HOW A PLAY IS PRODUCED

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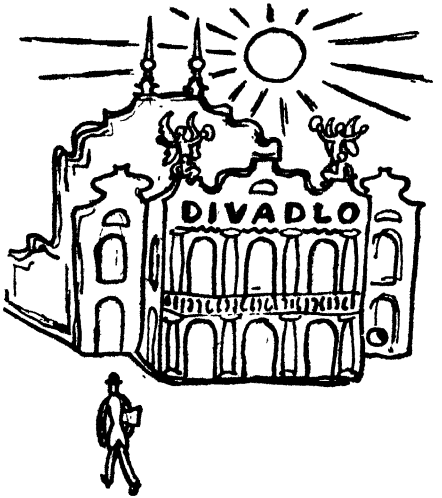

Introduction

THIS instructive little book is designed to explain to dramatists, to the public, and to dramatic critics, how a play is produced, and through what transformations it has to pass before it bursts from its chrysalis in all the beauty and splendour of its first night.

We do not wish to pretend that we understand the theatre ; as a matter of fact, no

one really understands it, neither those who have grown old on the boards, nor the most ancient of managers—not even the dramatic critics themselves.

Good Heavens, if only the reader of plays could know beforehand whether a play will be a success or not ! If only the manager could count the box-office receipts in advance ! If only the actor could be given a sign that his part will be a success ! Why, yes, *then* the production of a play might run as smoothly and calmly as cabinet-making, or the manufacture of soap.

But the production of a play is an art like that of warfare, and luck plays as great a part in it as in roulette, for no one knows beforehand just how things will turn out. It is a sheer miracle that the play gets played at all, not only on the first night, but on every succeeding night, and if it is played, that it gets played through to the end. For a play is not produced " according to plan," but through the constant conquest of insurmountable obstacles. Every lathe in the scenery

and every nerve in the actor's body, is liable to break at any moment. Usually, it is true, they do not break, but despite this fact, the situation is a distressing one, nor can it possibly be improved.

There will be no talk here of the dramatic art and its mysteries, but simply of the theatrical trade and *its* mysteries. It certainly would be far more agreeable to discuss the possibilities of the ideal theatre, and the ideal manner of producing a play, but all such talk of ideals only hides the complicated and marvellous reality which actually exists for us. We are not brooding here upon the lurking possibilities of the Collective Drama, or the Constructivist *décor*; in a theatre all things are possible; it is a magician's house of miracles. Indeed, the greatest miracle of all is that it goes on at all. If the curtain does happen to rise at eight o'clock, please remember that this is merely a fortunate coincidence, or simply a miracle.

Although we have avoided the temptation of talking about Art, all the same, we should

like, at least in the Introduction, to burn a candle before the Divine Muse. You will behold her, poor thing, by no means in her glory; you will even see her pushed and buffeted about at rehearsals, with a cold in her head, forced to endure every kind of injustice, hard labour, and all the disturbing troubles of life behind the scenes. When she appears before you on the stage, painted, and in a blaze of lights, remember the burdens she has had to bear. Then you will have something like a conception of dramatic art.

Moreover, there are all kinds of people behind the scenes, below the scenes, and above the scenes, who help to pull and push the car of Thespis along. And even if they do play their parts in a very naturalistic manner, garbed in everyday clothes, or in blue overalls, they play a very important part in the production of a play. So let them also be celebrated in this book.

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PART I

The Preliminaries

The First Beginnings

IN its first embryonic and groping beginnings, a play comes to birth outside the theatre itself, on the writing-table of the aspiring dramatist; its first appearance in the theatre does not take place until the dramatist fondly imagines it to be ready. Of course, very soon—say in about six

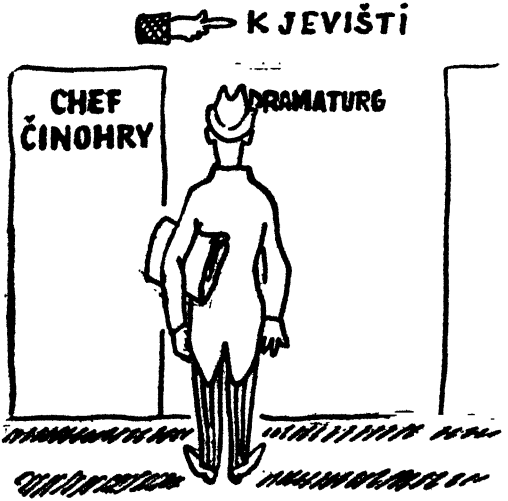
months or so—it is easily seen that it is not at all ready, for even under the most favourable of conditions it wanders back to the dramatist with the modest request that he should not only shorten it, but also re-write the last act completely.

For some mysterious reason it is always the last act which requires alteration, just as it is always the last act which is sure to prove a failure on the stage, and it is always the last act which is picked out by the critics, with wonderful unanimity, as the one weak part of the play. It is really quite remarkable that in spite of this unfailing experience, dramatists do insist on having some sort of a last act. Last acts simply should not be written at all. Or they should be cut off on principle, just as the tails of bull-dogs are cut off to preserve their beauty. Or else plays should be played backwards, with the last act first, and the first act, which is always said to be the best one, at the end. In short, something should be done to free dramatists from the curse of the terrible last act.

When this troublesome last act has been shortened, and altered two or three times, and the play has been finally accepted, there

begins for the dramatist an awful period of waiting and general hanging around. During this period he stops writing altogether, and

does simply nothing at all; he is unable to read the newspapers, live in the clouds, sleep, or kill time in any way; for the poor man exists in a trance of waiting to know whether



his play will be produced, when it will be produced, how it will be produced, etc., etc. It is no use talking to a dramatist who is undergoing this enforced period of waiting; only the very hardened ones manage to suppress their natural excitement, and are

able to pretend sometimes that they are thinking of other matters besides the play which they have had accepted.

Perhaps the dramatist has fondly imagined that even before he has finished his play, a man from the theatre will be standing behind his chair, breathlessly beseeching him to hurry that last act along, and declaring that the first night is on the morrow, and that he dare not return to the theatre without the last act, etc., etc. Of course, in real life this does not happen. If a play has been accepted, it must lie about in the theatre for a certain period so that it may have time to mature, and become, as it were, saturated with theatrical atmosphere. (Another reason why it must lie about in the theatre for some time, is that it may be announced as an "eagerly awaited novelty.") Some authors are foolish enough to attempt to interfere with this ripening process by personal intervention, which, fortunately, has no effect whatever. Things must be left to take their own natural course. When the play

has lain about in the theatre sufficiently, it begins, as it were, to emit a certain odour, and must be brought out on to the stage itself, which means, first of all, into the rehearsal room.

Casting the Play

OF course, before the actual rehearsals begin there is the business of casting the play. The author now makes the valuable discovery that this is anything but easy. There are in the play, let us say, three ladies and five gentlemen. For the eight rôles, therefore, the author chooses eight or nine of the best players in the theatre *ensemble*, and declares that he has written the parts specially for them, and for them alone. It is a wonder that he does not call up Moshna, the famous Czech comedian, out of the grave to play a part—" It's only a small one, but very important." So far so good. He now hands his list to the producer, and the matter wanders, as they say, " higher up."

Now, however, it turns out that :

1. Miss A. cannot take the principal rôle

because she is just now playing another principal rôle.

2. Miss B. returns the rôle the dramatist has chosen for her, protesting in a hurt manner that it is not a suitable part for her.

3. Miss C. cannot be given the rôle which

the author has chosen for her because she had a rôle last week, and Miss D. must have one now.

4. Mr. E. cannot have the principal male rôle. Mr. F. must get it instead, because the rôle of Hamlet was taken from him after he had wanted it, and given to Mr. G.

5. On the other hand Mr. E. might take the fifth rôle as a substitute, but he is dead certain to return it angrily because the dramatist has not chosen the fourth rôle for him, which is his own line.

6. Mr. H. must take care of himself because he has a cold owing to a conflict with the dramatic director.

7. Mr. K. cannot play the rôle No. 7 because there is no one else suitable for rôle No. 5. Although it is not his line, he says that he " will manage it all right."

8. The eighth rôle, that of a telegraph messenger, will be assigned, by special request, to the player chosen by the dramatist himself.

Thus it comes to pass that the whole affair turns out quite differently from what the inexperienced dramatist imagined. Not only that, but a general bitterness is prevalent among the players, who cannot forgive the dramatist for not having assigned the rôles direct to them. From the moment that the parts have been handed out, two quite

different opinions develop in the theatre. One group says that there are good parts in the play, but that they have been badly assigned. The other group declares, however, that the play has nothing but bad rôles in it, out of which nothing can be made—even if one were an acrobat, and could wrap one's legs around one's neck!

The Production

THE producer of the play works on the sound basis that the piece must be given a helping hand, as they say. In practice that means that it must be produced quite differently from the way the author has arranged things.

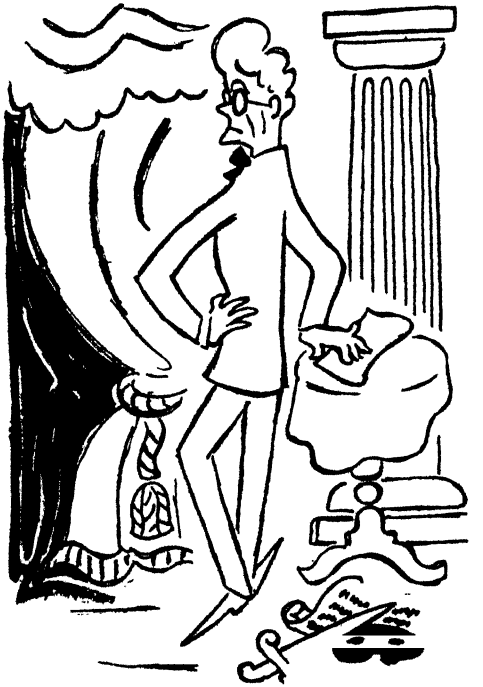
" You know," says the author, " I had always imagined it quite a quiet drawing-room piece. . ."

" Oh ! That wouldn't do at all," replies the producer, " the play must be given in quite a grotesque manner."

" Clara is a shy, passive creature," explains the author further.

" What are you thinking of ! " cries the producer. " Clara is decidedly a Sadist by nature ; a cruel creature. Look here, on *page* 37 Danesh says to her : ' Do not torment

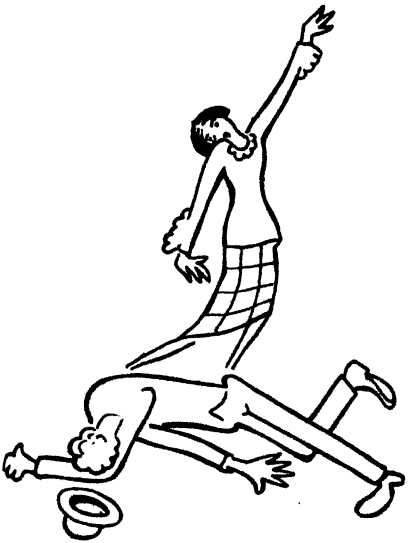
me, Clara ! ' When he says this line Danesh will writhe on the ground, while Clara will



stand by in hysterics. You understand, of course ? "

" But that was not my idea a bit," protests the author.

" But, my dear fellow, that is just the best scene of all," says the producer dryly. " Otherwise the second act has no proper curtain."



" The scene takes place in an ordinary middle-class room," the author goes on to explain.

" Oh, but we must certainly have some

steps or at least a platform in it," says the producer.

" But why a platform ? "

" So that Clara can stand on it when she cries out the word : ' *Never !* ' This moment must be pushed into prominence, do you understand ? The platform must be at

least nine feet high. And then, in the third scene, Vchelak jumps down from it."

"But why should he jump down from it?"

"Because you distinctly state in the stage direction that 'he jumps into the room.' That is one of the strongest moments. You know, your play wants a little more life in it. You surely didn't intend a common-or-garden scene that any Tom, Dick or Harry might write? Did you now?"

"Oh no, of course not!" replies the author hurriedly.

"Good. I knew you'd see my point."

I will now betray certain deep secrets of the dramatic art. A creative author is one who will not allow himself to be hampered by the theatre; and a creative producer is one who will not allow himself to be hampered by the text. As far as the creative actor is concerned, the poor devil has no other choice than that of following his own judgment (in this case one lays the blame of the bad interpretation on the producer), or of follow-

ing the producer's instructions (in which case the bad interpretation is imputed to the actor).

If by pure chance no one should stumble in the dialogue on the first night, no badly fixed scenery should suddenly fall down, no reflector should burn itself out, and no other similar misfortune should take place, the producer is then praised in the local press as " having produced very carefully " : but it is really pure chance, whether any of these things should occur. Before the first night is reached, however, the martyrdom of rehearsals must be endured.

Reading the Play

IF you happen to be a dramatist, or are thinking of becoming one, I should advise you not to make a habit of being present at the first reading of the play. For the impression received is absolutely crushing. Six or eight players gather together: they look tired to death; they yawn, feel cold, stand or sit about in groups, and cough *sotto voce*. This gloomy and depressing state of affairs continues for quite half an hour, until, finally, the producer cries: "Come, ladies and gentlemen, let us begin."

