

## AN ACTOR'S ADVENTURE.

At one period of my wild career I was, like the late Roscius, an actor, not too well known to fame, but one of the best "responsible gents" in the profession, and not above "handling the brush" or playing a solo between the acts on a coffee-pot. The wild, uncertain Bohemian life just suited my roving spirit. The world went very well then, though the world did not go very well to the theatres, and our salaries, in consequence, were low, and by no means sure. Still, we managed to knock along somehow, and usually had somewhere to sleep, enough to drink, a sausage roll or a pig's faggot occasionally for dinner, and a make-up box. I once travelled with Joe Pong's Company up in the north of England. Everybody knew Joe, fifteen years ago—one of the best fellows in the world, but, like myself, always in difficulties. One story of Joe's spoofing a bailiff is still extant. The minion of the law, after considerable trouble, managed to find Mr. Pong, and give him the writ. Joe invited the man to come in and see the performance that night, and wrote him out an order on the spot.

"And by the way," said Joe, to whom a happy thought had just occurred, "here's a local paper, containing nearly a column about the piece. You'd better take it home and read it and then you'll know something about the play before you come in?"

And he managed dexterously to wrap up the writ in the newspaper which he handed to the bailiff, who carefully took it home. And somehow Joe didn't act that night.

At the time of my story we were playing at Massingham-on-the-Moor, a small town in the mining district. Joe was a great favourite in Massingham, whose playgoing public were so hypercritical and exacting that it was a common saying in those parts that if you could pass Massingham you could go "anywhere." The tragedy of *Hamlet* was put up for Saturday, the last night of our stay. The "beginners" had just commenced to dress—we all shared the same room (with the rats)—when little Willy Bircham, the low comedian, entered, and in a voice trembling with emotion, if not with gin, observed:

"There's two men at the stage-door inquiring for you, Joe; and if they're not bums may I never wear a scratch wig again."

Joe snatched up his street trousers, in a deuce of a state.

"I know there is a *capias* out for me, boys, but what shall I do? I could get up into the paint room, and drop out of the window on to the roof of a wood-shed, and so into the street—but who's to play the blooming Dane?"

With the courage and promptitude which the occasion demanded, I stepped into the breach, tapped my manly chest, and answered; "I will!"

Nobody was a bit surprised. In those days we all went in for any part in case of emergency. One of my first lessons in acting was to take matters coolly.

"Laddie," said the old actor, who instructed me, and borrowed my grease-paints, "that green curtain has got to come down some time to night. Don't you worry about your words or props."

In this particular performance I was cast for Marcellus, Guildenstern, the second grave-digger, and Osric. So we got one of the orchestra—the big drum—to go on for Marcellus, Rosencrantz was to speak Guildenstern's lines as well as his own, the assistant sexton was cut out altogether, and the boy who sold the programmes was told off for Osric. Joe's wife, who played Ophelia, went down on her knees to me, and swore I was the saviour of her unborn babe, and I don't know what else; and we saw poor Joe land safely in the street.

Directly I came down, dressed as the melancholy Dane, I was touched on the shoulder—the old, old touch I knew so well.

"I want you, Mr. Pong—suit of Rusham and Pester."

"My name is not Pong, fellow," I remarked, with fine show of indignation.

"That wont wash," said Bailiff Number One, who had evidently been drinking.

"We see your name on the bills, and 'Amlet is good enough for me to take—ain't it, Joey?"

"Right," grunted his companion, who was of sullen, taciturn disposition.

I foresaw making a bit out of the job, so I didn't argue the matter, merely asking to be allowed to finish the play. This they consented to, first stipulating that they should accompany me to the dressing room when off the stage.

I don't suppose that poor old William Shakespeare was ever so damnably mauled as on that night. "Cut it as short as you can my lad," said the bailiff; and I suppose we played the entire tragedy in a couple of hours, no little to the mystification and annoyance of our kind friends in front. Of course I had to "wing" the part; and I rather fancy that Hamlet occasionally lapsed into the language of Cassio, Sir Lucius O'Trigger, Crabtree, Richard Hare, George O'Kennedy, and other heroes with whose parts I was better acquainted. For there were several leaves out of the prompt book, and poor old George Hunter was no flyer at giving you the word. But we managed to pull through somehow; though ever and anon I could catch sight of the Bogie Man at the wings, with his mate, and could overhear his refrain, "Cut it short, ma lad!"

When it came to the murder of Polonius, behind the arras, I did my level best to "pink" the chief bailiff with my rapier—we having previously arranged that the arras should be placed immediately in front of that functionary. But the point just missed the pit of his food-chamber.

Everything comes to an end, and eventually I delivered with immense effect, the grand old line, beloved of actors and audience alike:—

"The rest is silence."

And then, with the most indecent haste, the minions of the law were on to me before the green curtain was fairly down, and long 'ere Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes had recovered their perpendiculars. I was not even allowed to put on any street clothes, but was carried off to the railway station, and thence to the goal at Grimesboro' in "my inky cloak, and customary suit of solemn black."

But the law had to pay for that little mistake. One hundred good pounds were parted with for putting the wrong Hamlet in goal. And when on, the following Tuesday, I rejoined dear old Joe at Griston, the supper we had that night lasted far into the next morning, whilst the health of everybody was drunk three times over, not forgetting the bespoofed bailiffs.

But I never played Hamlet again.

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