**Strictly Business**

O. Henry

I suppose you know all about the stage and stage people. You’ve been touched with and by actors, and you read the newspaper criticisms and the jokes in the weeklies about the Rialto and the chorus girls and the long-haired tragedians. And I suppose that a condensed list of your ideas about the mysterious stageland would boil down to something like this:

Leading ladies have five husbands, paste diamonds, and figures no better than your own (madam) if they weren’t padded. Chorus girls are inseparable from peroxide, Panhards and Pittsburg. All shows walk back to New York on tan oxford and railroad ties. Irreproachable actresses reserve the comic-landlady part for their mothers on Broadway and their step-aunts on the road. Kyrle Bellew’s real name is Boyle O’Kelley. The ravings of John McCullough in the phonograph were stolen from the first sale of the Ellen Terry memoirs. Joe Weber is funnier than E. H. Sothern; but Henry Miller is getting older than he was.

All theatrical people on leaving the theatre at night drink champagne and eat lobsters until noon the next day. After all, the moving pictures have got the whole bunch pounded to a pulp.

Now, few of us know the real life of the stage people. If we did, the profession might be more overcrowded than it is. We look askance at the players with an eye full of patronizing superiority—and we go home and practise all sorts of elocution and gestures in front of our looking glasses.

Latterly there has been much talk of the actor people in a new light. It seems to have been divulged that instead of being motoring bacchanalians and diamond-hungry *lo* *re* *le* *is* they are businesslike folk, students and ascetics with childer and homes and libraries, owning real estate, and conducting their private affairs in as orderly and unsensational a manner as any of us good citizens who are bound to the chariot wheels of the gas, rent, coal, ice, and wardmen.

Whether the old or the new report of the sock-and-buskiners be the true one is a surmise that has no place here. I offer you merely this little story of two strollers; and for proof of its truth I can show you only the dark patch above the cast-iron of the stage-entrance door of Keetor’s old vaudeville theatre made there by the petulant push of gloved hands too impatient to finger the clumsy thumb-latch—and where I last saw Cherry whisking through like a swallow into her nest, on time to the minute, as usual, to dress for her act.

The vaudeville team of Hart & Cherry was an inspiration. Bob Hart had been roaming through the Eastern and Western circuits for four years with a mixed-up act comprising a monologue, three lightning changes with songs, a couple of imitations of celebrated imitators, and a buck-and-wing dance that had drawn a glance of approval from the bass-viol player in more than one house—than which no performer ever received more satisfactory evidence of good work.

The greatest treat an actor can have is to witness the pitiful performance with which all other actors desecrate the stage. In order to give himself this pleasure he will often forsake the sunniest Broadway corner between Thirty-fourth and Forty-fourth to attend a matinée offering by his less gifted brothers. Once during the lifetime of a minstrel joke one comes to scoff and remains to go through with that most difficult exercise of Thespian muscles—the audible contact of the palm of one hand against the palm of the other.

One afternoon Bob Hart presented his solvent, serious, well-known vaudevillian face at the box-office window of a rival attraction and got his d. h. coupon for an orchestra seat.

A, B, C, and D glowed successively on the announcement spaces and passed into oblivion, each plunging Mr. Hart deeper into gloom. Others of the audience shrieked, squirmed, whistled, and applauded; but Bob Hart, “All the Mustard and a Whole Show in Himself,” sat with his face as long and his hands as far apart as a boy holding a hank of yarn for his grandmother to wind into a ball.

But when H came on, “The Mustard” suddenly sat up straight. H was the happy alphabetical prognosticator of Winona Cherry, in Character Songs and Impersonations. There were scarcely more than two bites to Cherry; but she delivered the merchandise tied with a pink cord and charged to the old man’s account. She first showed you a deliciously dewy and ginghamy country girl with a basket of property daisies who informed you ingenuously that there were other things to be learned at the old log school-house besides cipherin’ and nouns, especially “When the Teacher Kept Me in.” Vanishing, with a quick flirt of gingham apron-strings, she reappeared in considerably less than a “trice” as a fluffy “Parisienne”—so near does Art bring the old red mill to the Moulin Rouge. And then—

But you know the rest. And so did Bob Hart; but he saw somebody else. He thought he saw that Cherry was the only professional on the short order stage that he had seen who seemed exactly to fit the part of “Helen Grimes” in the sketch he had written and kept tucked away in the tray of his trunk. Of course Bob Hart, as well as every other normal actor, grocer, newspaper man, professor, curb broker, and farmer, has a play tucked away somewhere. They tuck ’em in trays of trunks, trunks of trees, desks, haymows, pigeonholes, inside pockets, safe-deposit vaults, handboxes, and coal cellars, waiting for Mr. Frohman to call. They belong among the fifty-seven different kinds.

