

HAMLET ON THE HALF SHELL.

BILL NYE TELLS ONE ON BOOTH.

ON the "pleasure exertion" which I took last spring in company with others, all of whom missed a watery grave by the merest chance, there were two passengers from Waterbury, Conn., called by our crew the first and second Waterbury watch.

One was the Jeonial Jacques, who runs the opera house at Waterbury, and the other was Dr. Axtelle, who keeps Waterbury out of the jaws of death.

At Mr. Jacques' opera house Edwin Booth and his company played "Hamlet" without costumes. I had heard about it, but only indirectly. So I asked Jean to give me the facts.

It seems that at first Mr. Booth gave up all idea of playing in the absence of the costumes, and the company said, with one voice, that it would be impossible anyway, but the manager was heartbroken. The house was crowded to suffocation. People had come from quite a distance to see the great tragedian, and many of the men about town and grandees about Waterbury could be heard cracking their knuckles impatiently in the third gallery as time wore on and the costumes did not come.

Tears came to the eyes of the manager as he addressed Mr. Booth in his dressing-room. The great, sad, solemn orbs of the tragedian rested on him as he nervously cracked the big rubber band which held a bunch of general admission tickets and a roll of dumb but eloquent greenbacks.

"Do not be cast down," said Mr. Booth in that deep and mournful voice. "Do not send the people away," said he, as he began reversing his cuffs. "We will play 'Hamlet' this evening, as unusual.

The property man was sent out to the different stores, and Horatio ran over to a gent's furnishing goods emporium across the street.

The place was called the Old City Hall, and the hour was past for the curtain to ring up. It was a curtain on which the audience was advised to "call on Aleck Beeswax for tea, underwear and maple syrup; also hides, pelts and caramels; also notary public and soft drinks."

Other literature was to be seen on the curtain and a picture of a livery stable man in a high hat and fiery team taking a well-dressed lady and gent out riding in a victoria, with a speckled dog trying to keep up.

Mr. Booth took a drink of water out of a tin pail and asked Horatio if he could be ready in eight minutes. He thought he could. He took off a pair of red gloves and put on a pair of yarn mittens, better suited to the climate of Denmark.

"How would it do for the duel to be fought with revolvers, Horatio?" asked Mr. Booth, who was a practical man in an emergency.

"It will not be necessary," said the manager. "I have sent to our lodge for some Knights of Pythias swords. They will be here very shortly. I'm a little sore about the skull, Mr. Booth," he added, "dead sore. Doc Axtelle promised me a skull he had in his office, but he had to return it yesterday to his first husband, who is now leading a better life and wants all of his wives buried together. But I've got a phrenological head, with faculties all over it. That's the best we can do."

Mr. Booth said that would do, and just then the local property man brought in a prussic café to poison Hamlet's father with.

The evening was very cold, and in the poisoning scene Hamlet's father wore a pair of ear muffs, which, as he lay asleep in the garden, had to be removed by the poisoner before the deadly liquid could be poured into his ear.

"I do not remember who played the King, Hamlet's stepfather," said Mr. Jacques, "but he was the bummiest crowned head in search of a hairbrush that I ever saw. You know, Mr. Nye, that a King is no good anyway without his vestments, and generally the King in 'Hamlet,' robbed of his reigning wraps, is merely a great big appetite with a heavy head of whiskers. He wore a coonskin overcoat, borrowed of one of our leading livery stable keepers, and he had the handle of a croquet mallet wrapped in tin foil for a scepter."

Mr. Booth wore a dark business suit or black chevrot or some such stuff, and from the time the curtain rang up until the great obituary congress of the Hamlet family there was not so much as a smile. Thus did the dignity of a truly great man overcome the almost fatal obstacle of the absolutely ridiculous. It was tragedy in spite of the temptation for comedy.

With the phrenologist's checkered bust and in the grave scene one could imagine Mr. Jefferson yielding to the environments and saying:

"Alas, poor Yorick! I was acquainted with him. I knew him, Horatio, considerable. He was all der dime making chokes. Vonce I blay horse mit Yorick and ride on his pack 1,000 times!

"Look at his intellectual town lots. I never know we lock dot vay on the head ven ve are dead! My! My! My!

"Dot blace you tink vas der baseball grounds vos mirthfulness and funny business vot he got on his prains. Dot vos a funny Yorick! Here you see some more nice faculties he got marked oud mit a plus bencil. Dot vos de blace vere he t'ink of his home. Dot is vere he lofe his wife. She is marrit two times now since lot 1,000-legged vorn got his nest in poor Yorick's love of his wife! Poor Yorick! Vot make you schmile like dot? You t'ink you got de laff on Mrs. Yorick, eh?

"I pet you. If you could now speak to me, Yorick, mit dose chapless chaws and dot pallhead, mit intellectual additions marked out on de oudside, you would said to me, 'Rip von Wingle, I tolt you py ourselves Mrs. Yorick she cuts no ice mit me!'

"Still dot vas de same mit Alexander. You might trace Aleck till he vos a railroad mit a moggage on him or a fair vround. We must all come to dot, Horatio, some day when we are dead. We must not be stuck up too much.

"Charge Voshington aud Charlotte Corduroy vos like dot. They come to be dust by and by. All the great men vot haf to keep sober and make the after dinner sbeeches must be like dot.

"Imperious Caesar and Henry Clay both dead, you can't tell wioh is the other one.

"But I never know Yorick have his faculties marked out dot vay mit a plus bencil, so he can find out vot he is t'inking about. Maybe he get dot prains plotted

out dot vay so he can tell vot his taxes vas and den he can pe careful and not overtax his prains. Yorick vas a funny man. I bet you dot ven the angels get tired in the recording office they like to come and fold their wings and spend the evening mit Yorick."

The Queen wore during this performance a new dolman that was very much admired, and after pouring the poison in her husband's ear she won the hearts of both one and all by stepping to the upright piano, which stood against a tree in the royal garden, and singing a stanza of a little musical hit, beginning, "I don't like to play in your yard," or something of that kind, to attract attention from a whole passle of Danes who weré taking the corpse to the ambulance.

Ophelia wore a new street dress and came in on rubbers. Mr. Booth had all he could do to keep her from playing the part supported by a small white dog, and the manager says that in the burial scene she had to get up out of her grave twice to lrive the dog back.

Mr. Jacques said that everything was perfectly dignified except his wretched dog.

He bit the ghost twice on the calf of the leg and got all tangled up in the mosquito netting. (The ghost wore mosquito netting over a mackintosh.)

Yet with all these odd surroundings, even when Laertes looked at his watch to see if the funeral was due, and when Horatio telephoned for the ambulance in the last act, the wonderful beauty and strength of the lines and the melancholy dignity of the great tragedian won every heart, and with the close of the performance a tremendous, aggregated, sympathetic sigh came up like the first stealthy approach of a great billow along the sand, and then the mighty wave of applause followed with the roar that swells the actor's heart.

As Booth threw down the scabbard of his K. P. sword he turned his eyes on Horatio and said, "If we had played 'Hamlet' at the Princess' Theatre as we played it to-night, the results would have been different."

Bill Nye

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