



AN EPISODE.

CHRISTMAS OF THE JOLLY THEATER STOCK COMPANY.

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Three weeks before the holidays, and the outlook for a merry Christmas was a gloomy one, at least so far as the members of the stock company of the Jolly theater were concerned. Salary day had come and gone, and as yet the ghost had shown no disposition to walk, and it was because of the nonappearance of that most welcome speaker of stage-land that the rumor had started and was rapidly gaining ground that Messrs. Hustle and Hardup, proprietors and managers of the Jolly theater, were "in a hole again."

The piece which occupied the boards had proved a flat failure, and receipts at the box office had fallen in consequence to a plane never before reached in the history of the house. Moreover, no new play had as yet been put in rehearsal, and an atmosphere of unmistakable gloom and apprehension pervaded the region behind the footlights and weighed heavily on the spirits of every one there, from Pearl Livingstone, the talented emotional actress who played the leading female part, down to little Kitty Sullivan, who was only 7 years old and was in the depths of despair because for fully three weeks she had been out of the bill. In short, every member of the company was in a condition of mingled uncertainty and curiosity in regard to the future of the playhouse and the projects of its managers, who as yet had given no sign of their intentions and had, in fact, been invisible to the members of their artistic staff ever since the last day on which salaries became due.

On this particular night, which happened to be one of storm and rain, two or three of the principal actors had gathered together for a serious talk about the situation, when Tom, the programme boy, appeared suddenly before them in an almost breathless condition and exclaimed: "Mr. Freelance is back from Chicago. He's in the office with Mr. Hustle. They've got both doors locked."

"Mr. Freelance!" cried Miss Livingstone, her face lighting up with joy, precisely as it does in her scene in the second act where her lover comes back from India, or rather as it did light up in that scene before the business became so bad. "Are you sure it was Mr. Freelance, Tommy?"

"Sure!" rejoined Tom, with emphasis. "I seen him myself when he come in." "Then, Tom, you be sure and see him when he comes out and tell him that I am particularly anxious to see him back here as soon as the curtain goes down on the second act. Here's a quarter for you, Tom, and you'd better keep it as a curiosity, for it's getting to be a very rare sort of bird in the Jolly theater preserves."

"Thank you, mum," said Tom as he pocketed the coin, with a grin.

"I fancy I see a gleam of light on the distant horizon," remarked the venerable Mr. Borders in a tone similar to that which he assumes in the great melodrama called "The Ocean Blue," in the scene in which he is discovered sitting on a raft in midocean on the lookout for a passing sail. "In the meantime," he added, "I think we had better wait and hear what Billy has to say before we take any further action in the matter."

Up to that moment they had taken no action whatever, but the phrase sounded well, and so Mr. Borders employed it.

Now, Mr. William Freelance, called by his intimates Billy, was and is today one of the best known figures in the theatrical affairs of the town, and, as every member of the stock company knew, he had on more than one previous occasion come to the rescue of his old friends, Messrs. Hustle and Hardup, and that, too, when they were in even more deplorable financial straits than they were at the present moment.

It was his reputation as a mascot fully as much as his remarkable talents which caused the whole avant scene to brighten up at the news of his presence in the theater, for playfolk are notoriously superstitious and have an unbounded and childlike faith in the efficacy of a mascot as well as in the destructive qualities of a "jinx."

Just as the curtain fell on the second act Mr. Freelance appeared behind the scenes and received the rapturous greetings of the company. Then Miss Livingstone took him by the arm, detached him from the little group which surrounded him, led him gently but firmly into her dressing room, placed him on her sine trunk and standing before him with folded arms said, "Billy, what's going to happen?"

"My dear," replied Mr. Freelance permissively, "everything—all right, and I just left Hustle for five minutes to come back here and tell you so. We are going to put on a new piece, and there's a part in it that's simply great—out of sight, in fact. We are not quite sure who'll be cast for the part because it's a very heavy emotional one, and if we put a woman in it who didn't know how to read lines she would go all to