The company, bored to extinction, seats itself round a rickety table.

"*The Pilgrim's Staff; A Comedy in Three Acts*," the producer reads out, whereupon another individual hurriedly mumbles, "A modest, middle-class room. To the right a

door leads into a hall : to the left a door leads into a bedroom. In the centre is a table, etc. Enter George Danesh."

Nothing happens.

" Where's Mr. X ? " bursts from the producer. " Doesn't he know we are reading the play to-day ? "

" He's rehearsing another part on the stage," some one mutters unwillingly.

" I will read his part then," decides the producer, " *Enter George Danesh.* ' *Clara, something unexpected has happened to me.*' "

Nothing happens.

" Damn it," shouts the producer, " where's Clara ? "

No answer.

" Where's Madame X ? "

" Perhaps she's ill," suggests a voice miserably.

" She's acting at another theatre," says some one else.

" Yesterday morning Mary was telling me that . . ." some one begins to relate, " that . . ."

" All right, then, I'll read Clara's part," sighs the producer, and races through the dialogue between George Danesh and Clara as though all the devils in hell were at his heels. No one listens to him at all. At the other end of the table a low-voiced conversation begins.

" *Enter Katie,*" gasps the producer finally, and takes a deep breath.

Nothing happens.

" Now, look here, Miss," grumbles the producer, " please don't go wool-gathering. Are you Katie or are you not ? "

" Oh, Mr. Producer," answers the *ingénue* brightly, " I forgot to bring my part."

The producer mutters something terrible under his breath, and proceeds to recite the dialogue between Katie and Clara himself, rushing along nineteen to the dozen just as though he were a priest reciting the Lord's Prayer at a pauper's funeral. Only the dramatist endeavours to follow the flow of words : no one else betrays the slightest interest.

" *Enter Gustav Vchelak,*" concludes the producer in a hoarse scream.

One of the players starts ; begins hunting through his pockets for his pince-nez ; puts them on leisurely ; hunts through his part for the exact place ; and then enquires at length, " Which page is it ? "

" Page six."

The player turns over the pages, and begins

to read his part in a slow, solemn, tragic voice. Good Heavens! exclaims the dramatist to himself, this fellow is supposed to be a jolly *bon-vivant*. Meanwhile the producer representing Clara and the player representing a jolly *bon-vivant* recite the gloomy responses which are meant to represent sparkling dialogue.

"*When do you expect your hubsand?*" the player chants in a corpse-like voice.

"Husband," corrects the producer.

"But it says hubsand here," the player insists.

"It's merely an error in typing. Just correct it."

"Why on earth can't they type things properly?" says the player in a disgusted manner, digging his pencil into his part.

Meanwhile the agonized group is getting under way, when all of a sudden, *stop*! A sentence is missing in one of the parts, after "*it was his first love*," and before "*you are fond of your food*." Stop, the parts are mixed here. And then on again: indistinctly,

stumblingly, hurriedly, pours out the text of the " eagerly awaited novelty." When an actor has read his part, even if it is only three pages from the end, he gathers up his things and makes off. No one appears to be at all interested in how the play will end. And at last, when the final words are spoken, there is a silence, a dead silence in which the play is weighed up and judged by its first interpreters.

" What clothes am I to wear ? " ejaculates the heroine of the play, breaking the heavy silence. Meanwhile the dramatist reels out of the theatre convinced that never before in the history of the world has anyone written such a hopelessly rotten, piffling play.

In the Rehearsal Room

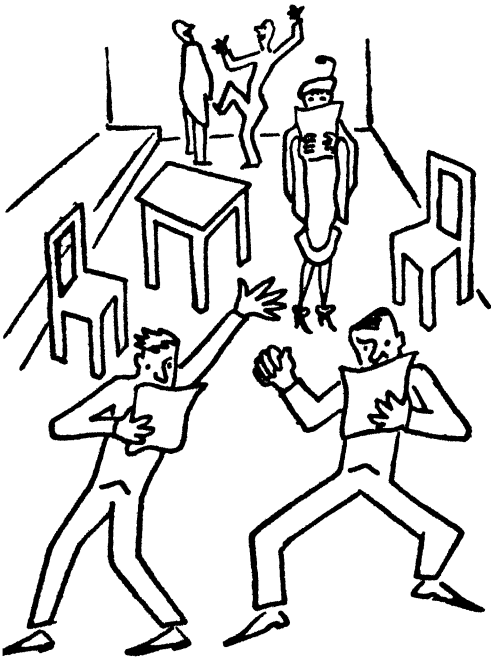
NOW the play goes a further stage on its journey : there must be *arrangement tests* in the rehearsal room.

" Here is one door," asserts the producer, at the same time pointing to empty space, " and this hat-stand is another. This chair is a divan, and this chair is a window. This table here is a piano, and here, where there isn't anything, is a large lamp. Madame enters by the door on the left, and stands by the table. Good. And now George Danesh enters by the other door. My God ! Where has Mr. X. got to again ? "

" He's rehearsing another part on the stage," comes from two voices.

" I will play Danesh then," sighs the producer as he hurries through the imaginary door. " ' *Clara, something unexpected has*

happened to me!' Madame Y., kindly step three paces forward towards me, and do try to look a little bit surprised, please. '*Clara,*



something unexpected has happened to me!' Then Danesh walks over towards the window —if you wouldn't mind, please don't sit on

that chair, it's supposed to be a window. And now, once more please. You enter from the left, while Danesh comes towards you. '*Clara, something unexpected has happened to me!*' "

"*No, Father*," reads Clara from the part in her hand, "*I haven't seen him since this morning*."

The producer stops aghast: "What on earth are you reading?"

"Act One, Page Two," Clara explains quite calmly.

"But that line doesn't come in at all here," cries the producer, snatching the part out of her hands, "Let me see, for Heaven's sake! '*No, father*,'—I don't quite—but look here, my dear young lady, you've brought the wrong play along."

"Well, it's the one they sent me yesterday," says Madame Y., quite unruffled.

"All right then, take the stage-manager's copy for the time being, and for Heaven's sake do try and be more careful. I enter right——"

" *Clara, something unexpected has happened to me!* " bursts out Madame Y.

" But those are not your lines," wails the producer, " You're playing Clara, not me."

" Oh, I thought it was a monologue," Madame Y. explains.

" Well, it isn't. I come in and say: ' *Clara, something unexpected has happened to me!* ' Now, look out! ' *Clara, something unexpected has happened to me!* ' "

" What kind of a wig shall I wear? " Madame Y. asks.

" None at all. Now, once more, ' *Clara, something unexpected has happened to me.* ' "

" Shol ed epi gram," Clara reads.

" What's that, eh? "

" I can't make out what it says here," Clara announces.

" Oh, my God," wails the producer. " It says: ' What has happened to you? ' Read properly, for goodness' sake."

Clara calls the whole company to witness that in her copy of the play the words do

really look like " Shol ed epi gram." When this fact has been sufficiently demonstrated, the frantic producer rushes through the imaginary door for the fifth time, feverishly croaking : " *Clara, something unexpected has happened to me !* "

In this sentence the dramatist realizes all the stupidity and senselessness of the world. Never, he fears, will this chaos be resolved into beautiful harmony ; the world will never, never recover from the terrible fact that something unexpected has happened ; for they will never get any further on than this line. . . .

" *Enter Katie,*" announces the producer.

" Mm, mm," comes from the rear of the room, where Katie has been simultaneously swallowing a sausage and executing a dance and chattering nineteen to the dozen. Crash. Two chairs fly to the ground, and Katie stands in the middle of the room hugging her knee in silent agony. " Katie has entered," she informs the company at large.

"Ouch! I did give myself an awful bang then."

"You are supposed to enter left, miss," says the producer waving her back.

"But I ca-a-n't," Katie mourns. "Can't you see that I've broken my leg?"

"Then be more careful next time," cries the producer. "*Enter Gustav Vchelak.*"

Gustav Vchelak looks at his watch. "I've got to go and rehearse another part on the stage now," he announces rather coldly. "I've wasted a whole hour already. Good morning."

The dramatist feels as though he were guilty of some offence. Meanwhile it is discovered that in the absence of both George Danesh and Gustav Vchelak it is impossible to arrange a single dialogue except the following crisp one from the beginning of the third act:

Servant: "Mr. Vchelak, Madame."

Clara: "Show him in."

The producer repeats this short episode seven times, after which there is nothing for

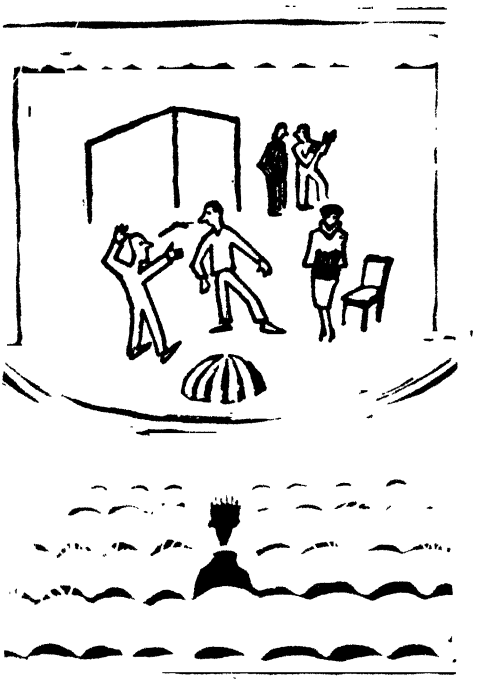
it but to conclude the rehearsal. The author staggers home in the grip of a deadly terror that his play will not be produced in seven years.

Further Rehearsals

AND yet, at these first rehearsals, in a room where a rickety chair may represent a divan, a throne, a rock or a balcony, most of the real work of the theatre is done. But the dramatist who is simply dying to see his play, here finds it in a mangled and chaotic state calculated to bring tears to his eyes : it is rehearsed simply anyhow, from the end or the middle ; an insignificant scene may be repeated twenty times while another far more important one gets left unrehearsed : half of the players are worn out with other rehearsals, while the other half are also worn out with these rehearsals. And yet, there are moments when the dramatist feels that " it " is becoming a reality.

In a few days a new person appears upon the scene : the prompter. The players cease

just to read their lines, and begin to act them properly; and things proceed like a house on fire. The dramatist declares that the first



night might easily take place that very evening. But the players curb his enthusiasm: "Just you wait until you've seen us on the

stage." After the play has been treated in all the dreadful ways described the great day arrives when rehearsals start on the real stage. The curtain remains down, and the prompter sits at a little table, with the dramatist, who is hoping devoutly that things will proceed famously, hovering around him. Well, as a matter of fact, things do not proceed at all. For during its short journey from the rehearsal room to the stage the play appears to have become unstuck, as it were. And all is lost.

After two or three rehearsals, however, things proceed quite smoothly and brilliantly again. And the producer finally gives the order: "Up with the curtain, please, and the prompter into his box." At this moment the most experienced player turns pale. For, no sooner does the prompter crawl into his uncomfortable little box than things go wrong again, for some mysterious reason, probably acoustic. Seated in a stall the crushed dramatist watches his beautiful text blowing about like a rotten piece of rag in a strong

wind. And to make things ten times worse the producer ceases to worry about what the players are saying, and confines himself to worrying about where and how they are standing and walking. God knows why he worries so much, thinks the dramatist: In the text it simply says, "*Exit Danesh.*" Surely that is enough? The producer has no doubt gone raving mad, for he is roaring to Clara that she must step back a pace; even the players are now worked up and start to quarrel with the prompter, accusing him of mumbling instead of speaking properly. Finally George Danesh announces that he has influenza and is going to bed. In the background the stage-manager and the property-man are barking at each other in a fit of atavistic fury. Finally the producer roars himself hoarse, and the disjointed text stumbles about the stage in a death-like weakness. Seated in his stall the dramatist shrinks like a creature of misfortune. Things are going sadly and cannot be helped—and to-morrow is the dress-rehearsal.

The Play Matures

ONE can usually count upon the storm of misfortunes bursting on the last day before the dress-rehearsal. Members of the company suddenly contract all kinds of illnesses, such as influenza, angina, pleurisy, etc. "Just see what a fever I have," the principal player wheezes in the dramatist's ear, like steam escaping from a tap. "I ought to go and lie down, for a week at least," he gasps, choking with coughs, and gazing at the dramatist with the reproachful, tear-filled eyes of a sacrificial lamb being led to the altar. "I don't know my lines at all," says another player. "Mr. Dramatist, do tell them to postpone the first night." "I've no voice at all," says Clara hoarsely. "There's such a draught here on the stage. Mr. Dramatist,

do tell them to let me see a doctor, or I shan't be able to act at all on the first night." And to crown all, the jovial *bon-vivant* sends a doctor's certificate : cramp in the stomach. So there you are.