But Bob Hart’s sketch was not destined to end in a pickle jar. He called it “Mice Will Play.” He had kept it quiet and hidden away ever since he wrote it, waiting to find a partner who fitted his conception of “Helen Grimes.” And here was “Helen” herself, with all the innocent abandon, the youth, the sprightliness, and the flawless stage art that his critical taste demanded.

After the act was over Hart found the manager in the box office, and got Cherry’s address. At five the next afternoon he called at the musty old house in the West Forties and sent up his professional card.

By daylight, in a secular shirtwaist and plain *vo* *ile* skirt, with her hair curbed and her Sister of Charity eyes, Winona Cherry might have been playing the part of Prudence Wise, the deacon’s daughter, in the great (unwritten) New England drama not yet entitled anything.

“I know your act, Mr. Hart,” she said after she had looked over his card carefully. “What did you wish to see me about?”

“I saw you work last night,” said Hart. “I’ve written a sketch that I’ve been saving up. It’s for two; and I think you can do the other part. I thought I’d see you about it.”

“Come in the parlor,” said Miss Cherry. “I’ve been wishing for something of the sort. I think I’d like to act instead of doing turns.”

Bob Hart drew his cherished “Mice Will Play” from his pocket, and read it to her.

“Read it again, please,” said Miss Cherry.

And then she pointed out to him clearly how it could be improved by introducing a messenger instead of a telephone call, and cutting the dialogue just before the climax while they were struggling with the pistol, and by completely changing the lines and business of Helen Grimes at the point where her jealousy overcomes her. Hart yielded to all her strictures without argument. She had at once put her finger on the sketch’s weaker points. That was her woman’s intuition that he had lacked. At the end of their talk Hart was willing to stake the judgment, experience, and savings of his four years of vaudeville that “Mice Will Play” would blossom into a perennial flower in the garden of the circuits. Miss Cherry was slower to decide. After many puckerings of her smooth young brow and tappings on her small, white teeth with the end of a lead pencil she gave out her dictum.

“Mr. Hart,” said she, “I believe your sketch is going to win out. That Grimes part fits me like a shrinkable flannel after its first trip to a handless hand laundry. I can make it stand out like the colonel of the Forty-fourth Regiment at a Little Mothers’ Bazaar. And I’ve seen you work. I know what you can do with the other part. But business is business. How much do you get a week for the stunt you do now?”

“Two hundred,” answered Hart.

“I get one hundred for mine,” said Cherry. “That’s about the natural discount for a woman. But I live on it and put a few simoleons every week under the loose brick in the old kitchen hearth. The stage is all right. I love it; but there’s something else I love better—that’s a little country home, some day, with Plymouth Rock chickens and six ducks wandering around the yard.

“Now, let me tell you, Mr. Hart, I am STRICTLY BUSINESS. If you want me to play the opposite part in your sketch, I’ll do it. And I believe we can make it go. And there’s something else I want to say: There’s no nonsense in my make-up; I’m *on the le* *vel*, and I’m on the stage for what it pays me, just as other girls work in stores and offices. I’m going to save my money to keep me when I’m past doing my stunts. No Old Ladies’ Home or Retreat for Imprudent Actresses for me.

“If you want to make this a business partnership, Mr. Hart, with all nonsense cut out of it, I’m in on it. I know something about vaudeville teams in general; but this would have to be one in particular. I want you to know that I’m on the stage for what I can cart away from it every pay-day in a little manila envelope with nicotine stains on it, where the cashier has licked the flap. It’s kind of a hobby of mine to want to cravenette myself for plenty of rainy days in the future. I want you to know just how I am. I don’t know what an all-night restaurant looks like; I drink only weak tea; I never spoke to a man at a stage entrance in my life, and I’ve got money in five savings banks.”

