By E. H. Sothern


The recent retirement of E. H. Sothern from the stage has raised dis- covery among those who knew him that he could not bear to be left alone, but that if he were given up to play at a comparatively early age, Mr. Sothern suddenly changed his mind. He was asked to answer the question as far as it con- cerned him, and his amazing reply was published below:

"Neither it was that you need have asked me what I preferred to do of myself, now I have retired from the stage, or because several manufacturers had recently ceased to sell Sigi Sing, I know not; but I woke one night in my own home in Enfield to see a figure in Elizabethan costume standing in the moonlight, "Twa aery looking fellow with a blank smile and a hairy air."

"Who the devil are you?" said I.

The visitor produced out of the void two huge horse-pistols and levelled them at my head.

"Get up," said he, "and play me a song. I'll have you at six o'clock." This kind of invitation was vastly per- missive. I was up and about it in a jiffy, and must have delivered myself to the satisfaction of my auditors, for shortly after I was called "By my luv, I dare wager should't thou go to London and play Hamlet thus without entering the famous Burbage, who is now making love to that part?" Here is a tinkle of 40 shillings to make merry within, and be thou on a purse which jingled as it fell. It stuck me I had heard all this before somewhere. Why, surely, this was the be- haviour of Gamutio Calvert, that licentious 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 real- ized continued:

"Where thou financiest the purse well lined, buy thou some place or linden in the country, grow thyself a tobacco; thy money may bring thee to dignify and reputation when thou rest not careless that thou art proud with speaking their words on the throne!"

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

"The same," said my visitor.

"What brings you here?"

"My sins," said I, "I am condemned to pervade the stage with my想着 me and re-enact my ancient escapade. Night in, night out, I am left to my fate in the darkness there. Essentially I am con- demned to repeat my infamous conduct toward the players. Since you are one of them, I say loiter on a moon- beam. It is you have retired from the stage."

"I have.

"You perchance you pursue my old sketch advice."

"Well, partially," admitted I.

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

"Sufficiently for a modest need."

"And that you will buy you some place or linden in the country, grow thyself a tobacco."

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

"You have a large family?"

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

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

"You, better than highway robber," said I, "but even as I spoke I recalled some remarks concerning the deporta- tions of sidewalker speculators."

"One can't tell till one dies," said Rattany's ghoul. "In the way of say that people of your kidney number good parts and rob authors of their reason. You may not always be the best of your moods in a purgatory."

"Shameful," said I.

"Your retirement to these four-post beds may be too temporary," said the ghost.

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

"You will miss the theater," said my tormentor.

"Actors cannot rest content without an audience. Come! Admit that you would rejoice act with my weapons at your head and not act at all."

"You will pardon me if I differ," said I, for truly it was my moment to be un- civil, "but there have been times when I langued for repose. Perhaps it means just as much to me as to you."

"But," said Rattany's ghost, "when a man has been active in a much-lauded pro- fession, he cannot well stand by him down, and stare at the sky. For my parts I have not been honored enough, I should have been a freesoarer to the last. One cannot acquire a pretty skill in a craft and not love to practice it. I have no further leagings 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, thou would be heavy on your hands should you dwell away from a plethoras 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 Rattany's ghost.

"Permit me to remind you," said I, "that Shakespeare, to whom you are sup- posed to have offered your most excel- lant advice, proceeded very shortly to act upon it, and that many others of my call- ing have seen the wisdom of a timely re- turn to certain things that might lag superfluous on the stage."

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

You see, acting is not entirely a physi- cal matter," said I. "The mind is em- ployed and trained in many directions. With all respect, one may believe it is slightly different with a clown, a jagged-tongued manager."

"I have no disputations with the cute fellows who round them behind me with a。
your time hardly believed that we deserved what we earned."

"What are you going to do?" and Gamaliel Ratsay swept 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 barrel shone in the light of the moon. "What will you do, now that you have given up acting?"

"Act!" said I. Ratsay'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 Ratsay's ghost.

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

"Quite so," said he. "But I thought you said you had retired?" said Ratsay'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 Ratsay'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 Ratsay'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 Ratsay'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 bed,
With a hey-net! the wind and the rain.

"Now what brought that to my mind?"

I wondered, for the association with Gamaliel Ratsay was not quite evident.

"Oh, of course! I'm thinking of my five Elizabethan beds," said I.

The New York Times
Published: October 29, 1916
Copyright © The New York Times