Let the truth be told : the actor's trade is far more arduous than military service. So, if any reader is stage-struck (and *in loco parentis* I warn him most solemnly against this ambition), let him first test his powers of resistance and his patience ; let him see

how he sweats under a wig or beneath grease-paint ; let him try walking about naked in a frost, or running about, wrapped up in wadding, in a Turkish bath ; let him see if he can stand eight hours of running, yelling, whispering, eating his meals hurriedly out of pieces of paper, wearing stinking stuff on his nose, being baked by hot reflectors, blown about by hurricanes from trap-doors, seeing about as much real daylight as a miner, being covered with dirt by everything he touches, not daring to sneeze for thirty minutes, wearing a waistcoat impregnated by the sweat of twenty predecessors, throwing off his clothes six times from his overheated, steaming nakedness, acting while he has some troublesome illness or disease—let him suffer these and many other evils that an actor must endure in playing a part : while an actor who has no part to play is even worse off !

" Let us begin, then," cries the unfeeling producer, and a few wheezing figures begin to reel about the stage reciting, as though with their last gasp, a text which has become

more hateful to them than death itself. " But ladies, that won't do at all," shouts the producer beside himself. " Once more now from the beginning. Let us have a better *tempo*, please ! And don't forget, you are supposed to stand near the door ! Once more then : *Enter Katie !* " Katie enters with the droop of a dying consumptive, and stands stock still. " Well, Miss, proceed ! " urges the producer. Katie whispers something, her eyes fastened upon the Unknown. " But, you are supposed to cross over to the window," rages the producer. " Once more now, from the beginning again." Katie bursts into tears, and runs from the stage. " What's the matter with her ? " asks the dramatist. The producer merely shrugs his shoulders, and hisses like molten iron plunged into ice-cold water. Meanwhile the dramatist pulls himself together, and hurries to the office, declaring that it is impossible to have the first night so soon, that it must be postponed, etc., etc. (Every dramatist feels like this on the day before the first night.) When

he returns to the stage, somewhat calmed, half an hour later, he finds that a furious fight is going on between the principal actor and the prompter. The principal actor asserts that the prompter failed to give him a certain cue, which the prompter naturally denies most violently, leaving his book as a sign of protest. The stage-manager now receives a few nice curses, which he proceeds to pass on to the curtain-man : whereupon the row proceeds into a labyrinth of theatrical corridors, fading away somewhere down in the boiler-room. Meanwhile the prompter has been persuaded to return to his little box ; but he is so embittered that he does nothing but whisper. " Let us begin then," cries the producer in broken tones, sitting down, firmly determined not to have anything more to do with the affair, for you must know that the last act has not been rehearsed on the stage at all yet. " Do you think that it will be possible to-morrow ? " inquires the dramatist.

" Why, things are going splendidly,"

declares the producer; and immediately bursts out with: "Once more now! From the beginning! That's all wrong! Start

from Katie's entrance!" Katie enters, but at this moment another storm bursts out. "Good God!" rages the producer. "Who the devil's making that noise? Who's

hammering? Mr. Stage Manager, throw that man out who is making such an awful row under that trap-door!" It soon transpires that the culprit is merely an innocent stage-hand who is putting something to rights under the trap-door: for in every theatre there is always something that is being put right. It further transpires that the stage-hand objects to being sworn at, and that he is quite capable of defending himself with rich, juicy language, and at considerable length. Finally some sort of truce is arranged on condition that the stage-hand wield his hammer a little less noisily. "Let us begin then," cries the producer hoarsely; but the prompter is now standing on the stage with his watch in his hand: "Twelve o'clock. I'm prompting this afternoon. So I must be off now." The last rehearsal before the dress-rehearsal usually ends in this manner. It is a close, irritable, stormy, cloud; but to-morrow will arch itself into the wide, radiant, beautiful rainbow of the dress rehearsal.

" Mr. Producer ! " remarks the dramatist, " don't you think that in the first act Clara might . . ."

" It's too late to change anything now," interrupts the producer gloomily.

" Mr. Producer," says Clara, " the dressmaker has just told me that she won't be able to get my costume finished by the first night. What shall I do about it ? "

" Mr. Producer," cries Katie, " what kind of stockings shall I have to wear ? "

" Mr. Producer," the property-man announces, " we haven't got no blooming aquarium."

" Mr. Producer," says the foreman of the technical staff, " that scenery can't possibly be ready by to-morrow night."

" Mr. Producer ! You're wanted in the office."

" Mr. Producer, what kind of a wig am I to wear ? "

" Mr. Producer, should they be grey gloves ? "

" Mr. Producer," the dramatist insists,

" don't you think that we ought to postpone the first night ? "

" Mr. Producer, I think I shall wear a green scarf."

" Mr. Producer, are there supposed to be fish in that there aquarium ? "

" Mr. Producer, the theatre will have to pay me for those boots."

" Mr. Producer, is it absolutely necessary for me to fall down when I faint ? I shall make an awful mess of my costume."

" Mr. Producer, here's a proof of the advertisements."

" Mr. Producer, is this material all right for my trousers ? "

And the dramatist begins to feel that he is the most superfluous person on earth. Serve him right, anyway ! He shouldn't write plays !

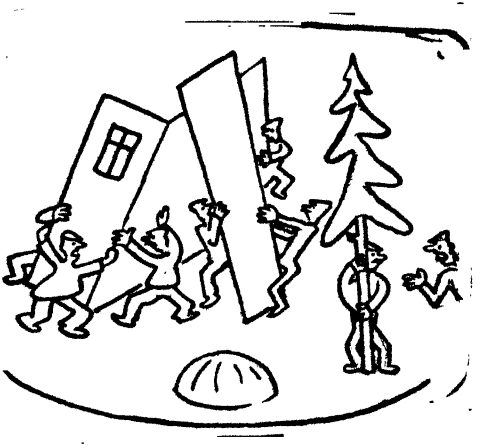
PART II

On the Stage

The Dress Rehearsal—I

IN theory the dress rehearsal is a rehearsal at which everything is supposed to go off as if it were " The Night " itself : with scenery, lights, costumes, grease-paint, noises off, and supers. In practice, however, it is a rehearsal at which none of these things is present in its completeness ; at which there is usually only half of the scenery on the stage, while the other half is only just drying, or just being fixed, or otherwise " on the way " : at which trousers are ready but not coats ; at which it is discovered that there is not a decent wig in the place ; at which it is discovered that the most important " props " are missing ; at which the supers cannot put in an appearance because one is a witness in a police-court case, another is in an office, in hospital, or somewhere ; at which the flautist

who has been engaged cannot come till three o'clock, because he is an official in the Ecclesiastical Office. The dress rehearsal, or as it is called in Czech the "general rehearsal,"



is in short a general review of everything that is still missing at the last moment.

The dramatist sits down in a stall and waits for something to happen. First of all nothing does happen. The stage is empty; then the players assemble slowly, yawn, and disappear into their dressing-rooms with such remarks

as : " I haven't had a look at the words yet, old man ! " and so on. Then the scenery arrives and the technical staff straggles on to the stage. The dramatist feels moved to run and help them ; he is looking forward so much to seeing the stage made ready for the play. Sturdy fellows in blue blouses and overalls lug in the side wall of a room : splendid ! Then they casually bring in another wall : magnificent ! Now for the third wall . . . but the third wall is still in the painting-room. " Just hang up something or other for the time being," cries the producer. Finally the missing wall is substituted by a forest scene.

At this point the whole proceedings come to a full stop. And all on account of a lath. It begins by two stage hands boring a hole in one of the wings. " What are you doing there ? " cries the foreman of the technical staff. " We've got to fix a bracket here," the men answer. The foreman therefore runs to intervene, squats down, and begins working away at the wing in question.

" What in Heaven's name are you doing ? " cries the producer after a quarter of an hour.

" There's a bracket to be fixed here," the foreman answers.

The producer pronounces a horrible curse, and runs to interfere, squats down and begins to examine the wing in question.

" Mr. Producer ! Why aren't you begin-

ning ? " cries the dramatist after another quarter of an hour.

" There's a bracket to be fixed here," the producer answers, deep in thought.

The dramatist sits down again crushed ; he plainly sees that they are all more interested in a bit of a damned bracket than in his precious play ; and he wonders what kind of a damned bracket it really is.

" Mr. Author ! Why aren't we beginning ? " inquires a female voice out of the darkness of the auditorium.

" There's a bracket to be fixed somewhere," replies the dramatist in a somewhat technical manner, since he is using the word " bracket." At the same time he tries to make out who is speaking to him but only succeeds in locating an odour of tar and toilet soap.

" It's me, Katie," comes the answer out of the darkness. " How do you like my costume ? "

Ah ! Yes ! Clothes ! The dramatist is glad that anyone should value his opinion at

all, and declares enthusiastically that that is exactly how he had pictured them—simple and unobtrusive——"

"But, I'd like you to know, my dear sir, that this is a Paris model!" retorts Katie somewhat insulted.

Finally, by some miracle the mysterious business of that damned bracket is disposed of.

"To your places!" cries the producer at last.

"Mr. Producer! I can't wear this wig."

"Mr. Producer! Ought I to carry a stick?"

"Mr. Producer! Only one super has turned up."

"Mr. Producer! Some one's gone and broke that there aquarium."

"Mr. Producer! I'm not going to act in rags like these."

"Mr. Producer! Two of the powerful reflectors have burnt out."

"Mr. Producer! I shan't be able to act properly to-day."

"Mr. Producer! You're wanted in the office."

"Mr. Producer! You're wanted downstairs."

"Mr. Producer! You're wanted in Room 2."

"Begin, begin!" roars the producer. "Curtain down! Prompter! Mr. Stage-Manager!"

"Ready!" cries the stage-manager.

The huge curtain is lowered. Darkness fills the auditorium. And the dramatist's heart beats quicker with eager expectancy: at last, at last, he will see his play!

The stage-manager rings once.

Now the written word is to be made flesh.

The bell sounds a second time, but the curtain does not rise. But the furious uproar of two raised voices is muffled by the curtain.

"Quarrelling again," growls the producer, rushing on to the stage to intervene. The curtain now muffles the uproar of three raised voices. Finally, the bell rings for the third time, and the curtain rises jerkily. An un-

known man, wearing a moustache, comes on to the stage and says : " Clara ! Something unexpected has happened to me." And an unknown lady approaches him with the words : " Whatever is that ? "

" Wait a minute," yells the producer, " Just switch off the lower light there. Add a bit of yellow. And why isn't the sun shining through the window ? "

" It *is* shining," a voice calls from somewhere beneath the stage.

" Do you call that a sun ? You must make it stronger ! And do buck up about it ! "

" Then we must use those two-thousand power lamps," declares the subterranean voice.

" Well, for God's sake, use them then."

" But we can't," and on to the stage crawls a man in a white overall. " I told you, Mr. Perducer, they'd burnt out."

The producer's voice fairly quivers with fury : " Then, for Heaven's sake, use some others."

And he flies on to the stage where a row

is just breaking out: a row of a violence so far unknown: one of those rows which are the most important feature of every serious dress rehearsal.

Meanwhile the dramatist sits in his comfortable stall as though he were sitting on uncomfortable thorns. Good Lord! he thinks to himself, "I'll never write a play again!"

If only he would keep his word!

The Dress Rehearsal—II

IT is a well-known fact that theatrical folk are very superstitious. For instance, before a first night you must never wish an actor or actress " Good Luck," but rather, " May you fall down and break your neck," at the same time spitting in the face of the person thus addressed. It is also asserted that there must be at least one row at the dress rehearsal if the first night is to

pass off smoothly. There may be something in this. In any case, no one can prove the contrary, owing to the fact that there has never been a dress rehearsal without a row.

The size of the row varies with the amount of authority possessed by the producer. The finest rows take place when the director of the theatre is himself producing. But if, by chance, the producer does not happen to be strong enough to cause a disturbance, then the scenic designer, the stage-manager, the foreman of the technical staff, the chief electrician, the mechanic, the upholsterer, the property-man, the prompter, the head tailor, the wardrobe mistress, the man up in the flies, the hairdresser, or any other technical authority in the theatre will see to it that a real row does take place.

There is but one rule to be observed in this battle: neither fire-arms nor weapons for stabbing purposes may be used. All other methods of attack and defence are more or less permissible: especially screaming, shouting, weeping, insults, complaints to the

manager, rhetorical questions, and other forms of violence.

But I do not want to insinuate for a moment that the theatrical milieu is a particularly wild,

bloodthirsty, or brutal one. But it is rather, so to say, a little touched in the head. Observed from a purely sociological standpoint, the theatre is a complex mass of individuals of the most diverse origin, and the most varied professions. For instance,

the stage hairdresser and the man who manufactures the stage thunder are more distant from each other than Parliamentary deputies of the Left and Right wing parties, who are, at least, to a certain extent, professional colleagues.

There is an eternal fight for supremacy between the property-man and the upholsterer. If a table is to be used in a stage setting, the tablecloth is the upholsterer's business; the plates, on the contrary, are under the property-man's jurisdiction; while

it is the duty of the electricians to see that the table-lamp is in order.

On principle, the theatrical tailor underestimates the importance of the stage-carpenter's activities, a contempt which is reciprocated by this gentleman. The property-man is always busily in the way of the scenic-designer, while both in their turn disturb the electrician as much as possible while he is working with his cables, reflectors, and other apparatus, thus embittering his whole existence. The upholsterer, with his carpets and ladders, increases the confusion still more, and is generally abused by all and sundry. When one adds that all this technical confusion takes place amid the greatest haste, with usually nothing quite ready, with the producer urging on the stage-manager, and the stage-manager urging every one else on—it is already noon, and the rehearsal has not yet begun, some idea of the exciting and catastrophic atmosphere in which a dress rehearsal takes place may be gathered.

