

Our Short Story.

THE KING'S JESTER.

Steadily, but surely, he had won his way up the ladder of musical success. Starting by winning a prize at a club competition in Doornfontein, he had appeared as an extra turn at a small concert hall in a reef town. The audience had taken kindly to him, and a manager of a small music hall in Johannesburg engaged him to appear on the evening bill for a week. He went down very well; the people liked his turn, and after appearing in a number of bioscope concert halls on the Witwatersrand, he gave up work and accepted an engagement with the African Theatres to travel throughout the country.

His fame grew, and within a short period an agent in London secured a contract for a tour in the provinces in the United Kingdom. For some years he worked these towns, and then one day the coveted London engagement at the Colosseum came, and he had reached London, but only amongst those in the profession; the public proper had not yet spotted him. His appearance at the Colosseum was an instantaneous success. For the first time he saw himself reviewed by the critics. His turn was described as original and clever, and the public was advised to go and hear him. It came. His engagement was extended from that of a fortnight to six weeks, at the end of which time he signed a contract to appear at the Colosseum a few months in every year for the next twelve years. He started a Moss-Stoll tour which lasted six months and returned to London with his new song "Jiggling," the effect of which was electric. It was whistled all over London and he became famous. A flattering cable offer came from America, asking him to appear there for a month, which offer he accepted, and returned loaded with laurels from the American press.

One day, to his delight, he received a command to sing before the King, and from that day Ralph Laurier was known as the King's Jester.

In a narrow dingy turning situated in Beit Street, Doornfontein, there is a house, one of two dozen in the street, in which reside Mordecai Levinson and his wife Fanny-Esther. Here they have lived for twenty-five years, ever since they first arrived in South Africa from the town of Dwinsk, Russia. Mordecai has always been a very conforming Jew of the old type, and Fanny-Esther, his wife, is a very devout Jewess. Their lives have been led under the influence and in the atmosphere of the Talmud, for Mordecai, although circumstances had made him a tradesman in Johannesburg, yet came from a very learned family in Dwinsk, and he had studied when young in a Yeshibah and knew much of ancient Hebrew lore.

In his synagogue in Doornfontein he is known as Reb Mordecai, and people respect him, for he is proud and reserved, and knows much. Reb Mordecai had demonstrated with his son at his appearing in a competition at a club; he was shocked when he heard from his neighbours that his son was appearing as

an extra turn at a music hall, and when he heard that his only child was giving up his work to devote his career to the profession of a music hall comedian he grew angry. He commanded his son to give up this mad idea, which would hasten his—Mordecai's—grey hair down to the grave. It was not a career for a Jewish child. But the son obstinately refused to give up his idea, and Mordecai waxed angry and struck him. His son, staggered by the force and unexpectedness of the blow, left the house, and the next day started fulfilling the engagement of his first South African tour.

From that day Mordecai was much changed. He chafed under his burden, but his heart closed more and more against his son.

"Beat him out of your head," he roared to Fanny-Esther, his wife, and she, poor woman, always ready, from the day of her marriage, to obey the least whim of her learned husband, stifled the maternal feeling, so intense in the soul of the Jewish mother, and wept silently and spoke not of her only child.

Meanwhile, Ralph, as he progressed, grew more and more to hate the life of the somewhat Ghetto atmosphere in which he had been enchained all his youth. The longer he kept away from it and from all things Jewish, the more he appreciated his success and freedom. And one day, in church, he married a lady with a private fortune of her own, which, coupled with his own income, enabled them to live in a fine style.

The rain had been dripping in Beit Street and around Doornfontein all the morning, but people were gathering in and round the house of Reb Mordecai, who lay dying. He had not mentioned his son's name during his illness, and now the last moment had arrived before his soul would be delivered unto Heaven. A Rabbi, who sat by his bed, chanted the dying prayer with him, and Mordecai, raising himself, cried in Hebrew with his dying breath: "Hear, Oh Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is One!" The next moment he was dead. The Rabbi bent down and gently closed his eyes.

Fanny-Esther, who had been standing quietly by the bed, gave a heartrending cry, and fell screaming on her husband's body.

"O my righteous one," she moaned, "My good Angel! My Heart! My Precious!"

At that moment the matinee performance at the Empire Theatre, in Johannesburg, was crowded with a good-natured audience. Ralph Laurier was occupying the boards in his famous plush jacket, white trousers, cocked hat and red boots, singing his famous song, "She Stuck to him like Glue, by Gum!"

He sang five songs, but the crowd, like Oliver Twist, asked for more. They liked Laurier, his humour was irresistible, infectious, and they rocked with laughter at the antics of the comedian who had gained the appellation of—

—The King's Jester.

DAVID ISRAEL.

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