

What Can an Actor Do When He Retires?

E. H. Sothorn Answers in Humorous Vein the Question So Often Asked, Using as Interlocutor the Ghost of Gamaliel Ratsey

By E. H. Sothorn

The recent retirement of E. H. Sothorn from the stage has revived discussion about what an actor can do with himself when he gives up playing at a comparatively early age. Mr. Sothorn was asked by *The New York Times* to answer the question so far as it concerned himself, and his amusing reply is published below:

WHETHER it was that THE NEW YORK TIMES had asked me what I proposed to do with myself, now I have retired from the stage, or because several malefactors had recently escaped from Sing Sing, I know not; but I awoke one night in my quiet home in Litchfield to see a figure in Elizabethan costume standing in the moonlight. 'Twas a swarthy looking fellow with a quaint smile and a jaunty air.

"Who the devil are you?" said I. The visitor produced out of the void two huge horse-pistols and leveled them at my head.

"Get up!" said he, "and play me a scene or I'll blow your brains out."

This kind of invitation is vastly persuasive. I was up and about it in a jiffy, and must have delivered myself to the satisfaction of my audience, for shortly he cried: "By our lady, I dare wager should'st thou go to London and play Hamlet thou wouldst outstrip the famous Burbage, who is now making fame in that part! Here is a trifle of 40 shillings to make merry withal," and he threw me a purse which jingled as it fell.

It struck me I had heard all this before somewhere. Why surely this was the behavior of Gamaliel Ratsey, that hilarious highwayman of Shakespeare's day who had forced the players to act for him on the Queen's highroad! This was made clear beyond peradventure, for the rascal continued:

"When thou feelest thy purse well lined, buy thee some place or lordship in the country that, growing weary of playing, thy money may bring thee to dignity and reputation when thou need'st not care for them that before mad'st thee proud with speaking their words on the stage."

"You are Ratsey's ghost!" I cried.

"The same," said my visitor.

"What brings you here?"

"My sins," said he. "I am condemned to revisit thus the glimpses of the moon and re-enact my ancient escapades. Night in, night out, I flit about beneath the gallows tree. Especially am I condemned to repeat my infamous conduct toward the strollers. Since you are one of these, I have slid hither on a moon-beam. It is said you have retired from the stage."

"I have."

"Then perchance you will pursue my oft quoted advice."

"Well, partially," I admitted.

"I take it then that your purse is well lined."

"Sufficiently for a modest need."

"And that you will buy you some place or lordship in the country."

"The truth is," said I, "that I own five Elizabethan four-post beds and I want to get into them and rest a while."

"You have a large family?"

"No, but Elizabethan four-post beds are my hobby and I want a home now to put them in."

"You player folk are fortunate people," said Ratsey's ghost. "I would I had purchased a share in a company of players."

"'Tis better than highway robbery," said I, (but even as I spoke I recalled some remarks concerning the depredations of sidewalk speculators.)

"One can't tell till one dies," said Ratsey's ghost. "They do say that people of your kidney murder good parts and rob authors of their reason. You may find that you too shall live o'er your misdeeds in purgatory."

"Heaven forbid!" cried I.

"Your retirement to these four-post beds may be but temporary," said the

robber. "Surely," he continued as he lowered his horse-pistols and slipped into a chair, "you do not propose to sleep for the rest of your natural life?"

"You are interviewing me," said I, and I perceived a certain similitude between those flintlocks and the interviewer's pencil.

"It is more or less a matter of lead," said the ruffian, and he leveled his guns again.

"Well, no," said I. "There will be

cannot cry 'Stand and deliver!' to the sunset and the hills, nor will Dame Nature succumb to 'Your money or your life!' Her purse is for wooers, not swashbucklers. She must be persuaded with a reed, not a bludgeon."

"I have ever gleaned that players ne'er wearied of their puppet show," said Ratsey's ghost.

"It is true enough," said I, "that ours is a most lovable labor, a very seductive slavery, and while one may look back

poker. A juggler, too, even in extreme old age, might lose his appetite could he not, when at meals, send his knife, fork, plate, tumbler, mutton chop, potato, and salt-cellar flying dexterously about his head. What tight-rope artist would be content with only a balance in the bank? But your actor, willy nilly, is inoculated with a taste for literature and the arts. Maybe he can sit by his fire while he discovers the world."

"What are you going to do?" said Ratsey's ghost.

"The men and women of the theatre are versatile," said I. "Your own Burbage was a painter of note. All, or nearly all, of the prominent actors were able writers, good business men many of them. Edward Alleyn busied himself with the founding of the College of God's Gift at Dulwich. I'm sure if Marlowe, Jonson, Spencer, Heywood, or Heminge, or Peel or Green had been disabled they would have found congenial occupation had they but reverted to their paternal trades of butchers, bricklayers, tanners, tailors, and what not."

"This is apart from the matter," said the ghostly inquisitor. "What are you going to do? That's the point."

"I really can't see why you raise the question," said I. "Why on earth should there be wonder as to the ability of an actor to occupy himself intelligently away from the theatre any more than there should be in the case of other 'good men and true.' Here in my own day, we have very many players who are excellent painters—Forbes-Robertson, Tim Murphy, Caruso, Frances Starr, Weedon Grossmith, Kendal, Giddens, Jefferson—besides a number of women, Bernhardt among them; several who have been physicians, Wyndham and Charles Bishop. Henry Edwards was a famous entomologist, Titheredge a horticulturist, an authority on roses; here's Wilson a bibliophile; innumerable playwrights have been players from Shakespeare to Molière and Pinero; just now five thousand English actors are proving pretty good soldiers."

