

# **Work'us**

by

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'As my friend Parmentire said earlier in this symposium, the humour is not always to its - ah! professional exponent, the Comedian. It may somewhat mitigate the gloom in which the enactment of my special roles in the greater passions for which opportunity has been given to me - and others - yes, to others - by the Master, Shakespeare, and the galaxy of dramatic, poetic talent which has carried down to our day the torch of tragic thought, if I, in this hour of social communion when, if I may be allowed the expression, the buskin is unlaced and the sock is - ah! somewhat eased, relate to you a somewhat humorous episode of my "hot youth," when, like our dear Prince Hal, I occasionally made the welkin ring in its darker hours before the dawn.

'Looking back over the vista of time, those hours of revelry seem to have left a less effaceable mark on memory than does the

whirlwind of jealous passion, or even the soft dalliance of the hours of love.'

'Oh, Mr Dovercourt!' said the Second Lady, putting up her fingers to screen a modest blush. The Tragedian, pleased, went on:

'It is, perhaps, the contrast between my hours within what I may call my art-workshop and those without its pale - what a great writer has called the "irony of things" - which makes my memory cling to little trivial absurdities of days long gone; whilst the same memory has lost sight of many an hour of paramount triumph, snatched from eager humanity even before the very thrones of the Kings of the Earth. Ah, me! those halcyon days which are gone for aye! But "sit still my soul" and "break my heart, for I must hold my tongue." Well, it was when I was in the stock at Wigan, when Hulliford Greenlow controlled the theatrical destinies of that home of the black diamond. A few of us choice spirits were used as a habit to assemble nightly when our work at the theatre was over. Our rendezvous was at the hotel, or rather I should say the public-house, known as "The Merry Maiden." It was in reality but a drinking house; but there were a few bedrooms which were now and again occupied by some overcome reveller. The place, however, had so bad a reputation in the eyes of the police that no one would willingly remain in it after the withdrawal of the extraneous company, unless quite overcome by his libations to Bacchus. Naturally our conversation, if at times pronounced, was bright; and naturally, too, there were at times jokes, both practical and - and - ah - verbal, consonant with the various dispositions of the nightly frequenters of the house. There were a few choice spirits who were outsiders to our habitual galaxy, and efforts were often made by others to penetrate our charmed circle. We were, however, conservative in our tendencies. We cared for none of the guests who were not good company; and the landlord, a genial soul but thoroughly equipped with business instincts, did not care for any company which was devoid of surplus cash. Naturally the more choice spirits amongst us had at times periods of - ah - petrification, when, in fact, the ghost had not walked; and at such times we were wont to reap in a practical shape the harvest of which the seed-time had been a certain toleration extended to repetition on the part of some of our eclectic community, and the exercise of some of our histrionic talents in enacting the part of listeners.

'One night we had a strange experience in the shape of a fresh guest. He was a very young man, a weakling and somewhat deformed. In fact, our genial host called our attention at first to