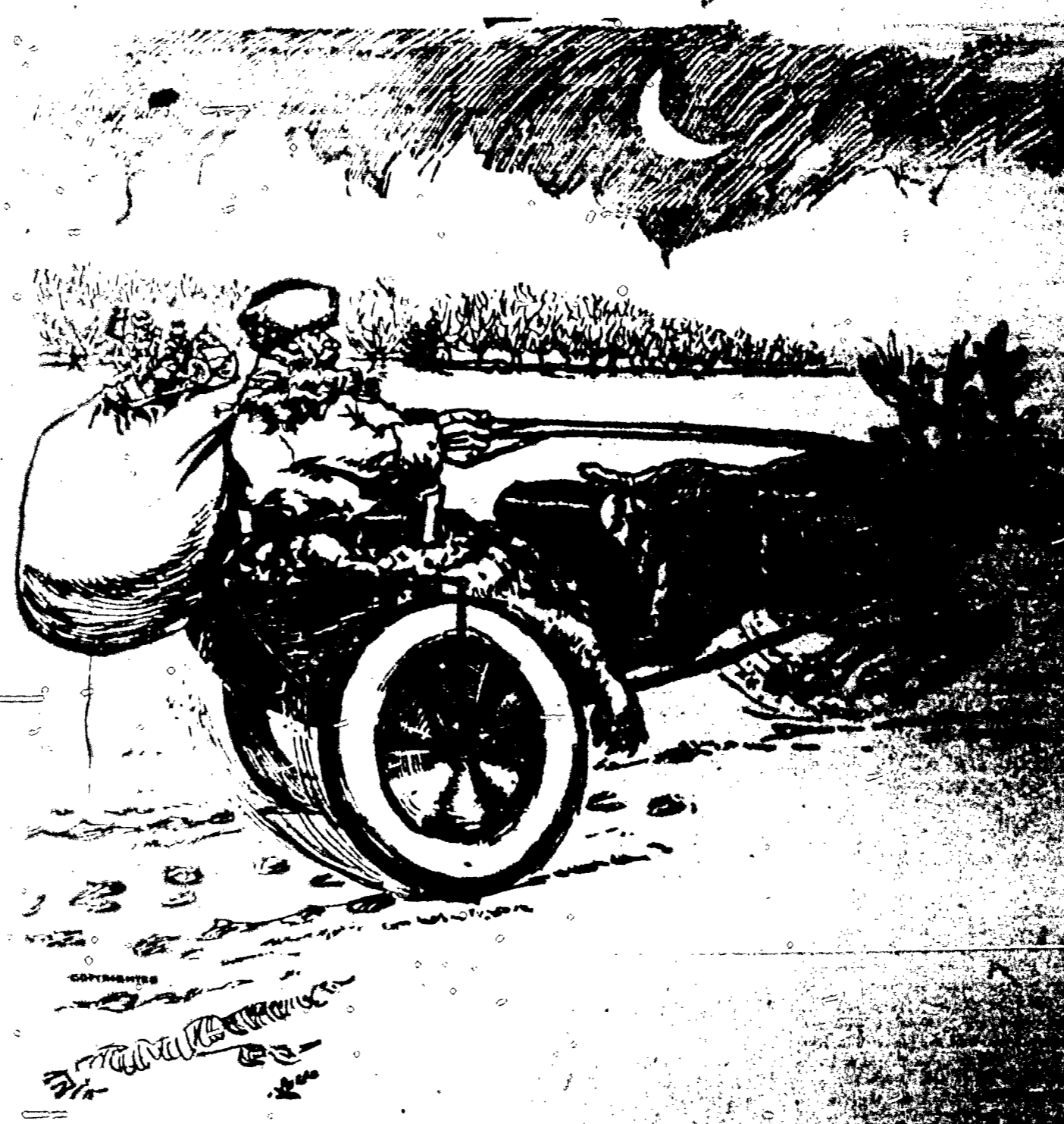


"MR. FREELANCE IS BACK."

pieces and the bottom would drop out of the whole play. I thought I'd speak to you about it because Hardup has caught a new 'angel' and said something to me about Kitty Bracebridge—"

"If that wolf puts her foot in this theater!" began Miss Livingstone, but Mr. Freelance interrupted her by placing his hand over her mouth and saying: "Wait for me after the curtain goes down, Pearl, and I'll talk to you about it. Shadrach's waiting in the office, and I've got to give him a 'jolly' so as to get the costumes out of him, but I'll be back here after the last act."

In spite of the storm outside and the dispiriting atmosphere within the performance given that night by the Jolly stock company was a notably brilliant one, for the news had spread that there was to be a speedy change of bill, and hope was once more in every member's breast. Mr. Freelance invited Miss Livingstone out to supper just as she was on the point of declaring that she would not go on again unless she received every cent of the back salary that was due



her, and before they left the restaurant she had meekly agreed to study the great emotional role which had been intended for Miss Bracebridge and to say nothing more about back salary.

The next morning, in accordance with a call posted in the stage entrance, the company assembled to hear the new play read by the gifted Mr. Freelance, and such was that gentleman's eloquent paper that when he laid the manuscript aside expressions that ranged from mere satisfaction to rapturous enthusiasm were heard on every head, and there was scarcely an actor or actress present that did not feel confident of a personal success in the new production.

The reading over, Mr. Freelance took Miss Livingstone, Mr. Borders and one or two other rebellious spirits aside, and, as he expressed it in a subsequent interview with Mr. Hustle, "stiffened their backbones" with the assurance that everything was all right and that the piece was to be done on Christmas eve in order that they might have a really merry Christmas on the prospects of its success. After that, he assured them, their back salaries would pour in upon them in a perfect avalanche.

As Mr. Freelance was leaving the theater he felt some one tugging at his

coat, and on looking down saw Miss Kitty Sullivan standing beside him, her eyes, in earnest tones, and with a sad, wistful look, "Billy, can you say just for me in the new piece?"

The child called him by his first name because she had always done so, and she spoke in that way by other members of the company, and Billy rather encouraged her in the idea because it sounded funny to him to hear himself addressed in such familiar terms by an infant of her size.

Kitty was a veritable child of the avant scene, and had been an orphan from her very earliest infancy. She was now about 7 years of age, and had begun to comprehend the difference between the real stage of Miss Livingstone's house, trees and scenes, and the painted imitations of stagecraft. She was only two years and a half older than she beheld the coast for the first time, and it is related of her that on one occasion she stood near the footlights, tightly clasped in her arms, and wept as they broke their way through the family tangle of hair and costumes, and in her own way, "Billy, how do you work 'em?"

And now she was here, home, her old friend, with her small, pathetic eyes upturned, and inquiring anxiously

of her, and before they left the restaurant she had meekly agreed to study the great emotional role which had been intended for Miss Bracebridge and to say nothing more about back salary.

