

"Who Was That Lady...?"

BY MARION HARGROVE

Author of "See Here, Private Hargrove"

Everybody blames Joe Miller for today's bad gags. But it wasn't his fault. Here's how an ancient comic became a legend because of a book he didn't write . . .

JUST for the record, Joe Miller never wrote that joke book. He never even heard of it. He has no more connection with it than Lincoln has with the highway or George Washington has with the bridge.

Mr. Miller's footprints on the sands of time were put there by a tramp who stole his shoes.

When Joseph, or Josias, Miller departed this life in 1738, about the only thing he left behind him was his good name. He had been for some 29 years a valuable property of London's Drury Lane Theater, where he played 59 different comic roles. He was good box-office and a darling of the critics, and he might well have expected history to remember him only as an exceptionally good comedian who always left 'em laughing.

That was the way his relatives thought of Joe Miller. When they set up his tombstone, they chiseled on it that he was "a tender husband, a sincere friend, a facetious companion and an excellent comedian." He was known and loved, the epitaph added, for his "honesty and wit and humor."

As things developed, the outlay on this tombstone was money down the drain. A later generation launched a building project on the ground where Joe lay buried, and nobody knows what happened to Joe's monument.

To explain what happened to Joe Miller's good name, let us go back to the year 1739, only a few months after Mr. Miller shuffled off this mortal coil. The scene is the office of T. Read, a publisher, in Dogwell Court, London. Mr. Read looks up from his composing-stone as one John Mottley, a jackleg playwright and literary handy man, enters.

247 Real Buffalos

READ: If you're looking for another advance, the door's right behind you. Three weeks I've been waiting for this joke-book copy!

MOTTLEY: I got the whole thing right here, T. R.! A collection of the most brilliant jests, the politest repartees, the most elegant bons mots in the English language —

READ: If you're dreaming up a blurb for the title page, write it down yourself. I'm no stenographer.

MOTTLEY: T. R., let me be the first to congratulate you! You've got right here two hundred and forty-seven of the finest gags ever collected under one cover. You're a made man, T. R.!

READ: (leafing through manuscript) You got any jokes I ain't heard? This one about Alexander the Great I've had in twelve joke books already.

MOTTLEY: Just listen to this one: "An Irish lawyer of the Temple, having occasion to go to dinner, left these directions

written and put in the keyhole of his chamber: 'I am gone to the Elephant and Castle, where you shall find me, and if you can't read this note —'"

READ: — Carry it down to the stationer's and he will read it for you.

MOTTLEY: Oh. You've heard it.

READ: I've heard it, and I've heard it better told. The way you mangle a gag, it's easy to figure out why your plays close the night they open.

MOTTLEY: Good old T. R.! Always clowning! Hey, a rube joke! "A melting sermon being preached in a country church, all fell a-weeping but one man, who being asked —"

READ: I've heard it.

MOTTLEY: "— Who being asked why he did not weep with the rest, 'Oh,' said he, 'I belong to another parish.'"

READ: I said I'd heard it.

The Wit's Companion

MOTTLEY: Killing-comeback joke: "A gentleman lying on his deathbed called to his coachman who had been an old servant, and said, 'Ah, Tom, I'm going on a long rugged journey, worse than ever you drove me.' 'Oh, dear sir,' replied the fellow (he having been but an indifferent master to him), 'ne'er let that discourage you, for it is all downhill.'"

READ: Let's not read all of them now. Just throw the manuscript over on my desk while I've still got the heart to publish it. What about a title for this bilge?

MOTTLEY: I've got that, too. Call it "The Wit's Vade-Mecum."

READ: The wit's what?

MOTTLEY: Vade-mecum. It's Latin. Means "go with me." Companion, sort of. The wit's companion.

READ: No good.

MOTTLEY: Well, ah, what about "John

Mottley's Jest's or, The Wit's Vade-Mecum"?

READ: Look, Mottley, we're going to have trouble enough selling this book as it is. Let's not kill it altogether, shall we, by letting people know you wrote it. Think of somebody real funny.

MOTTLEY: Joe Miller?

READ: (triumphantly) That's it! Joe Miller! "Joe Miller's Jest's or, The Wit's Vade-Mecum." Maybe that title won't sell!

MOTTLEY: You've hit it, T. R., you've really hit it! There's a title that sings!

READ: Oh, if only I'd got this idea while Joe Miller was still around! What a joke book he could have turned out!

MOTTLEY: (miffed) I don't know about that, T. R. Joe Miller was illiterate. At least I can write!

READ: I never heard a critic say you could.

To cut the story down to reasonable length, "Joe Miller's Jest's, by Elijah Jenkins, Esq." was a sell-out. Despite the age and frailty of the material, despite what the critics said about it, despite the knowledge that got about that it was Mottley's work, it sold. It went through three editions the first year, picking up 26 "new" jokes on the way. Six years

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AUTHOR: Only 27, he's a top writer, lecturer

