

They Played a New Hamlet

by L. Frank Baum

120 Flourmoy street; Pitkin & Brooks, Chicago.

"No," said the actor, as he put his feet on the opposite seat, threw his ulster over the head of the harmless old gentleman in front of us, and proceeded to light his corncob pipe, "life with a cross-roads aggregation ain't no snap. You traveling men think you lead hard lives, but as a matter of fact you don't know what trouble is. Why, I've worked for five companies since the 1st of October, and played every part you can think of except a bronze statue, and where am I now? On my way to join an Uncle Tom's Cabin company of the deepest dye! Wouldn't expect it in an artist and a gentleman, I know; but three meals a day are indispensable to my health and happiness, and I must do what I can till Henderson offers me a comedy part in his new extravaganza.

"Comedian? Not on your birthday; I'm a tragedian by instinct and education; but it so happened that I always have to play the comedy role wherever I go--fate, I suppose, or what these theosophist Indiamaniacs call Karma. I never remember playing a part to my liking, but once, and that was under adverse circumstances, I did the ghost in 'Hamlet,' and it was this way: I'd joined a party of barnstormers who were playing week stands through the mining towns of

Pennsylvania. We sported a brass band at one time, but they had skipped out and left us with nothing but a bass drum, that was of little use as an attraction; still we lugged it around with us. Well, one week we were at a coal town way up on the hills above the Two Lick, where the natives were as green as grass. The first night's performance was a great success, but at its close a committee of miners waited on us with a request that we play 'Hamlet' the next night. Our manager replied that 'Hamlet' was not a part of our repertory, but that we'd give 'em a much better show. The miners were evidently disappointed, and the leader said:

"See here, boss, we've got to have this here Hamlet show or the folks 'll git mad. None of us has ever seen it, but there was a digger here last year as could talk of nothin' else but Hamlet, as was the greatest show ever played an' had a ghost to it. Now, you say you're actors, but can't play Hamlet; we've talked with the boys, and that's the play they all want. You give us that an' we'll pack the house for you.'

"The manager looked puzzled and undecided, and another miner noticed it and exclaimed:

"See here, cap'n, if you can't give us Hamlet why leave that out, but give us the ghost, anyway.

"The manager put on his sweetest smile.

"My friends,' he said, 'you shall have the ghost and Hamlet, too.'

"Tomorrow night?'

"Tomorrow night.'

"The delegation thanked us earnestly and withdrew, while the members of the company turned upon their betrayer in anger and amazement.

"Who knows anything about Hamlet?' I asked.

"Who's got a copy of the play?" inquired the heavy man.

"'Where's the costumes coming from?' screamed the leading lady.

"But the manager silenced us all.

"'Look here,' he said: 'if they are bound to have Hamlet they shall have him. It'll fill the house. I never saw Hamlet myself, but I know a few quotations from it, and the most they want is the ghost, anyhow. We'll go on and do anything we like--fake the thing through--and when it gets dull we'll ring in the ghost for excitement.'

"That settled it, but I had my own misgivings when I looked at the stage. We were playing in a schoolhouse, and, as there was no stage, we had been obliged to build one from some lumber a miner had brought to add a wing to his house. He wouldn't let us cut the boards or nail them, so we laid them across some trusses, meeting the ends in the middle, and during the performance we had to exercise great care when we stepped or the end of a plank would fly up and give us an exit not down in the play.

"When the evening came there was a very nervous lot of actors behind the impoverished curtain, and even the manager lost a part of his assurance and would have backed out if he dared. But the miners were packed in the house like sardines in a box, and there wasn't standing room for a fly, so we knew it would not be safe to change the bill on them.

"That performance of 'Hamlet' was the rankest parody of a play ever presented to a suffering public. The miners looked on critically and tried to make out what it was all about. The manager, who was chief actor as well, stayed on the stage most of the time himself, getting off time honored gags and trying to put a little go into his embarrassed and indignant company. I was to play the ghost, but not having seen 'Hamlet' at that time and having no idea how to dress the part I had covered myself with a sheet and swung the brass drum in front of me. As I'm rather short, my eyes just ranged across the top of the instrument. My cue was to be 'Who art thou?' but I was busily engaged in watching the antics of the company.

"They had been a little reckless in their movements and some of the boards near the center of the stage had slipped back, leaving a hole about two feet across. Owing to the drum I never saw this hole. I stood waiting for my cue in the wings, but I was thinking intently of something else when I became conscious that the manager was standing at the other side of the stage glaring angrily at me and shouting 'Who art thou?' at the top of his voice.

"Instantly I stepped out, gave the drum a solemn beat at each stride and exclaimed 'I am thy father's ghost!' At the same time I unconsciously stepped into the gaping hole in the stage and disappeared like a shot; but the drum remained on top while I was struggling in the darkness to gain a footing and the crowd was shouting in intense delight at this magnificent denouement. The manager rang down the curtain and act first was concluded. They drew me out all covered with bumps and bruises, and while the company roared with laughter and the manager thanked me with tears in his eyes for saving the piece, I tried to collect my wits and discover what had happened.

"But this wasn't the worst of it. Those cussed miners thought the accident was part of the piece, and during the next act shouted so energetically for the ghost that I was forced to go on and repeat the whole business. The third act was the same way, and when it was over my legs and arms were skinned, one eye was swelled shut, two of my front teeth were missing and every inch of my anatomy was sore. The crowd waited outside to escort me to the boarding house, where they gave me three rousing cheers. 'Tell you what,' said one of them to me the next day, as I sat propped up in bed, 'that air Hamlet is a great show. We sorter wondered why you didn't want to play it for us, but we understand now, and are grateful to you for givin' in. If ever your troupe comes here again, an' you give us Hamlet an' the ghost, you can have every dollar the town holds!'

"And that," concluded the actor, with a sigh, as he picked his grip out of the rack and put on his ulster, "is the only time I remember playing a tragic part, and yet my soul yearns for tragedy. Good-by, old man, I get out here. To-night, if you'll stop off, you'll see me once more in the grasp of relentless fate, and playing the fascinating part of Marks, the lawyer--for which sin may heaven forgive me!"

Text typed and edited by Scott Andrew Hutchins, based on the text in *The Chicago Sunday Times-Herald* 28 April 1895, 28. It was part of the first installment of "'Heard on the Road.': Traveling Men's Stories": "Here is the first installment of THE SUNDAY TIMES-HERALD'S traveling men's stories--'heard on the Road.' They have come in, as will be seen, from nearly every part of the union and are all sent by traveling men. Some, it may be expected, are 'chestnuts,' but all are readable, even the twice told tales. A few of the travelers sent in novelettes having no relation to their experiences on the road. That is not the kind wanted. Actual stories--'heard on the road' will always be welcome. Some of the story writers, inspired by a brief glimpse of the muse, volunteered to drop their grip sacks and turn writers for THE SUNDAY TIMES-HERALD for food and aye. None of these offers could be accepted." Judged to be the best

was not this but "Just Let the Bear Eat Him" by Jo L. Henry. Based on the quality of that story, this editor's opinion is that he was the Philocles of 1895.

Note: In the penultimate paragraph, "teeth" is rendered "teenth" in the original. Baum's name, address, and company are given at the bottom, not the top, and "street" is not capitalized, just as I have rendered it.

Afterword forthcoming.