“Miss Cherry,” said Bob Hart in his smooth, serious tones, “you’re in on your own terms. I’ve got ’strictly business’ pasted in my hat and stenciled on my make-up box. When I dream of nights I always see a five-room bungalow on the north shore of Long Island, with a Jap cooking clam broth and duckling in the kitchen, and me with the title deeds to the place in my pongee coat pocket, swinging in a hammock on the side porch, reading Stanley’s ‘Explorations into Africa.’ And nobody else around. You never was interested in Africa, was you, Miss Cherry?”

“Not any,” said Cherry. “What I’m going to do with my money is to bank it. You can get four per cent. on deposits. Even at the salary I’ve been earning, I’ve figured out that in ten years I’d have an income of about $50 a month just from the interest alone. Well, I might invest some of the principal in a little business—say, trimming hats or a beauty parlor, and make more.”

“Well,” said Hart, “You’ve got the proper idea all right, all right, anyhow. There are mighty few actors that amount to anything at all who couldn’t fix themselves for the wet days to come if they’d save their money instead of blowing it. I’m glad you’ve got the correct business idea of it, Miss Cherry. I think the same way; and I believe this sketch will more than double what both of us earn now when we get it shaped up.”

The subsequent history of “Mice Will Play” is the history of all successful writings for the stage. Hart & Cherry cut it, pieced it, remodeled it, performed surgical operations on the dialogue and business, changed the lines, restored ’em, added more, cut ’em out, renamed it, gave it back the old name, rewrote it, substituted a dagger for the pistol, restored the pistol—put the sketch through all the known processes of condensation and improvement.

They rehearsed it by the old-fashioned boardinghouse clock in the rarely used parlor until its warning click at five minutes to the hour would occur every time exactly half a second before the click of the unloaded revolver that Helen Grimes used in rehearsing the thrilling climax of the sketch.

Yes, that was a thriller and a piece of excellent work. In the act a real 32-caliber revolver was used loaded with a real cartridge. Helen Grimes, who is a Western girl of decidedly Buffalo Billish skill and daring, is tempestuously in love with Frank Desmond, the private secretary and confidential prospective son-in-law of her father, “Arapahoe” Grimes, quarter-million-dollar cattle king, owning a ranch that, judging by the scenery, is in either the Bad Lands or Amagansett, L. I. Desmond (in private life Mr. Bob Hart) wears puttees and Meadow Brook Hunt riding trousers, and gives his address as New York, leaving you to wonder why he comes to the Bad Lands or Amagansett (as the case may be) and at the same time to conjecture mildly why a cattleman should want puttees about his ranch with a secretary in ’em.

Well, anyhow, you know as well as I do that we all like that kind of play, whether we admit it or not—something along in between “Bluebeard, Jr.,” and “Cymbeline” played in the Russian.

There were only two parts and a half in “Mice Will Play.” Hart and Cherry were the two, of course; and the half was a minor part always played by a stage hand, who merely came in once in a Tuxedo coat and a panic to announce that the house was surrounded by Indians, and to turn down the gas fire in the grate by the manager’s orders.

There was another girl in the sketch—a Fifth Avenue society swelless—who was visiting the ranch and who had sirened Jack Valentine when he was a wealthy club-man on lower Third Avenue before he lost his money. This girl appeared on the stage only in the photographic state—Jack had her Sarony stuck up on the mantel of the Amagan—of the Bad Lands droring room. Helen was jealous, of course.

And now for the thriller. Old “Arapahoe” Grimes dies of angina pectoris one night—so Helen informs us in a stage-ferryboat whisper over the footlights—while only his secretary was present. And that same day he was known to have had $647,000 in cash in his (ranch) library just received for the sale of a drove of beeves in the East (that accounts for the price we pay for steak!). The cash disappears at the same time. Jack Valentine was the only person with the ranchman when he made his (alleged) croak.

“Gawd knows I love him; but if he has done this deed—” you sabe, don’t you? And then there are some mean things said about the Fifth Avenue Girl—who doesn’t come on the stage—and can we blame her, with the vaudeville trust holding down prices until one actually must be buttoned in the back by a call boy, maids cost so much?