Good: the producer is now calm and

resigned to the unfinished state of the stage; the tailor fits an unfinished coat on to the actor who must now play his part: the hairdresser places the improvised wig on to his head; the wardrobe-man pushes on to him some unnecessarily large gloves; the producer presses the required stick into his hand; now the play may begin.

The curtain rises, and the hero opens with something like this: "Clara! Something unexpected has happened to me!" At once, in a shrill, hysterical voice, the producer screams out that something is not as it ought to be. Of course, it is the light which is all wrong.

"And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." But it does not say in the Holy Bible whether the light was red, yellow, or blue. There is nothing in Genesis about switches, tubes, funnels, or searchlights, about ones, twos, threes, fifties, hundreds, or thousands, about regulators or reflectors, about horizons or shadows, and other lighting effects. The Lord did not command:

" Turn the second switch to six yellow one." Nor did He shout : " Give a blue spotlight on the doorway. Damnation, not a blue one.

Switch the moon into the chandelier, and veil it. No, that's very bad. The horizon must be yellow, and the chandelier must not shine on the doorway like that," and so on.

It was quite easy for the Lord, for He

created light first, then Man, and then, the theatre. The dress rehearsal is a rehearsal on the theme: "Let there be light"; only things do not proceed so smoothly at a dress rehearsal as they did in the times of Genesis.

"Mr. Producer!" cries the hero at last. He has been standing on the stage all this time. "It's one o'clock already. Are we going to rehearse or not?"

"I've been waiting for you to go on," croaks the producer angrily. He has already screamed himself hoarse.

"Clara! Something unexpected has happened to me!"—and the rehearsal begins again.

But the producer bursts out with: "That's all wrong. Reduce the third switch by fully half."

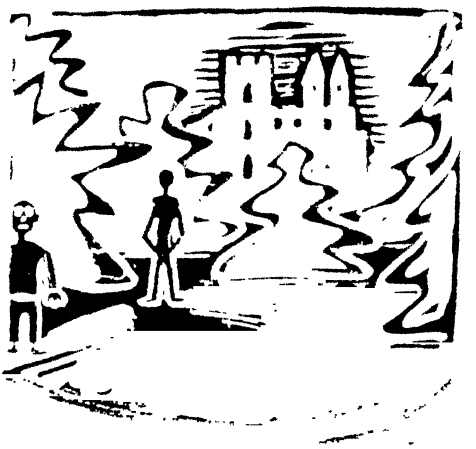
"What has happened to you?"

"More . . . still more subdued . . . enough . . . come along now, what's the matter?"

"Mr. Producer!" cries the electrician,

the third switch isn't burning any more."

"Then what is burning if not that switch?"



"The chandelier. You told me to switch on the chandelier."

"Never mind that. It's nothing to do with you what I told you to do," storms the producer; "turn the chandelier off, and turn the third switch to six."

" Clara ! Something unexpected has happened to me ! "

" What has happened to you ? "

" That's all wrong. Switch the yellow into the chandelier, and turn off the footlights."

There is one marvellous moment of extraordinary silence. Oh ! That this precious silence might last.

" What's the matter with you all ? " cries the producer. " Why aren't you rehearsing ? "

The stage-manager comes on to the stage : " Mr. Producer, Clara has gone out."

" But she's damned well got to rehearse now," storms the producer. " Tell her she's got to come on to the stage at once . . . at once, mind you."

" But—but——"

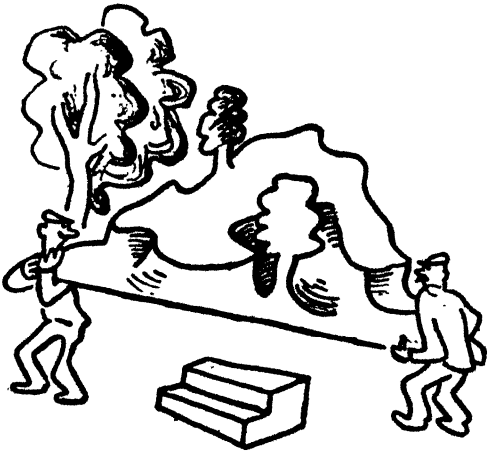
" There are no ' buts ' about it," rages the producer. And then, suddenly collapsing like a man completely crushed, he murmurs : " All right, let us begin then."

And at last the rehearsal begins all over again.

" Clara ! Something unexpected has happened to me ! "

" What has happened to you ? "

At this moment the upholsterer stumbles



on to the stage with his steps which he places near the window.

" Man ! What are you doing here ? " the producer asks in a breaking voice.

" I'm putting up the curtains," answers the upholsterer professionally, crawling up his steps.

"Putting up what curtains? Go away! Why didn't you put them up before?"

"Because the material wasn't sent sooner, that's why," answers the man on the steps.

The producer makes a rush at him, prepared to throw both him and his precious steps on to the ground, burning to choke him, throttle him, trample on him, or assault him in some other manner. The poor author of the play, who is also present, covers both his eyes and ears. For now the proper dress-rehearsal row has burst out in its full glory. It is a wild, howling, screeching affair; a feverish stormy row, unjust as the world, and as necessary as a storm created by Nature herself; a row which fills all those present, whether author, actor, manager, producer, electrician, with dull despairing rage, weariness, disgust, and an intense longing to be outside; far away from this accursed atmosphere of the dress rehearsal.

Slowly the producer returns to his place in the auditorium. He has aged by ten years,

is exhausted, bad-tempered, and hated by every one.

" Begin again," he says with disgust.

" Clara ! Something unexpected has happened to me ! "

" What has happened to you ? " whispers Clara, without any voice at all.

Heavily and joylessly the dress rehearsal drags on.

" Wrong ! " croaks the producer, " back. You must enter quicker."

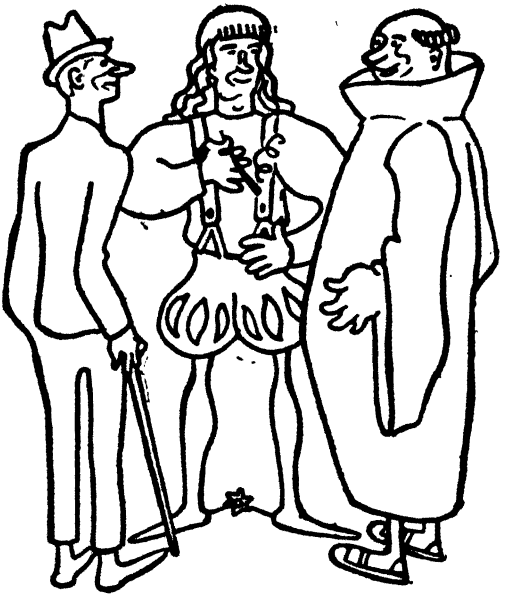
Weariness fills the players. Their legs begin to wobble. Their voices begin to stick in their throats. Memory suddenly fails them. Will it never end ?

" Back," thunders the producer, " you are hiding your partner."

Oh ! if it were only at an end. The words are rattled out in feverish haste. The producer tries to interrupt, but only succeeds in making helpless signs with his hands. He wipes the cold sweat from his brow. The end.

The players creep silently out of the

theatre. Out on the fresh air of the street they begin to sway and stagger. The author of the play hurries home with lowered eyes; his shoulders seem to bear the burden of the



weariness and depression of all. To-morrow is the first night. Good! Nothing matters to him any more.

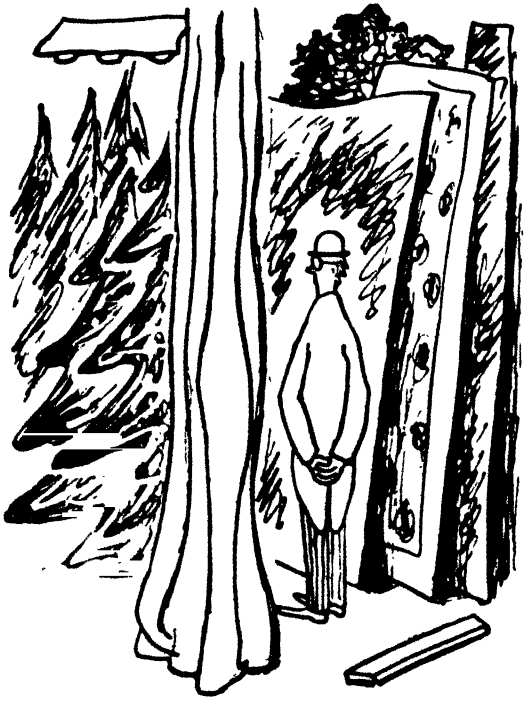
But in spite of it all every one will look

forward to the next dress rehearsal. You authors, players, producers, electricians, it is a long dark day for you all, as heavy as a millstone about your necks, but perhaps you will look forward to it just because it is so exhausting.

The Mise en Scène

WE have described, with great exactitude, what happens when a dramatist writes a play, and has it accepted; and how things turn out at the several kinds of rehearsals, including the dress rehearsal. We have also, in a touching manner, described all that the dramatist feels and experiences when he finally witnesses the various processes through which his word arrives at its theatrical incarnation. We have seen how the play becomes the axis around which the whole business of the theatre begins to revolve. We have been able to observe how creakily, and in what apparent confusion and terrible scramble, everything is put at the service of the exalted Muse to whom, with his play, the dramatist has given an opportunity to manifest herself. At the

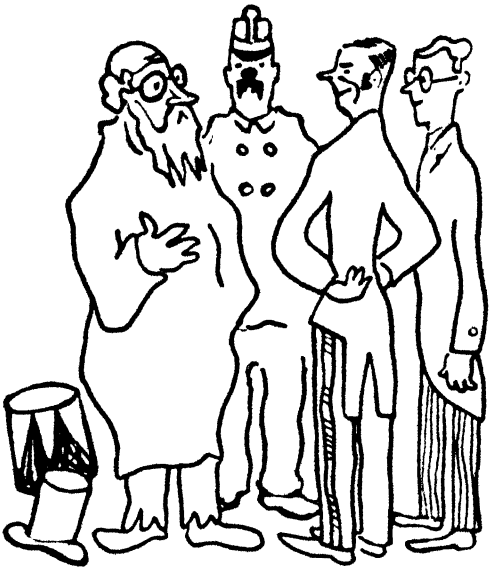
same time, we have seen how the dramatist, despite his indispensability, (for who but a



dramatist can write a play ?) feels himself not only superfluous, but even deserted. For he alone, amid all the pandemonium that is now

let loose, is the object of neither haste nor rows : his physical person is not lighted by reflectors, nor is it found necessary to make it secure with screws, to treat it with paints, to hang draperies upon it, or to conceal it with a cloth representing a garden-lawn. To his quivering being it is not necessary to affix steps, or to screw doors. There is no doubt that in the interests of the play he would be only too willing to undergo all these tortures, but the fact is, that while he looks on with amazement at the terrible turmoil he has created by becoming a dramatist, it is not concerned with him at all. And, therefore, he feels himself extremely superfluous and in the way, hopping out of the path of the property men who are bringing in a table, and bumping into some scene-shifters who are labouring with a wall. Like a ghost he wanders guiltily through the empty spaces of the theatre, and nowhere is he allowed to prove his usefulness, and willingness to help. He would like to say a word to the producer, but that individual has no

time for him; and the actors in their dressing-rooms are talking about fishing, intestinal colic, and how a certain actor played Hamlet at the country town of



Hradec Králové thirty years ago. And the dramatist, to act the hero, and to show them that he is not frightened by his own play, timidly joins in.

This, then, is what things are really like.

The dramatist had not imagined that he would be such an extremely superfluous person in the theatre. All the work is laid upon other shoulders than his. The producer has formed his own conception as to how the play should really be produced, and finds himself in a difficulty when he sees clearly that the dramatist, with his text, is hampering his free, creative talents. For the producer visualizes an ideal play, which the dramatist, butting in quite inconveniently and harmfully with his text, often seriously threatens. So that, perhaps the best play of all would be the one without dramatist and without text, and, perhaps, without actors, too ; for they also tend to threaten the success of the production. The producer's creative work is, therefore, extremely difficult and tragic, for he struggles all the while to create something better than that which is written, acted, and produced. Thus the producer is a man under a kind of curse, doomed to plait ropes of sand. But he does not let anyone notice this fact.

The producer shares his supreme authority in the theatre with the scenic designers ; for painted sets, curtains and costumes are things which it is impossible to do without in the theatre. The scenic designer, too, is sadly hampered by the dramatist's stage directions. For it is his highest ambition to put the Eiffel Tower on to the stage, with a background of volcanoes, or a Polar landscape in the Cubistic manner, or to conjure up such constructions as have never been seen on the stage before : water-chutes, roundabouts, lighthouses, and suspension-bridges. The dramatist, however, merely requires the modest poorly furnished room of a poor widow or a conventional middle-class sitting-room. Sometimes he endeavours to meet the producer and the scenic designer half-way by various remarks in the text : such as that in the centre there is a door, on the left still another door, leading to the balcony, on the right a door leading to a bedroom, and, of course, on the window-sill, a canary in a cage.