his - ah - eccentricity by the humorous way in which he addressed him as "my lord," it being our custom in those days to designate as a nobleman anyone whom Dame Nature had in a malevolent moment inflicted with a curvature of the spine. The youth was ill at ease, but he was so manifestly ambitious to share our revelry, and he was so eager in his appreciation of our merry quips and cranks - the flashing by-play of our intellectual swords - that we decided tacitly to allow him to remain amongst us. Our humorous but business-like host took care that the new-comer's expenditure on the goods of his trade was commensurate with his enjoyment. On further visits of this young nobleman he so harassed him into needless expenditure - an expenditure manifestly ill according to his means, for his garments were poor and worn - that one or two of our duller spirits interfered, and chid our host into a more decorous observance of the economic proprieties. The youth would join us at irregular periods, but seldom a week passed that he did not make his appearance. After a little his shyness wore away, and now and again he ventured to make a remark, generally of an abstruse kind and necessitating for its full understanding an intimate acquaintance with the classics. By this time, too, we had come to know something of the youth's personal surroundings. He was the son of a man who had been a teacher in a school, but who had been killed at a fire whilst he was helping at a rescue. His widow, being penniless, had, of course, to go to the Union, where the boy was brought up. Being a cripple and unable to play or work with other boys, he had been allowed to take advantage of the school, and had read all the books he could get and had taught himself some of the dead languages. When these facts had come to our knowledge, some of our community were not well pleased that he should have come amongst us. There is, Ladies and Gentlemen, a very natural prejudice against the workhouse taint, and some of the high-spirited members of our little coterie resented it. Our genial host was one of the most indignant. He was, though himself a man of humble origin, one of very fine feelings, and he said it hurt him, and it hurt his house, to be tainted with any workhouse scum - such was the humorous way in which he expressed himself. "To think," said he, "of his damned impudence, comin' 'ere to my 'ouse - my 'otel - a-spendin' of money while 'is hold mother is a-livin' in the workus, kep' by rates paid by you an' me. I'll let 'im know what I thinks before I've done with 'im." The man who had told us the story set the landlord right upon one point; the old lady was not living in the Union, nor had been for some time. So soon as her son had begun to earn money, which he did, it was said, by writing for papers and magazines, he had taken her out, and they lived together in a tiny house some distance outside the town, where rent was cheap.

'Well, we were discussing the affair, when "lo! and behold you" -'

'My hown words! 'E's a-stealin' of 'em from me!' came from the Sewing Woman, with a snort. 'H-ss-sh!' went round the company. The Tragedian glared, and went on:

'When lo! and behold you, who should come in but the very hunchback himself in a new suit of clothes. We all tried to look as if there was nothing strange; but do what we would, the conversation from that moment on kept about nothing else than the workhouse. Our genial host did not say a word, from which I gathered that he had some deep design. At first the young man coloured up and flushed something painful to see; but presently he went over to the bar and gave an order sotto voce. Then he came back amongst us, and, standing up, said something like this:

"Gentlemen, I want you all to drink a bowl of punch with me. To-night is a red-letter night with me, and I want you all, good fellows that you are, to let me speak my gratitude to you. For you have done for me more than you perhaps know. You let me come amongst you and share all your fun, and get inspiration from your brilliancy. I feel most keenly all you have just been saying about the workhouse. No one knows better than I know how true it all is. But I owe it something; I owe it much. It sheltered my mother in her trouble, and it sheltered me in my youth. It gave me education, and made thus for me possibilities which I might not otherwise have had. And, indeed, I am grateful to it. But the life there is a barren one at best, and there is little light through its dull, sad shade. I wanted a contrast to this shade of my youth, and I heard someone speak of you fellows and your brighter evenings here. I was earning but little money, but the schooling which my mother and I had gone through made our wants but few, and I was able to save each week the necessary sum to pay my footing here. My dear mother wished it. She used to sit up for me till I returned whenever I came here; and before we went to bed I told her of you all and most of the clever things I had heard. Then out of all your brightness, and with the contrast to what I knew already, I found I could begin the play I had longed to write. You gave me material! You gave me inspiration! You gave me hope! And I wish you could know the depth of gratitude in my heart. My play is to be rehearsed tomorrow at the Crown Theatre in London, and I am to be there to help. I got some little money only yesterday for a story, and you see me in the first good suit of clothes I ever had. I tell you all these

things because you have been so good to me that I want you to feel, one and all, how much I owe you. This shirt I wear, my mother made herself and washed and ironed for me; and it touched me when I was coining out to-night when she brought it to me and said: 'My boy, I can't be with you, but I want you to feel that I am near you. Every stitch in this is put in with love and hope, and you must feel it, whether you think of it or not.' It was she who counselled me to come here to-night to thank you all, my good friends; to close worthily the door on the old life, and bring, if I may, into the new life some of the good feeling that you have so freely given me in the old." He appeared moved, and the tears were in his eyes. We all drank his punch, of course; and as it was his punch we had, of course, to drink his health. Then, if you please, our genial host got up and said that he was going to stand a bowl of punch too, so that we might bid our young friend adieu. So we drank his punch also. Then he came and whispered to me to order another bowl of punch. "I'll pay for it. See that his Lordship drinks plenty; I mean to be even with Work'us!" So the whisper went round the jovial spirits that our young friend was to have a skinful. And he had. He was not accustomed to such freedom of liquor, and after the first few glasses it wasn't hard to persuade him to drink more. He was always reminding us that he had to catch the train for London at 8.15, and he kept showing us his ticket.