But, wait. Here’s the climax. Helen Grimes, chaparralish as she can be, is goaded beyond imprudence. She convinces herself that Jack Valentine is not only a falsetto, but a financier. To lose at one fell swoop $647,000 and a lover in riding trousers with angles in the sides like the variations on the chart of a typhoid-fever patient is enough to make any perfect lady mad. So, then!

They stand in the (ranch) library, which is furnished with mounted elk heads (didn’t the Elks have a fish fry in Amagensett once?), and the dénouement begins. I know of no more interesting time in the run of a play unless it be when the prologue ends.

Helen thinks Jack has taken the money. Who else was there to take it? The box-office manager was at the front on his job; the orchestra hadn’t left their seats; and no man could get past “Old Jimmy,” the stage door-man, unless he could show a Skye terrier or an automobile as a guarantee of eligibility.

Goaded beyond imprudence (as before said), Helen says to Jack Valentine: “Robber and thief—and worse yet, stealer of trusting hearts, this should be your fate!”

With that out she whips, of course, the trusty 32-caliber.

“But I will be merciful,” goes on Helen. “You shall live—that will be your punishment. I will show you how easily I could have sent you to the death that you deserve. There is *her* picture on the mantel. I will send through her more beautiful face the bullet that should have pierced your craven heart.”

And she does it. And there’s no fake blank cartridges or assistants pulling strings. Helen fires. The bullet—the actual bullet—goes through the face of the photograph—and then strikes the hidden spring of the sliding panel in the wall—and lo! the panel slides, and there is the missing $647,000 in convincing stacks of currency and bags of gold. It’s great. You know how it is. Cherry practised for two months at a target on the roof of her boarding house. It took good shooting. In the sketch she had to hit a brass disk only three inches in diameter, covered by wall paper in the panel; and she had to stand in exactly the same spot every night, and the photo had to be in exactly the same spot, and she had to shoot steady and true every time.

Of course old “Arapahoe” had tucked the funds away there in the secret place; and, of course, Jack hadn’t taken anything except his salary (which really might have come under the head of “obtaining money under"; but that is neither here nor there); and, of course, the New York girl was really engaged to a concrete house contractor in the Bronx; and, necessarily, Jack and Helen ended in a half-Nelson—and there you are.

After Hart and Cherry had gotten “Mice Will Play” flawless, they had a try-out at a vaudeville house that accommodates. The sketch was a house wrecker. It was one of those rare strokes of talent that inundates a theatre from the roof down. The gallery wept; and the orchestra seats, being dressed for it, swam in tears.

After the show the booking agents signed blank checks and pressed fountain pens upon Hart and Cherry. Five hundred dollars a week was what it panned out.

That night at 11:30 Bob Hart took off his hat and bade Cherry good night at her boarding-house door.

“Mr. Hart,” said she thoughtfully, “come inside just a few minutes. We’ve got our chance now to make good and make money. What we want to do is to cut expenses every cent we can, and save all we can.”

“Right,” said Bob. “It’s business with me. You’ve got your scheme for banking yours; and I dream every night of that bungalow with the Jap cook and nobody around to raise trouble. Anything to enlarge the net receipts will engage my attention.”

“Come inside just a few minutes,” repeated Cherry, deeply thoughtful. “I’ve got a proposition to make to you that will reduce our expenses a lot and help you work out your own future and help me work out mine—and all on business principles.”

“Mice Will Play” had a tremendously successful run in New York for ten weeks—rather neat for a vaudeville sketch—and then it started on the circuits. Without following it, it may be said that it was a solid drawing card for two years without a sign of abated popularity.

Sam Packard, manager of one of Keetor’s New York houses, said of Hart & Cherry:

“As square and high-toned a little team as ever came over the circuit. It’s a pleasure to read their names on the booking list. Quiet, hard workers, no Johnny and Mabel nonsense, on the job to the minute, straight home after their act, and each of ’em as gentlemanlike as a lady. I don’t expect to handle any attractions that give me less trouble or more respect for the profession.”

And now, after so much cracking of a nutshell, here is the kernel of the story:

At the end of its second season “Mice Will Play” came back to New York for another run at the roof gardens and summer theatres. There was never any trouble in booking it at the top-notch price. Bob Hart had his bungalow nearly paid for, and Cherry had so many savings-deposit bank books that she had begun to buy sectional bookcases on the instalment plan to hold them.