On the other hand, there are, of course,

those ambitious dramatists who are lured by visions of marvellous picturesque effects : they require a series of brilliant transformations,

where, in a few seconds, a wild forest has to be turned into a royal palace ; the royal palace into a country inn, and the country inn again into a rocky glen. These transformations give the producer, the scenic designer, and the fore-

man of the technical staff an opportunity of racking their brains as to how, under the circumstances, and with the somewhat sorry properties at their disposal, they can make the specified transformation in the short space of time required of them. The scenic designer, therefore, reads the play without paying much attention to the beauty of the words : his main concern is where the doors are to be, and of what kind they must be, and what inconvenient furniture the dramatist has asked for : and eventually, after taking council with the producer, he arranges everything differently. The astonished dramatist then declares that *that* is exactly how he had meant everything to be. For one of the many peculiar things about the theatre is that things generally turn out differently from what is expected ; when the scenery arrives on the stage, the scenic designer is surprised to discover that the properties are always much too big, or much too broad, much too short, much too small, in fact, always different from what he has imagined they would be like ;

and the producer is always surprised to find that the stage scene is not a bit like his idea of what it ought to be, after handing it to the scenic designer. And so there is nothing to be done about it except to resign oneself to the change; and the strange thing about it all is that, the worse things have panned out, the more praise comes from both the critics and the public; they declare that this time the settings are superb, and a great success.

The scenic designer, then, plans out his ideas for the settings, and brings them to the producer, and both of them then approach the stage-manager, who, after seeing them, wrings his hands in despair declaring finally that they won't do at all, because the cabinet-makers and the painters have no time to spare for such plans, and that in any case they would have to work miracles to carry them out. Well, finally he allows himself to be persuaded, and although there was no time for them, miracles soon begin to be performed in the cabinet-maker's shop, and at the painters. Lath is joined to lath,

and the curious outlines of woods and rocks arise before one. And in the painting-room a strong smell of paste begins to pervade the whole place, and old-time workmen, who have been connected with the theatre for thirty years or more, with funny little pork-pie caps on their old heads, and long pipes in their mouths, begin to paint "some more of that there rotten Cubistic muck"—as one old veteran puts it, "If only Raphael were to see us now." You see, things are not what they were thirty years ago, when the painting-room of a theatre was almost a kind of Academy of Fine Arts. Nowadays the paint is merely poured on to the canvas straight out of a bucket, just to get things done quickly, and is spread with a broom; and, lo and behold, from this labour and materials one has charming brocade or a shady wood. Modernism has burst into the theatre with its seven-league boots, and the delicate handiwork of the dear old days is now a thing of the past; most of the painting is now done by means of lighting. Quantity, not

quality, is needed most now from the old masters of the painting-room ; and the old-time workers have not yet become quite

accustomed to the new ways of the theatre.

When the scenic-room begins to work it sets in motion not only the stage tailor, the dressmaker, but also the hairdresser.

All of these individuals are extremely ambitious people, for, just as clothes make the man, so does the theatrical tailor's shop imagine that it makes the actor. "I can't cut M. Vydra a low waist like that," cries the tailor to the designer of costumes, who has just gone a little out of proportion. The greatest pleasure is derived from manufacturing the most impossible flute-shaped trousers, swollen backs and fronts, coats too short or too long, tight-fitting or quite loose, just as the character may need them. And if the comedy of the play demands it, the finest sartorial wit and ingenuity is expended on making these clothes fit as badly as possible. Here, silk is made from cheap lining material, and brocade from cheap sacking material, and old Austrian military coats are transformed into jerkins for both nobles and servants in some play by Shakespeare or Molière.

And when the play is being dressed partly or entirely from old materials, then the theatrical wardrobe man is delighted if he

can offer the producer, who is making his selections for some play by Shaw, a pair of trousers in which some nineteenth-century

actor played in some old nineteenth-century Czech comedy. For there is a strange dearth of modern, civilian clothes in the stock of the theatrical wardrobe. You can be sure to find

there fifty angels, ten Indian rajahs, thirty knights, a hundred mandarins or Roman centurions, but not a single, solitary pair of common-or-garden summer trousers. So there is nothing for it but to make the best of a pair of old military trousers with straps, just like those that Eugène Onegin wears in the opera. Nothing pleases the theatrical wardrobe-man's heart so much as some similar aged article of clothing, consecrated by the various plays in which it has appeared with success on the bodies of the celebrated actors who are the glory of the theatre.

On the first night the men from the theatrical tailor's shop all crowd into the wings, and their foreman follows with fascinated eyes the tragedian's every moment. Complications follow complications : no one knows whether there will be a solitary suicide or a whole massacre ; the tragedian is tormented by an intrigue ; poor innocence suffers ; the tragedian acts like a god, places his hand upon his heart, declaims magnificent verses, sits down, stands up, draws his sword,

falls, dies, or conquers and ascends the throne, or finally, after all his terrific troubles, marries the leading lady—the tailor hangs

upon his every movement, gulps in his gestures, and when the audience thunders applause, he whispers to himself with pro-

found emotion: "How beautifully those clothes act on Mr. X." For he too had had a part in the success: he had had to run all over Prague to match that flannel; he had stuffed wadding into those breasts with a sculptor's skill; and he had expended ingenuity worthy of an engineer upon the protruding coat-tails.

Nor must we forget the hairdresser. His workshop, hidden somewhere in the furthermost depths of the theatre, seems like a savage temple in Melanesia, or an Indian wigwam. Here you see lying casually about next to fair, girlish tresses and bald heads of every description, wigs of all kinds and colours, curly, long-haired, black, ginger, iron-grey, and silvery. Severed heads with their necks as pedestals stand about on tables, and nearby are to be found several sorts of noses, the pointed noses of fools and drunkards, and the straight noses of knights and intriguers, shaggy eyebrows, curious beards, moustaches of all kinds, beards for bandits, noble fathers, foresters, and monks. Indeed, the tables are

littered with every kind of facial adornment you could think of. Then there are the

grease-paints. With these are produced that blood-red freshness of the lips, that thirsty crimson of the leading lady's lips about which

the student and the servant girl in the second gallery dream. On top of this goes powder and rouge, with which is conjured up that all-conquering tenderness of cheeks, and then there is the black pencil for the painting of the eyes, making them so deep and magically lustrous that they almost drive you mad.

Here you find flesh paint of a light hue for voluptuous creatures, while the darker is for poachers, gipsy women, and the human mobs. Here is to be found all those paints and powders and lipsticks that make the player's face so repulsive at close quarters, dirty, greasy, so different from what the spectator sees from his stall that he would hardly believe it possible that it is the same face. All the deception of the stage is displayed here in broad daylight, that curious deception which is only transformed into beautiful illusion by the enflaming contact with the public. It is terrible at rehearsals, at the dress rehearsal, and on the first night, behind the scenes. Only when the lights go out, and the curtain rises, and the audience

" in front " begins to gaze at it, does this deception melt before its eyes, retreat into the background, disappear, turning into the truth and beauty of the spectacle. So that a coarsely painted piece of canvas looks like a wonderful landscape, tin-plate turns into gold, rough tow looks like a prophet's beard, and carmine turns lips into such desirable objects, that for a kiss from these lovely lips heroes are ready to slaughter each other. As a piece of work, seen at close quarters, it is, no doubt, very rough and imperfect : and yet, when it is successful, the breath of illusion makes it live, and, when it is very successful, makes it live as a beautiful spectacle until the end, accompanying the spectator home, and even further.

The First Night

BUT let us return to the further current of events.

The first night is the fatal moment in which the play is turned into an event. Up to the very last rehearsal, parts of it might still be altered, and thus save the play from disaster. It was still a work of art in the process of construction, a world in the making, a star which is being born out of chaos. The first night is but the final expression of despairing resolution to allow the whole affair to take its own course, come what may. It is the moment in which both the author and the producer definitely abandon the matter to the care of other hands, at the same time cutting themselves off from the possibility of helping in any way. Neither the author nor the producer will ever feel the satisfaction

of, let us say, the carpenter, who can allow the newly-made table to dry as it ought to do, who can then thumb and finger every edge and crack expertly, stroke the surface of it with his hand, knock on it, look the whole thing over, and say : " There's a good bit of work for you." Ah ! If only there could have been but one more rehearsal.

On the morning before the first night there is a last informal rehearsal. The players gabble through their parts hastily, lifelessly, and in whispered tones so that they may save their voices for " the night " ; they reel off the text as though they were crushing sand between their teeth. And every one hurries, gloomy and silent, as though a corpse were in the theatre. From the depths of the auditorium creeps a sad, stark silence. Nothing more can be done. It is the beginning of the end.

As is well known, the first nights have their own special public. There are people who only go to first nights. It is said that they go to first nights out of a passionate love for

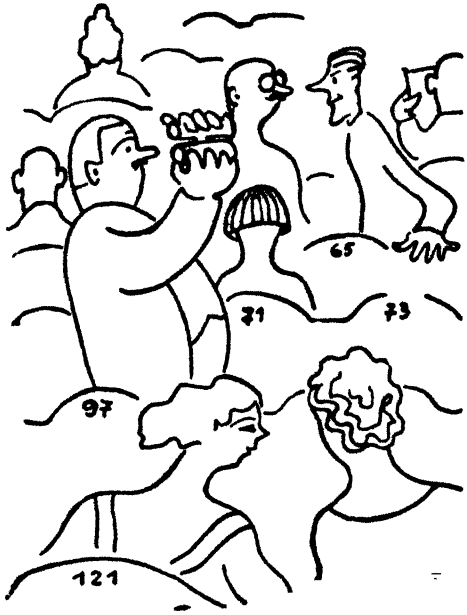
the theatre, out of sheer curiosity, for purely snobbish reasons, for the sake of showing off their clothes, or for meeting their friends and acquaintances. But I believe that they

attend first nights because they are driven to them by an unconscious and perverse cruelty. They attend them so that they may gloat voluptuously over the stage fright of the actors, the author's suffering and the

producer's agony. They attend first nights in order that they may take a bloodthirsty delight in the terrible situation on the stage, where every moment something can break down, become confused, and ruin the whole show. One goes to first nights just as the old Romans used to go to the arena to watch the Christians being tortured, and the wild animals tearing each other to pieces, out of a curious pleasure extracted from the agony and the unnatural excitement of those who are sacrificed.

Just at the moment when the first night public is settling itself down, with a rustling of generous conversation, in the gleaming arena, the author, with a strange and unbearable pain in the pit of his stomach, is rushing round the theatre. The players in their make-up peep through the spy-glass in the curtain at the audience, feel quite unwell owing to the usual first night panic, and rage about in their dressing-rooms because they have got an ill-fitting wig, or because their costumes won't fasten properly.

Dressers, both male and female, fly from dressing-room to dressing-room, for something is lacking in each. The producer is



rushing about on the stage from left to right, spluttering and groaning, because the last piece of stage property for the first act has not yet arrived from the workshop ; angrily

refuses to listen to any complaints from the players, and drags chairs on to the stage ; the tailor carries off a costume to his workshop ; the stage-manager gives the last signal in the dressing-rooms ; the firemen are in their proper places ; bells ring in the corridors ; a stormy row breaks out at the last moment between the property man and the upholsterer ; and three minutes after seven o'clock (the play begins at seven) the last piece of stage furniture finally arrives on the stage.

Meanwhile, you, Mr. First Nighter, are sitting in your stall, looking at your watch, and saying : " It's high time they began the show." If, at this moment, you were to place your ear against the curtain, you would hear the sound of hammering and the sound of breathless voices :

" Where shall I put it ? "

" Not there, you ox."

" That must be screwed on."

" There's a bracket wanted here."

" What d'you want here ? "

" For Heaven's sake, do buck up ! "

" Be careful there : the whole wing's falling down."

" That must be fixed to-morrow."

" And what about this ? "

" Hurry up, you fellows, for Heaven's sake ! "

Ting-a-ling. The first curtain signal goes. The stage becomes dark and silent. One hears a few final blows of the hammer, the moving of heavy furniture, and excited voices :

" Get out of the way."

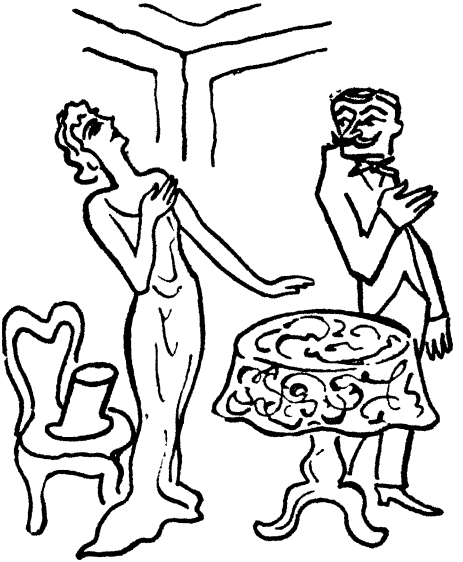
" Cut the lath off."

" Leave it alone, and clear out."

" Pull it on. But quickly."

