turn to die onstage came, his famous histrionics kept getting preempted by yelling from the boxes:

"Why don't you die!"

Such words simply rolled off" Coates. But later that year, his sincerity was thrown into question. This was the one thing he could not bear to hear, and it hurt him so badly that he never entirely recovered. An army widow had beseeched Coates for help, and so he helpfully planned out a benefit show for her on December 1. He was to play the role of Belcour in the play The West Indian. After the last few shows, Coates had wisely inserted this statement into the evening's playbill:

A Reward of £5 will be paid by the gentleman who plays "Belcour" on conviction of each offender throwing anything on the stage to annoy the performers.

But as the show began that night, a young man stood up in the audience and demanded to be heard. There was a serious accusation to be lodged against Robert Coates, he said gravely: "Ladies and gentlemen, the charge against Mr. Coates is that he does not act upon a principle of philanthropy, but directly or indirectly gives his services for remuneration."

The crowd erupted in a tumult, with shouts for proof. The young man described how the young woman benefiting from that night's show had fallen into dire straits. "Having heard of Mr. Coates's generosity in these matters," he continued, "she applied to him, through the medium of Mrs. Lyall, that gentleman's landlady. . . . Aid was persistently refused, until the benficiary agreed to give Mrs. Lyall forty pounds for the amateur's services."

He then produced a copy of the receipt. The crowd was outraged and broke into an uproar. Coates, for once in his life, was struck dumb with horror at their jeers.

IT IS HARD to know what might have appalled Coates more—the idea that he was acting from less than sincere motives, or the imputation that a man of his enormous wealth would be extorting such trifling amounts from people. But after the show he threw himself and his money into an investigation of the matter, and found to his disgust that it was all true. His landlady at his Craven Street lodgings, Mrs. Lyall, was collecting payment from the straitened widows and orphans that he had been performing for, all the while claiming that she was doing it under Coates's orders. Coates marched Mrs. Lyall over to the offices of the mayor of London and had her issue a full written confession, witnessed and notarized by the mayor himself. He had the confession set into type, and then printed and distributed widely, but it was too late; the damage had already been done to his reputation among Londoners.

Yet theater managers and needy widows in other cities were still beseeching him for help, and so in 1814 he began playing outer cities like Birmingham—these crowds were delightfully unironic, simply enjoying the spectacle of Coates repeating the death throes of Lothario and Romeo. But his high point was in Stratford-on-Avon that December, playing his beloved Shakespeare in the Bard's own hometown. One patron of the barnlike Stratford theater, Charles Matthews, watched on in bemusement:

That darling Fancy's child of Nature—Coates—acted here, and was advertised in the character of Romeo.

After he had acted, he was determined to have a procession all by himself, a minor pageant. . . and walked, dressed as Romeo, from the barn to the butcher's shop where Shakespeare was born. Here he wrote his name on the walls and in the book kept for that purpose, called himself the illustrator of the poet, complained of the house, said it was not half good enough for the divine bard to have been born in, and proposed to pull it down at his own expense and build it up again, so as to appear more worthy of such a being!

But few of Coates's grand plans came to-pass anymore; his plantations on Antigua suffered reversals, and he slowly found himself with less and less income to flaunt. Over the next couple of years his star faded from the British stage; his fans moved away from him and on to the next bright and shining object. Coates, still devoted to his Bard, was left alone again.

Without his public, and entering his fifties, Coates sought companionship. He found it in Miss Emma Robinson, and married her in 1823. The two became devoted helpmates and produced a son and a daughter. But Coates, who alone had escaped childhood death from among his many siblings, was not so lucky with his own children— neither

lived to see adulthood.

Humbled by his shrinking fortune and domesticated by marriage, Coates decamped from London to Boulogne-sur-Mer, where tapped-out English nobility and misspent capitalists retired to ponder their financial exile. Sometimes, when a visitor recalled the old days in London, the Amateur of Fashion could be coaxed into giving one of his famous recitations. But no matter how many times he was asked, he refused to take to the stage again.

DECADES PASSED, AND memories of the strange actor faded into oblivion. But one day in 1843, a member of a London gentlemen's club happened to be looking out the window when he spied a strikingly odd figure making his way up St. James's Street. It was an elderly man, dressed in Hessian boots and clothes that were thirty years out of date.

Then it dawned upon the watcher.

"It's Romeo Coates!" he shouted.

Club members rushed to the windows. The old man had continued walking past the club, but the distant memory of the shouted phrase arrested his step. He turned around and returned to the club's window, where he politely doffed his hat.

"My name, gentlemen, is Robert Coates."

He then walked onward with perfect elderly gravity, and disappeared into the crowd.

Coates and his wife had moved back after decades away, and taken up lodgings at 13 Portman Street. Coates could be seen in his haunts once again now, though an observer of this seventy-one-year-old man could scarcely have thought him capable of the famed histrionics of his youth.

Visiting old friends in the city, he was sometimes goaded into performing, particularly for younger men and women who had not seen him thirty years before. Watching Coates, they were mystified: why had he been so reviled by critics? During the long decades of Coates's absence, the theater had embraced melodrama; what was once histrionics was now artistic passion. Coates, it seemed, hadn't been born to the wrong style of acting at all. He had simply been born to the wrong era.

RETURNING TO LONDON meant that Coates could indulge in his one great passion again, which was going to the London theaters. And so he died as he lived: by the theater. On the night of February 15, 1848, after attending a show at Covent Garden Theatre, Coates was departing in his carriage when he remembered that he had left his opera glasses on his seat in the theater. He clambered down from the carriage and

out onto crowded Russell Street, and into the path of another speeding carriage. He was knocked down; the wheel went over his head.

The carriage sped away, and its driver was never found. A crowd gathered around the bleeding and broken old man. The theater was steps away, just out of his reach.