"Plague take it! what are you going to do?" said Ratsey's ghost.

"Since your time," said I, "Salvini, Garrick, Kemble, Macready, Bancroft, Hare, Phelps, Helen Faucit, Mrs. Siddons, Mary Anderson have all retired gracefully and have found congenial and useful occupation for their leisure. It is a curious delusion that actors are so constituted that they will cease to exist mentally when they leave the theatre. Perhaps it is because good humor and kindness are so generally associated with feeble mentality. As a class, players are joyous. They laugh a great deal, and pale wisdom is associated with divested melancholy. To be cheerful is to be suspected of being weak-minded. There's a great deal in the Scriptures about the laughter of fools, and Solomon declares, 'I said of laughter, it is mad'; but then it must be remembered that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, which was no laughing matter."

"What are you going to do with yourself?" said Ratsey's ghost. "I ask you for the last time. The day is nearing, I must soon begone; it is my custom to be hanged at daybreak."

"I recall," said I, "that you suffered that penalty in 1605."

"And it is part of my routine now," said he. "I want this thing settled before I die. Come!" and he put the flintlocks to my head again.

"I tell you," said I, "this wonder as to what actors will do when they leave their masks behind them has a curious note of incredulity and a tinge of sarcasm in it, as it had in your own day. You will recall these lines:

England affords these glorious vagabonds
That carried erst their fardels on their backs,
Coatsers to ride on through the gazing streets,
Sweeping it in their glaring satin suits
With pages to attend their masterships,
With mouthing words that better wits have
framed
They purchase lands and now esquires are
made.

"That sounds as though the people of



(Insert)—E. H. Sothorn as He Looked When He First Went on the Stage. Photo Underwood & Underwood Studios.

waking hours, and I fancy I shall not be idle."

"You will miss the theatre," said my tormentor. "Actors cannot rest content without an audience. Come! Admit that you would rather act with my weapons at your head than not act at all."

"You will pardon me if I differ," said I, for truly it was no moment to be uncivil, "but there have been times when I longed for repose. Perhaps this mania of mine for four-post beds sprang from some such deep-rooted desire."

"But," said Ratsey's ghost, "when a man has been active in a much-loved profession, he cannot well abandon it, sit him down, and stare at the sky. For my part, had I not been hanged betimes, I should have been a freebooter to the last. One cannot acquire a pretty skill in a craft and not love to practice it. Have you no further longing to cheat people of their tears and their laughter?"

These pickpocket phrases angered me, but I had no wish to provoke him.

"I can understand," said I, "that, like other captains of industry, time would lie heavy on your hands should you dwell away from a plenitude of pockets. One

with regret, the time has come when these efforts tell on me and, although it may seem strange to one of your active habit, I would seek repose."

"But not stagnation," said Ratsey's ghost.

"Permit me to remind you," said I, "that Shakespeare, to whom you are supposed to have offered your most excellent advice, proceeded very shortly to act upon it, and that many others of my calling have seen the wisdom of a timely retreat before they should lag superfluous on the stage."

"Will you tell me without more ado what you intend to do with yourself when you finally ring down the curtain?" said Ratsey's ghost, and he waved his pistols about dangerously.

"You see, acting is not entirely a physical matter," said I. "The mind is employed and trained in many directions. With all respect, one may believe it is slightly different with a clown, a juggler, a tight-rope walker. One can imagine the clown's household still disturbed with his pranks and that he must of necessity enter a door heels over head and tickle his friends with a red hot

your time hardly believed that we deserved what we earned."

"What are you going to do?" and Gamaliel Ratsey stamped his foot.

"There is much to learn and a world to see," said I with enthusiasm. "There are a great many things I have never had time to think about. I have several conclusions I want to reach before I go any further."

"Look here!" said the highwayman. "I give you one last chance," and his barrels shone in the light of the moon. "What will you do, now that you have given up acting?"

"Act!" said I.

Ratsey's ghost nearly faded away.

"Act?" he repeated. "What for?"

"For the British Red Cross," said I.

"That is something I've got to do. It's the only way I can help."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" said Ratsey's ghost.

"I understand," said I, "that that is your custom."

"Quite so," said he. "But I thought you said you had retired?" said Ratsey's ghost.

"I have retired."

"How can you have retired if you act for the Red Cross?"

"I had to retire in order to act for the Red Cross. I retire acting."

"I see," said Ratsey's ghost. "I

caught you in the act of retirement."

"I certainly was not attired as desired when you inquired why I had retired," said I.

"You make me all-fired tired," said Ratsey's ghost, "and it's time I sought the gibbet. It's some distance off in the old Bedford Jail. It's a beastly thing to have to do every morning, but one can get accustomed to anything. By the way, hand over that 40 shillings I gave you."

"Oh, yes, I remember you robbed the actors of it the next morning."

"Precisely. That's my business."

"You're a witty thief," said I.

"You're an amusing mountebank," said Ratsey's ghost.

The cock crew.

Invisible hands drew a black cap over the highwayman's head, his flint-locks vanished into thin air, he was bound with chains. There was a sound of a bolt drawn; he disappeared through the floor.

As I slipped between the blankets, the clown's song in "Twelfth Night" rang in my brain:

But when I came into my beds

With a hey-ho! the wind and the rain.

"Now what brought that to my mind?" I wondered, for the association with Gamaliel Ratsey was not quite evident. "Oh, of course! I'm thinking of my five Elizabethan beds," said I.

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