Ting-a-ling. The curtain rises as the last stage-hand slinks off ; the lighted stage stands out clear from the darkness, and Clara, already on the stage, quickly makes the sign of the cross for luck. Her partner (over his forehead runs the sweat of excitement, but this is not visible to the audience) enters, and throws his hat on to a chair instead of on to

the table. " Good morning, Clara," he says sonorously, and then stops dead : " Good God ! I ought to have said ' Clara, some-



thing unexpected has happened to me,' at once."

Clara, meanwhile, is stuck stiff with fright : she has not had her cue. " Good morning," she extemporizes in despair.

" . . . Something unexpected has happened to me," hisses the prompter from his little box in the middle of the footlights.

In despair, the actor seeks a way of transition to what he should really say. He has just remembered that the author has fixed the time not in the morning but in the late afternoon.

" Begin . . ." whispers Clara, destroyed.

" Hm . . . yes . . ." the actor flounders, " just imagine, Clara, just . . . yes . . ."

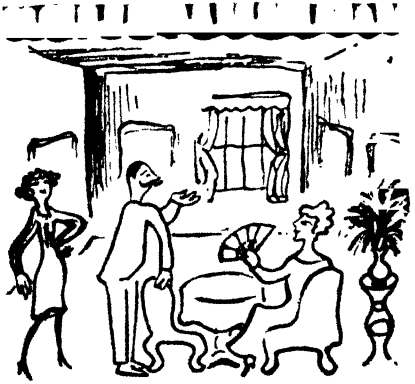
" Perhaps something unexpected has happened to you ? " Clara firmly helps him out.

" Yes . . . yes . . ." replies the actor, now enthusiastically, " just imagine, something unexpected has happened to me."

" Whatever is that ? " now asks Clara.

In the author's box a moment of deadly fear has ended in a great sigh of relief. The situation has been saved. But in the first few moments of the play the author had clutched the ledge of his box convulsively, longing to jump into the stalls, and scream : " Back ! You are all wrong. Begin all over again,

please." Now he is gradually calming down once more: for on the stage the dialogue is being rattled off in the smoothest of manners as though it had been well oiled and greased. After a time Clara has to sink on to a chair, as though her legs had failed her, but, good



God! her stupid partner has put his hat on to the chair instead of on to the table. Now we are really in for it: now, Clara, in her emotional excitement will sit down on her husband's hat; the whole act will be spoiled; in Heaven's name! how can it be prevented?

The author's hands grow moist with fear. He hears and sees nothing but that awful hat on the chair: the moment of catastrophe draws near, slowly but certain. If only a panic would break out in the theatre. Suppose he were to yell out "Fire" at the top of his voice?

At last, at last, the cue falls like lightning; at last Clara will sit down on the damned hat —ah, no, for the divine Clara, with wonderful presence of mind, merely takes up the hat, and then sinks into the chair, with the miserable hat still in her hand. But what will she do with it now? Will she hold it in her hand until the very end of the act? Why doesn't she put it on to the table? Ah! at last she gets rid of it: she puts it on to the table. But, oh, how awkwardly, and in such a terribly ostentatious manner—the author looks at the audience, sees nothing but coughing, throat-clearing figures. Evidently no one has noticed the calamity of the hat.

The author turns to the stage again: what, the dialogue does not seem to have got any

further ? Why does this scene last so long ? The author gets unpleasantly hot. Perhaps the play is too long. My God ! it is dragging along endlessly without any action. The author now perspires in agony ; " I ought to have cut it here, it is weak, it is rotten, impossible, meaningless—and why don't they play it faster ? Perhaps it would be better if I were to stand up and scream out : ' Wait a moment ! I will cut it ! ' "

God be praised ! it is over. Now comes the most important part of the exposition, the key to the whole plot, a short, exciting conversation, three pages long, and then a quick finish. But the author's hair stands on end with horror. For Katie, who should only enter by rights five minutes later, now precipitates herself on to the stage : Katie, who should only enter after the three pages are past. My God ! what can be done about it ? The author wants to scream out : " Curtain ! Let down the curtain ! " but his throat is dry with fright. The other two players on the stage stand there like two stuck pigs,

while Katie merrily rattles off her lines ; then the other two join in, helped by her mood, and the three pages of important explanation are calmly " jumped." Exactly ! Now, not a soul will understand the comedy ; no one will know what it is all about ; the whole plot, theme and construction, has gone to the devil. God in Heaven ! Without these three pages the whole play is a disconnected farrago of nonsense.

What on earth induced Katie to come on too soon ? Why did they allow her to come on at all ? Now the audience will hiss and boo because the nonsensical plot will only succeed in aggravating it to the highest degree : why, any child could tell you that the play has neither head nor tail now ; why hasn't the producer stopped the play ? The author looks at the people in the audience quickly to see if they are protesting already. However, they are only blowing their noses quite naturally, calmly coughing, while from time to time a light laugh floats through the audience : Katie really seems to be making

quite a hit with them. Perhaps the people are only waiting until the end of the act before they boo and hiss? But the author would like to sink into the earth. He flees from his box, rushing behind the scenes as though he really intended setting the building on fire. He will never dare to look anyone in the eyes again, he thinks despairingly, as he sits in the dressing-room to which he has fled for refuge. He rings his hands in despair, and buries his head in his hands. Yes, yes, all is lost now.

After an indefinite period, perhaps only after a few hours, he raises his head. What is happening? It sounds just as though somewhere far off water were pouring down on to paving-stones. It is rushing down with a violent splashing sound, rapid and distant. All of a sudden the water splashes louder, becomes one great big noise; some one dashes into the dressing-room, yelling: "Here he is. Here's the author." Some one seizes hold of his hands, drags him along at a mad run, while from every side hands

reach out to shove and push him; he staggers, sways, stumbles, sees and understands nothing, strikes out bravely at the

whirling mass of people, but it bears up under his blows, and only pushes him on and on further, until, bang!—and he flies as though shot out of a cannon's mouth on to the stage

Katie and Clara grasp both his hands in their clammy ones, and drag him to the footlights. Down below, the audience is still clapping like a waterfall produced by hydrants. The author sees nothing but thousands of round balls in which human eyes are swimming; he attempts an idiotic smile, and bows jerkily several times.

The curtain falls, and the splashing of water dies away into the distance, but ting-a-ling, and the curtain rises again quickly. The author, stretching his hands out to Katie and Clara, now remains alone and abandoned on the stage, centre for a thousand eyes, bows again, suddenly realizes with horror that he is bowing in a most ridiculous manner, just like a marionette—can't help it, though—bows right and left, to the gallery and to the stalls, and steps backwards. Friends and strangers standing in the wings shake his perspiring hands furiously, repeating over and over again, "Congratulations! Congratulations!" Ting-a-ling, the author finds himself on the stage again without knowing

how he got there, waves both hands towards the wings, revealing by this gesture that he is a mere nothing, that the players have done all. Well, if you must have it at all costs, then still another and another and another bow—what joy it is, this undeserved success. Pooh! Finally the author is able to stagger from the stage: all at once he is suddenly abandoned, feels himself superfluous, while the scene-shifters tear down the walls of the room (it is but the end of the first act), fix something, carry furniture away, making him feel in the way of every one.

"Hurry up there," shouts the producer, while the author flings himself into his arms. "Mr. Producer, everything went off splendidly, splendidly."

"We must be thankful it didn't go off worse," replies the producer dryly.

"And listen," cries the author enthusiastically, seizing the producer by a coat button, "couldn't Clara sit on the hat in the beginning? I think that it would make the people laugh."

" But we don't want them to laugh at the beginning," replies the producer. " Hurry up there. We don't want it to last until midnight."

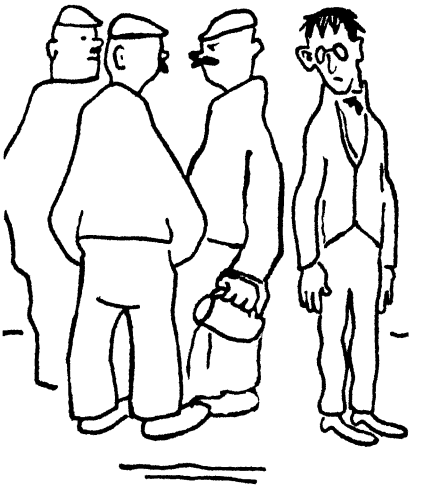
So the superfluous author hurries to thank the players. The hero is just sitting at his supper, and replies quite modestly to the author's thanks : " Oh ! thank you, but that's no part at all." Clara is annoyed because she has torn her frock on a nail. Katie is in her dressing-room sobbing with rage because the producer has been terribly rude to her. " Is it my fault," she sobs indignantly, " that the same cue comes twice ? I have to go on when Clara says the word ' Never,' and it's not my fault that this word is said twice." The author attempts to console her, but Katie weeps all the more heartbrokenly. " He . . . has been so rude to me . . . just on the first night too . . . how can I go on playing . . ."

So the superfluous author nobly consoles her with " But, my dear young lady, no one noticed that part of the play was missing at

all." And in this respect the author is much nearer the mark than he himself imagines. No one, in fact, did notice that the first act had neither head nor tail. For it is so easy to overlook a little thing like that.

Ting-a-ling, the curtain rises for the second act. The author trips over cables and stage properties through the back stage, bangs into the horizon, and almost pitches headlong through a trap door. All at once he remembers that he can follow the play further from where he is, behind the scenes. But behind the scenes the technical staff is packed closely together like sardines; scene-shifters, tailors, seamstresses, dressers, mechanics, men in overalls, and their wives and aunts; the supers and their cousins and the friends of their cousins; and all kinds of curious, enigmatic *habitués*, all standing closely packed together watching the play on the stage, joking in loud voices, walking about on tiptoe across the creaking floors, quarrelling with the stage-manager, getting in the way of the players, creating all kinds of noises and

disturbances, and it's a wonder they don't stick their noses on to the stage. The superfluous author squeezes himself through them and stands on tiptoe, for he wants to see what



is taking place on the stage ; but he hears instead the voice of a man in a blue overall :

" Lord ! Isn't it dull ? "

" It's much too long," says another man.

" We shan't get away before midnight."

Bang ! Some one has knocked over an

iron chair behind the scenes. Just at this moment a love scene is being cooed on the stage. So the superfluous author steals off on tiptoe; making the boards creak in a ghostly manner, and it is with difficulty that he finds his way through the labyrinth of passages to the exit, where he flees into the open air. It is night. A few people are hurrying through the streets thinking of Heaven knows what; the trams ring their bells; life murmurs in the distance. In the coolness of the peaceful night the author's heart aches. He feels himself alone, more alone than he has ever felt himself before in his life—just on the evening of his fame too!

If only it were all over!

After the First Night

AFTER the first night the author remains in complete ignorance as to whether his play has been a huge failure or a huge success. True, he has been called before the curtain, but perhaps the audience only applauded for a joke, or because it was sorry for him, or for some other unknown reason. Full of fear and mistrust, the author examines the words and looks of his friends.

"You are happy, aren't you?"

"I think that the first act ought to be cut a bit."

"But it was played quite well, considering."

"I congratulate you."

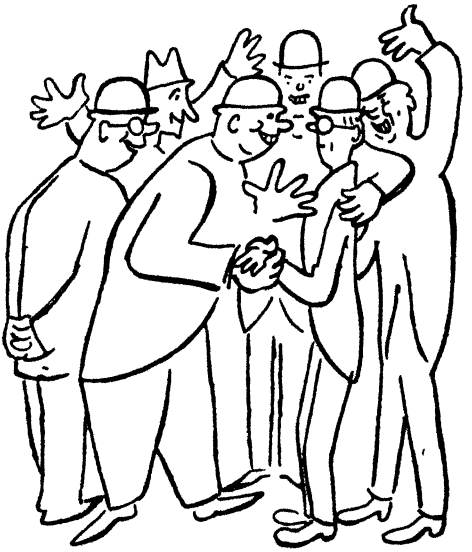
"Perhaps the third act could be cut?"

"Of course! They ought to have played it quite differently."

" Clara was quite impossible."

" I liked the end best."

" Don't you think that the second act drags just a wee bit ? "



" You ought to be satisfied."

" I think that it was wonderful."

So the author staggers about in a haze of uncertainty. Was the play a success or not ? And on the next day he buys all the news-

papers : surely he will learn from the critics how it really went off. Well, from the critics he learns the following :—

(1) That his play has a plot ; but every critic gives a different one ;

(2) That it (*a*) had a splendid reception ; (*b*) a lukewarm reception ; (*c*) was hissed by part of the audience ; (*d*) deserved the hearty reception it received ;

(3) That the producer : (*a*) had absolutely nothing to do at all ; (*b*) did what he could ; (*c*) was not half attentive enough ; (*d*) paid great attention to the production ;

(4) That (*a*) the *tempo* of the play was brisk ; (*b*) the play dragged ; (*c*) every one played with enthusiasm ; (*d*) the players did not know their parts ; (*e*) the players contributed to the success of the play ;

(5) That Clara (*a*) was wonderful ; (*b*) was obviously unwell ; (*c*) did not interpret the part correctly ; (*d*) filled the rôle with intense life ; (*e*) had fair hair ; (*f*) had black hair (while he even reads that Miss Jarolim was splendid in the rôle of Clara which

happened to have been played by Mrs. Nova !) ;

(6) That the decorations : (*a*) struck just

the right note ; (*b*) did not suit the character of the play at all ;

(7) That the ensemble : (*a*) was as good as it always was ; but (*b*) it was very inadequate.