'Then we put him to bed in a room of "The Merry Maiden." We all helped. But before we went away we took the gloss off that new suit of clothes. I daresay we were a bit rougher than was necessary; but it was so excruciatingly funny to think of when he would wake with a headache and find his new clothes torn and burned in holes, and stabbed with a penknife, and blotched with ink and candle-grease. Finally we put the shirt up the chimney and dragged it about the floor a bit till it was a real picture. As we came away our genial host observed with a laugh: "Lord Work'us' will find it like old times when he sees his clothes."

'Well, our little joke wasn't quite complete after all. We had, of course, intended that he should miss his train; but it seems that early in the morning his mother came looking for him, and learned from a servant that he was there. Our genial host was still asleep, so there was no one to prevent her entering. I believe she just got him to the train in time. He hadn't a coin about him after he had paid for his bowl of punch.

'I heard from one of the Company at the Crown that he arrived in a terrible state. He was well plucked enough, I will say that for him; and he would have gone on with his work looking like a

scarecrow, only that by some evil chance Grandison, the Manager, saw him in time and took him away to his own room and let him wash and rigged him up.

'Anyhow, he never came back to Wigan. And now look at the justice of things! Here's this workhouse upstart with a fortune. They say he has over a hundred thousand pounds, his wife and his mother drive about in carriages; whilst men of genius like myself have to pig it in hovels with the riffraff of the stage. Pah!

He drowned the depth of his indignant emotion in his drink.

For a time no one spoke; the men smoked, the women looked down at nothing on their laps. The first sound heard was from the Engine-Driver:

'That's a funny story - a really funny story! I won't say what I think, because this is Christmas-time, and the gent who told it is an old one with one foot in the grave. I'm from Wigan, I am. So you can fancy how nice it is for me to hear a story like that. I know where "The Merry Maiden" is, and I know, too, the sort of reputation that the "genial host" bears. Bless him! I'll look in there when I'm next at home, and see if we can't fix up another joke of some kind!'

Later on he was heard to say in private conversation with the MC:

'Look here, mister, you're a man of the world. Tell me, how do the beaks look nowadays on scrappin' in the Midlands? What do they consider a fair fine where there has been a holy shindy and some hound has been wiped the floor with?'

'You are next, Murphy,' said the MC, looking at the Super-Master, and at the same time handing a glass of steaming whisky punch. 'Don't be afraid of this. 'Tis John Jamieson.'

'I'm a timarious man be nature,' he answered as he began to sip the punch as a preliminary, 'but whin I'm dhragged into publicity like this I'm tuk be the short hairs, so ye'll pardon me, I thrust, Ladies and Gents all, av I thransgress in me shortcomin's.' Being an Irishman, he was regarded by the Company as a humorist, and felt that he had to keep up that perilous reputation - just as he had to strain himself now and again to achieve a sufficient brogue.

'I suppose 't would be bettther for me to shtay on dhry land an' to give an expayrence iv me own, rather than to be afther gettin' into difficulties be puttin' out to say what I don't know in the way of shtories an' consates. Illi robur et aes triplex circa pectus erat. Yous'll remimber!' He had been brought up at a hedge school, and always advanced the preposterous statement that he had been 'at College.'

'All right, Murphy. What you will, but hurry up! This isn't Monday trunks, but Sunday hand-bags!' The professional simile was received with laughter and applause by the actors; but Murphy, who was a shrewd fellow, knew too much to waste his opportunity on quips and cranks, so went on at once.