I tell you these things to assure you, even if you can’t believe it, that many, very many of the stage people are workers with abiding ambitions—just the same as the man who wants to be president, or the grocery clerk who wants a home in Flatbush, or a lady who is anxious to flop out of the Count-pan into the Prince-fire. And I hope I may be allowed to say, without chipping into the contribution basket, that they often move in a mysterious way their wonders to perform.

But, listen.

At the first performance of “Mice Will Play” in New York at the Westphalia (no hams alluded to) Theatre, Winona Cherry was nervous. When she fired at the photograph of the Eastern beauty on the mantel, the bullet, instead of penetrating the photo and then striking the disk, went into the lower left side of Bob Hart’s neck. Not expecting to get it there, Hart collapsed neatly, while Cherry fainted in a most artistic manner.

The audience, surmising that they viewed a comedy instead of a tragedy in which the principals were married or reconciled, applauded with great enjoyment. The Cool Head, who always graces such occasions, rang the curtain down, and two platoons of scene shifters respectively and more or less respectfully removed Hart & Cherry from the stage. The next turn went on, and all went as merry as an alimony bell.

The stage hands found a young doctor at the stage entrance who was waiting for a patient with a decoction of Am. B’ty roses. The doctor examined Hart carefully and laughed heartily.

“No headlines for you, Old Sport,” was his diagnosis. “If it had been two inches to the left it would have undermined the carotid artery as far as the Red Front Drug Store in Flatbush and Back Again. As it is, you just get the property man to bind it up with a flounce torn from any one of the girls’ Valenciennes and go home and get it dressed by the parlor-floor practitioner on your block, and you’ll be all right. Excuse me; I’ve got a serious case outside to look after.”

After that, Bob Hart looked up and felt better. And then to where he lay came Vincente, the Tramp Juggler, great in his line. Vincente, a solemn man from Brattleboro, Vt., named Sam Griggs at home, sent toys and maple sugar home to two small daughters from every town he played. Vincente had moved on the same circuits with Hart & Cherry, and was their peripatetic friend.

“Bob,” said Vincente in his serious way, “I’m glad it’s no worse. The little lady is wild about you.”

“Who?” asked Hart.

“Cherry,” said the juggler. “We didn’t know how bad you were hurt; and we kept her away. It’s taking the manager and three girls to hold her.”

“It was an accident, of course,” said Hart. “Cherry’s all right. She wasn’t feeling in good trim or she couldn’t have done it. There’s no hard feelings. She’s strictly business. The doctor says I’ll be on the job again in three days. Don’t let her worry.”

“Man,” said Sam Griggs severely, puckering his old, smooth, lined face, “are you a chess automaton or a human pincushion? Cherry’s crying her heart out for you—calling ‘Bob, Bob,’ every second, with them holding her hands and keeping her from coming to you.”

“What’s the matter with her?” asked Hart, with wide-open eyes. “The sketch’ll go on again in three days. I’m not hurt bad, the doctor says. She won’t lose out half a week’s salary. I know it was an accident. What’s the matter with her?”

“You seem to be blind, or a sort of a fool,” said Vincente. “The girl loves you and is almost mad about your hurt. What’s the matter with *you* ? Is she nothing to you? I wish you could hear her call you.”

“Loves me?” asked Bob Hart, rising from the stack of scenery on which he lay. “Cherry loves me? Why, it’s impossible.”

“I wish you could see her and hear her,” said Griggs.

“But, man,” said Bob Hart, sitting up, “it’s impossible. It’s impossible, I tell you. I never dreamed of such a thing.”

“No human being,” said the Tramp Juggler, “could mistake it. She’s wild for love of you. How have you been so blind?”

“But, my God,” said Bob Hart, rising to his feet, “it’s *too la* *te*. It’s too late, I tell you, Sam; *it’s too la* *te*. It can’t be. You must be wrong. It’s *im* *pos* *sib* *le*. There’s some mistake.

“She’s crying for you,” said the Tramp Juggler. “For love of you she’s fighting three, and calling your name so loud they don’t dare to raise the curtain. Wake up, man.”

“For love of me?” said Bob Hart with staring eyes. “Don’t I tell you it’s too late? It’s too late, man. Why, *Cherry and I ha* *ve be* *en mar* *ri* *ed two ye* *ars!* ”