Consequently the poor author never really discovers whether his play is successful or not. For even if it has a long run, that means nothing. In theatrical circles, when a play is only given a few times they say it is no good, and a failure ; if it should run a long time, however, they say that this is a sure sign that the play is rubbish.

PART III

Behind the Scenes

A Guide Behind the Scenes

IN the course of the preceding rather chaotic account of how a play is produced (which, however, is far from approaching the wild confusion of the theatrical reality which inspired it) we have had occasion to speak about a whole series of persons, whose existence, nature, habits, privileges and abilities may not be quite clear to the general public, the critics and the dramatists-to-be. But desiring to make you better acquainted with them, we find ourselves at a loss as to where we should begin. Shall it be downstairs at the stage doorkeeper's lodge, upstairs in the office, in the cellar with the boiler-man, at the box-office, or in those mysterious wide expanses of the theatrical store-rooms? Well, let us begin, as they say in the theatre, " upstairs " : at the offices. A minor branch

of this place is the counting-house, where, according to a time-honoured custom, the players are paid on the first and the fourteenth

of the month ; the officials on the first, an the technical staff every Saturday. Bu while we are dawdling in this Temple c Mammon you must know that in additio to their regular salaries the players ear

certain other sums : a fee for a doubled rôle, a fee for a song and dance, an extra fee for taking some one else's place, a fee for appearing nude and painting the body. But, in spite of all these extra fees, the players do not seem to grow remarkably rich. As a matter of fact the counting-house is rather a sad little place, with its small window usually shut. Here, too, players may receive advances on their salaries.

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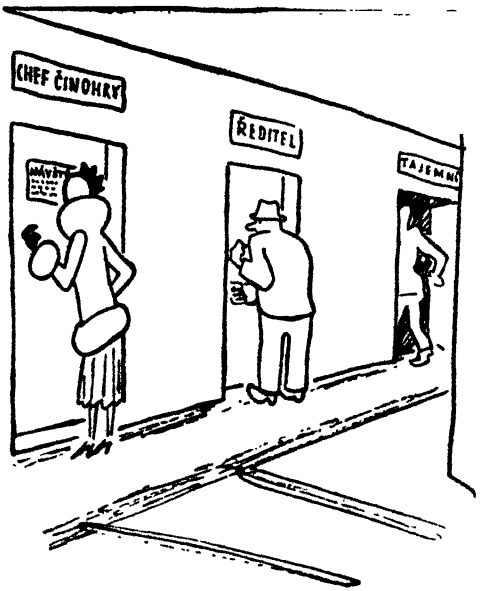

of the month ; the officials on the first, and the technical staff every Saturday. But while we are dawdling in this Temple of Mammon you must know that in addition to their regular salaries the players earn

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" *Upstairs* "

THE supreme court of appeal in a repertory theatre is made up of the secret trinity : the Director of the Theatre, the Dramatic Director, and the Administrator. Of this holy trinity it is usually the poor Dramatic Director who must walk the road to Calvary and be crucified from time to time.

The Director of the Theatre is a man who, for his past sins, has been condemned to be eternally annoyed. He is compelled to adjust all quarrels, complaints and questions of ability : storm when necessary ; dry tears ; haggle over any increase in salaries ; and sign much-needed monetary advances. His power is great, but it is purely internal in character.

As far as the Administrator is concerned,

his functions are, to a certain extent, unlimited and surrounded by secrecy.

These three almighty creatures spend their time in rooms furnished with carpets, easy-chairs and similar luxuries, which, however, are forced to flaunt themselves in fashionable drawing-rooms on the stage when needed.

There, higher authorities are succeeded by lesser authorities, whose titles begin with Co-Directors and Secretaries, and end with Assistants. The latter rattle telephones, and bang feverishly on typewriters, copying out rôles, letters and memoranda. It is just like an ordinary office, except that it is somewhat distracted; every one is in a fearful hurry; and every one is working like the devil. That is part of the whole game.

The rôle of the reader of plays is a very quiet one, and plays itself out in a little room hidden away in a corner somewhere. It is an oasis of peace, inducing a deep, almost refreshing lassitude in the feverish swirl of the theatrical factory. To this little room

come the modest authors (the less modest ones lay direct siege to the Dramatic Director) bringing neatly copied plays, over the contents of which they "spread" themselves, return frequently, and by all means in their power try to discover when their play will be produced. The reader of plays, a peaceful and contemplative man, tells them that "it will come along in good time." He is, however, taken seriously only by the dramatists. For the players are offhand with him, regarding him with justice, as something of a bookworm. As though the theatre of to-day had anything to do with literature!

The factotums of the theatre resemble the factotums of Ministries and newspaper offices: they are very literary, however, for at the beginning of the month they take the royalties round to the authors.

I seem to have mixed the artistic and administrative departments of the theatre together. And what, in fact, happens, is that the Director of the Theatre always says that he only works for artistic ends,

while the reader of plays lays great stress on the economic importance of the box-office.

Now, however, let us descend lower.

The Ensemble

THE *ensemble* is always crowded a few apiece into the dressing-rooms. These dressing-rooms are tiny holes. They contain a dressing-table, a washstand, and are either very hot or very cold. Every player has in front of him or her a small mirror, a hare's foot or a powder-puff, powder, flesh-paints, vaseline, towels for wiping the cosmetics off, carmine, an eyebrow pencil, greasy paper (in which some boiled ham has been wrapped), a half-eaten piece of bread, and the crumpled and creased rôle itself. There is a strong odour of human bodies, hastily consumed suppers, cosmetics, central heating, old costumes, gum, sausages, wigs; while in the ladies' dressing-rooms there are the additional odours of various kinds of scented soaps and underlinen.

In the largest of the gentlemen's dressing-rooms cards are everlastingly being played. Indeed, it is always noisy and lively in the

gentlemen's dressing-rooms: all kinds of practical jokes are played here, choruses are sung, trials of strength are made, while other wild pleasures are also practised. In the

ladies' dressing-rooms, on the other hand, a more distrustful and whispering silence prevails, a calm which is only broken by the running to and fro of the dressers, the clattering of the curling-tongs, and the rustling of the black-beetles, for these little creatures, you must know, gather in the ladies' dressing-rooms because they find sugary sweets there.

We, however, as is quite correct and proper, will confine ourselves to the gentlemen's dressing-rooms; admire the knights' hose and doublets, heavily wadded and padded, which are hanging up on the walls; weigh in the hand the theatrical swords and helmets with their flaunting plumes; get into the way of the dresser who is pulling on the high riding-boots of the half-naked hero; of the hairdresser who is busy curling the hero's wig; and of the tailor who is busy squeezing the hero's waist in while fastening up his tight doublet. We sit down on his shirt and clothes, and to the best of our ability, add to the general disorder which develops between

the first and third signals given by the stage-manager.

The performers are thus divided into a group of gentlemen and a group of ladies. In the group of males we have the tragedian, the hero or heroic lover, the comic lover (usually known as " Duckie "), the country boy, the *bon-vivant* who is usually a corpulent gentleman by profession, the comedian, the character-actor (father, schemer, bully, neurasthenic, etc.), and several other non-descript players, down to the man who plays the bow-wow. The actual limits of an actor's capacities are not very clearly defined : the rarest types are the tragedian and the heroic lover ; in most cases, the newly engaged heroic lover turns out to be a character-actor.

In the group of ladies we have the tragedienne or heroine, who plays in " costume," the first lover, the " lyric lover " (also called " Grouser "), the " heroic " mother (also known as " weeping Jessie "), the comic old woman, the feminine character-actresses, the innocent young girl (or " Pussy "), and the

chambermaids usually known as " fat-heads." Here, too, no clear line can be drawn. One usually finds that the rôle which is handed out to a player is not at all in his or her " line," while the rôle which is in his or her " line " is given to another player. This gives rise to much unpleasantness : rôles are brought back and taken upstairs, to " those in authority." As though " those in authority " are responsible for the idiotic author having written such wretchedly small parts ! And if he must write a small part then he should not drag it through every act ; he should get rid of it in the first act and let the poor actor get home early.

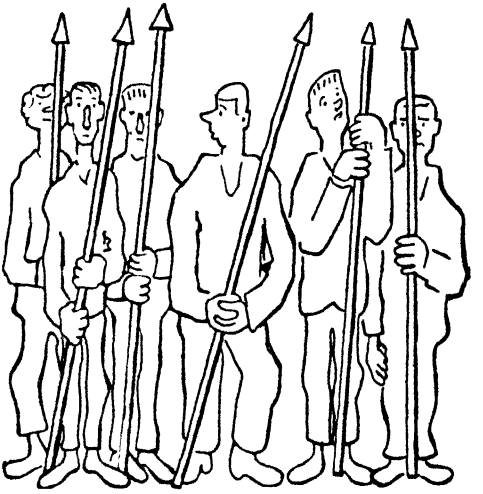
I should like to lead you through the lives of the players, and reveal to you their pasts, their cares, their sorrows, their sensitiveness, the difficulties of their profession, their stage-frights, their curious superstitions, their loves and hates, their jokes and their lamentations, their brief joys which are always being revived : but I am not writing a realistic novel about stage life but only a short guide.

I will, therefore, cease to wander round the dressing-rooms, between scenery, lamps, weapons, and theatrical thrones, and turn to the mob of both sexes. They are called "supers."

The Supers

WHEN the author introduces into his play the "People," or the " Folk," or a " Mob," he generally imagines a great mass of individuals old and young, stout, broad-shouldered beings with big chests, thick necks, and powerful voices as the " People," the " Folk," or a " Mob " are usually supposed to be. But he is visibly disappointed when he sees on the stage a small handful of narrow-chested, more or less lean worms, with thin piping voices, who do not by any manner of means represent the real " proletariat " either in weight or substance. As a matter of fact they are poor students engaged at sixpence per night : and for sixpence one can hardly expect the poor beggars to be strong, broad-shouldered and sunburnt !

And because the producer is hissing from the wings : " For Heaven's sake, move yourselves a bit ! " they move themselves a bit, shake their bodies about, jostle each other in



an endeavour to make one believe that they are really alive. True, there are also permanent supers who move about with a certain pride. Members of the technical staff also act as supers sometimes. Thus, you may see

during the interval a Roman soldier carrying a bench on his head, or a French *garçon* screwing a loose bracket tight. The playing children in the crowd are usually the offspring of the theatrical folk.

If the piece is an elaborately mounted play, requiring a very large mob of people, then every one in the theatre is pressed into service: dressers, scene-shifters, property men, upholsterers, stage-managers, electricians and seamstresses; indeed, it is a wonder that the whole theatrical administration itself does not come on to the stage.

For making a noise one gets paid something extra.

The Stage-Manager

THE stage-manager runs to and fro in the wings with the book of words in his hands, pushes the players on to the stage at the right moment, and through the correct entrance, directs the crowds, or even produces noises " off," and gives the signal for the curtain to rise : further, he rings the bells in all the dressing-rooms, goes along the corridors screaming " Ready to begin, please ! ", plays minor rôles, stamps like a horse when a " horse off " is prescribed, is on intimate terms with all the actors, and is abused by all and sundry for everything that happens. Just as there are greater and lesser producers, so are there greater and lesser stage-managers.

The stage-manager must be simultaneously not only in the right and left wings, but also

behind the scenes and under the trap-door; he must also see that everything is on the stage, must know all about the properties, and must often take the place of the producer. He is the poor creature upon whom everything and every one falls.

As far as the noises "off" are concerned, these are produced by various people: the mechanic unleashes the stage thunder in the flies, the scene-shifter sees to the noise of falling hail; while the rain, bells, sirens and shots are the business of the property man.

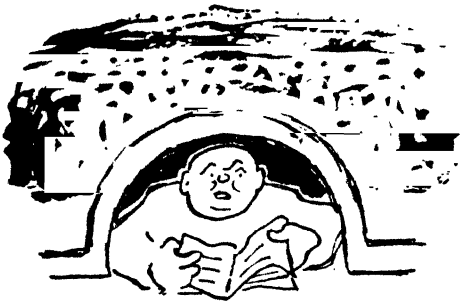
The stage-manager, however, imitates the singing of birds, hoots like a motor-horn, rattles the crockery, and makes all the other necessary noises, except those which are produced by the orchestra.

The Prompter

IT is quite a mistaken idea to imagine that the prompter merely anticipates the text mechanically for the actor. This is not the case. The great and inspired prompter lives with the actor. While the actor is letting himself go, he does not interrupt : he knows two minutes beforehand when it will be necessary to " reach " the actor his words. The actor only gets annoyed if the prompter butts into his speech unnecessarily, or if, in a moment of uncertainty, the prompter precedes him with a couple of words : then he is still more irritated. There is a mysterious contact between player and prompter, and to be a born prompter is to be gifted by the gods. For this reason the good prompter is treasured as no one else is.

The prompter also has his personal contact

with the play. There are plays during which he delights to prompt, and others in which he hates to prompt. He is bored if the piece is a boring one, and amused when it is an



amusing one. When dramatic authors bother about the casting of their plays they always forget the prompter: this proves their ignorance of the stage.

The Curtain Man

THE curtain man sits in a glass box near the stage. At a sign from the prompter he lowers the curtain. The curtain falls quickly or descends tragically and slowly, according to the way the play ends. If the theatre is on fire the curtain man must remain at his post until the iron safety curtain has been let down. He is aware of this heroic duty: his face wears the concentrated expression of one who holds an exposed advanced post. Next to him is a pint of beer.

The firemen stand just behind the door where they are most in the way. They are black and serious: they do not laugh: they do not weep. But if a candle is burning on the stage, or if an actor lights a cigarette,

they follow this fiery action with tense interest. They are always ready to rush on to the stage with drawn hatchets.

The Property Man

THE property man lives in the property room, which is a place difficult to describe, for everything you can possibly think of is kept inside it : swords, a stuffed canary, bowls, drums, goblets, dishes, bags, pipes, antique vases, folios, baskets, trunks, inkpots, samovars, diadems, rings, cards, dice, trumpets, Red Indian quivers, boxes, pistols, civil and military utensils of all the ages, instruments of all countries, everything that ever was and now is.

It is the property man's duty to procure whatever the dramatist needs : a motor-car, a horse, an aquarium, a white elephant, a dead cat, a live peacock, a decimal weight, Aladdin's ring, dirty washing, a musical box, a waterfall, an infernal machine, a singing spinning-wheel : in a word, every possible

thing with the exception of the following: (1) all that is fixed to walls and hangs up is

a matter for the upholsterer; (2) all that gives light is in the hands of the electrician; (3) all

that, which apart from jewels and weapons, is the wardrobe man's affair.

The property man is also supposed to see to all that is eaten, drunk or smoked on the stage during the performance. Further, he must look after and hand out all the despatches, letters, and Papal Bulls that have to appear on the stage : to provide live animals : to ring bells and fire shots : take on to the stage the properties required and carry them off again : and many other things.

From the property man's point of view the realistic plays are the difficult ones. You would never believe how difficult it is to get hold of a rusty hoop or a pair of snuffers, and these are just the very things that the realistic school of dramatists loves to prescribe. It would be far better if they asked for a Papal tiara, or a Neptune's trident : for the property man has this kind of junk in plenty. But where in the Lord's name are you to get hold of a rusty hoop ? Where are you to procure a piece of oakum ? Where can you find a broken loom ? These are terrible demands.

The Electrician

THE chief electrician has his centre of action beneath the boards of the stage, or in the portal, and plays on a kind of organ composed of lights ; every one of these switch-boards, levers, or buttons releases some mysterious source of illumination, white, yellow, orange, red, blue, moon-yellow. Here you have the footlights and the overhead lights, the upper " Two," " Three," and " Four " funnels in the wings, or on slides, further sources of light in the portal, lamps in the gallery, portable thousand-candle-power lamps, corner lights, bulb-reflectors, free contact funnels, tubes, searchlights, batteries, pocket-lamps, projection apparatus, the cloud film, transparents, and Heaven knows what else.

It does not seem so very remarkable to the

spectator when the hero is standing well in the " limelight " ; but reflectors are blazing

down on him from the flies and the wings, and a searchlight from below. Meanwhile,

these lamps are getting gradually hotter and hotter, indeed, until they are almost red-hot, and the poor electricians have to hold them in their bare hands in an atmosphere that resembles that of a furnace. Perhaps it is impossible for the light to reach a certain corner, or shadows are thrown in the wrong place, or the lighting is as dull as in a school-room, or the producer would really like to conjure up something wonderful with the lighting: but the electrician has no more cable to spare; alas! Perhaps the ten-thousand candle-power lamps are burning without producing the desired beautiful effect and the electrician would like to illuminate the scene with his own eyes and fingers to satisfy the difficult demands of the producer. He mixes all the colours, drags cables about the stage, turns all the switches on and off, drives his men hither and thither, until all of a sudden the producer cries "Stop! Now it's quite all right. Make a note of it quick." And with trembling fingers the electrician scribbles cryptic notes on his piece

of paper. Yes : but it is all to no purpose. This miraculous lighting effect is never realized again. For in the theatre, do what you may, something always goes wrong. But I must remark that we are only at the beginning of the technique of lighting. As for the producer, the dramatic director and the scenic designer they have already been dealt with ; but there still remains the Stage Inspector.

The Stage Inspector

HE is also known as the foreman of the technical staff, and ruler over the carpenters' shop, painting-room, and store-rooms. It is to him that the scenic designer hands his suggestions, saying: "And now, my good man, manage that somehow with your cloth and laths."

It is easy to give instructions; you can paint anything on paper, but to make it stand up and hold together in practice is quite another thing. For this reason the foreman always says: "Lord love us, that won't do at all!" and "Lord love us, when have we got time for it?" Finally, it is demonstrated that it will do somehow after all, and is even nearly ready; how this is attained, I do not

know; but in a theatre you are always handling sheer impossibilities.

Scenery consists: (1) of various movable articles of furniture, such as stairs, steps, pedestals, and tables, folding scaffolding, and similar woodwork known also as plastic scenery; (2) of prospects and horizons, which are the large painted sheets which hang at the back; (3) of flats, which are frame-like decorations screwed to the floor; (4) of borders and drops and arches, which again are painted cloths, hanging on so-called battens; (5) of draperies; (6) of various coverings, which merely mask gaps in the wings. This is all, and from such weak materials and rags have to be conjured up earth and sky, castles in the air, etc., etc. And when at the dress rehearsal all this is standing on the stage, suspended, screwed to the ground, supported by brackets, and still smelling of wood and glue, the foreman is radiant with glory. He does not see the actors, nor know what is being said on the stage, but he feels to the depths of his soul

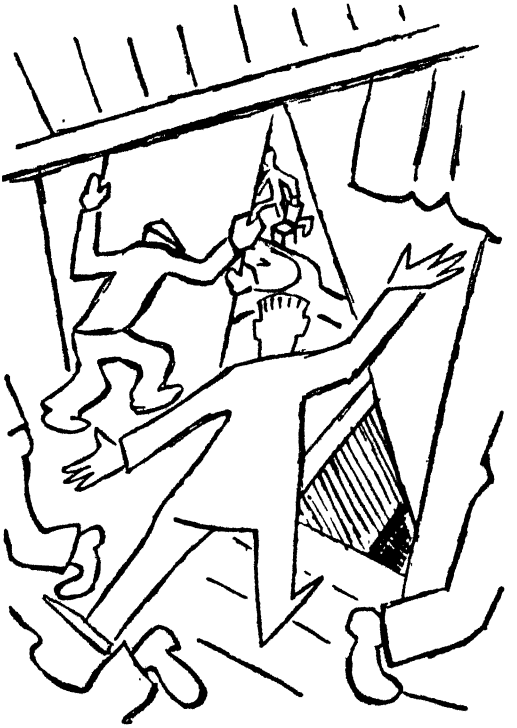
all these flats, drops, and steps and prospects. " There's a scene for you ! " he says, with pardonable pride.

And if you, patron of first nights, are grumbling that the interval is lasting a deuce

of a time, you should just have a look at the foreman's battlefield. The curtain has hardly reached the ground when twenty pairs of hands seize the flats and practicables and begin " taking to bits."

The prospects are hauled up, the property man throws his things into a basket, the upholsterer rolls up his carpet, raising clouds of dust, the furniture men remove tables and chairs, the trap-door sinks with a groan beneath one's feet, and look out! A new prospect comes sailing down on to people's heads from the flies. And here are the new walls already, the upholsterer hammers on hangings, the electricians drag cables about the stage, the property man rolls on with a new basket of things and the furniture men with new tables and cupboards. " Look sharp there! "—" Get out of the way with that, man! "—" Look out! "—" My God! " —" Mind your head! "—" Out of the way with them steps! "—" Hold this, Franta! " —" What on earth are you doing, man? "— " Screw it on, then! "—" Out of the way! "

—" Where's this supposed to go ? "—" It's falling ! "—" Silly fathead ! "—" But I told



you yesterday ! . . ."—" Good God, buck up about it ! "—" Where are you screwing

that ? "—Crash ! now it has really fallen down, but by a miracle no one is killed. " Mind the trap ! "—" Look out ! ! "—" Look out ! ! ! "—" Go away ! "—" Clear that away ! "—" It's blooming well bust ! "—" Steps here ! "—" It won't hold, I tell you ! " —" Take it down again ! "—" Who the hell's pinched my hammer ? "—" We must saw a bit off here ! "—*Ting !* the stage-manager rings once for the curtain. " Christopher, that's all wrong ! "—" We must put a bracket here ! "—" Leave it there ! "—" Take it away ! "—The actors are already on the stage. " Where's that sewing of mine ? "—" Those doors won't shut ! "—" But that chair was standing somewhere else ! "—" Give me that paper, quick ! "—" I shall never be able to finish my part to-day ! "—" Lord, where did I put that shawl ? "—" I don't know a word ! "—*Ting !* the curtain rises slowly and irrevocably. Lord of Hosts, if only things last till the end of the act !

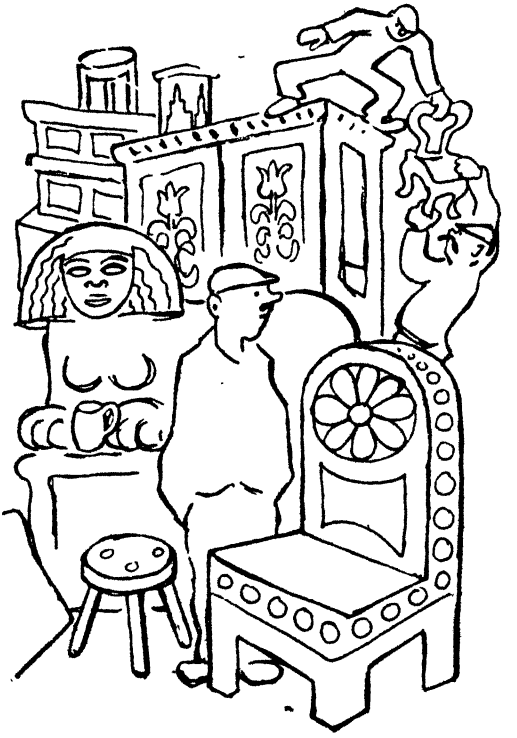
The Technical Staff

THE technical staff, as will have been seen, are very busy in the interval. During the action, if it is a first night, they are crowded into the wings, where they look on, make jokes, and calculate when it will be over. On other nights they play cards or lie about on benches in their rooms. Half a minute before the end of the act a bell rings for them, and they tramp on to the stage, where a lyric dialogue is reaching its whispered end. At it, lads !

The Furniture Men

THESE hang out mainly in the furniture-room and the stores, where are gathered together thrones rather the worse for wear, rustic settees, Louis XV and Louis XVI furniture with torn coverings, antique couches, Gothic altars, cupboards, what-nots, hearths and coffins, and in a word everything that people ever sat on, eat at, and lie down upon. Only that an antique couch is not called an antique couch, but "that sofa that figured in *Quo Vadis*"; a Louis XVI suite is known briefly as "those settees that played in *The Statesman's Trial*," or some other play. Every piece of furniture the theatre possesses has such a name; just as in the wardrobe there hangs "the coat that Mr. Bittner wore in *The Bullies*," or may be

found "those top-boots that played in *Otheller*."



The Wardrobe Men and Women

THEY live either in the tailors' shops and the unending wardrobes, or in the actors' dressing-rooms. From such a wardrobe you might clothe the entire garrison of Prague, of course in a somewhat heterogeneous fashion. There hang thirty Roman senators, a dozen monks, four cardinals, one pope, fifty Roman legionaries complete with helmets and swords, twenty men from Chodsko,[1] seven bailiffs, two or three headsmen, a few Onegins, knights of velvet and silk, and Spanish knights with pumpkin breeches, further whole bushels of shepherds' and musketeers' broad-brimmed hats, scores of tall pointed caps and shakos, lambskin caps and Boyars' fur caps, heaps of pointed shoes, riding-boots, turn-down boots, sandals, tall

[1] Historical district in Bohemia.

boots and Spanish boots, swords, sabres, cutlasses, rapiers, and daggers, belts and straps, harness, ruffs, epaulettes and scarves,

armour and shields, tights, hides, furs and brocades, leathern breeches, shirts and dominos, Atillas and Bohemian jackets ; an

immeasurable and worthless collection, in which there is everything, but never what is required. In days gone by, the articles in this collection used to be sewn of good, valuable materials ; now they are fabricated from paper, lining-material, or sacking, daubed and sprinkled with colours, and there you are. My word, how they look at close quarters !

The wardrobe men, too, bear their own special relation to the play. " That's nothing of a piece," they will say, " there are no changes of clothes in it ! "

Miscellaneous People

FURTHER we find the mechanic and the boiler-man, the cleaners, and then, as a rule, an elderly man, known as Mr. Novotny or something of the sort. No one knows why he is there or what is his business, and he usually goes to fetch beer. And then some people in the basement, whom no one has ever seen. And even now I am sure to have forgotten some one or other. For the theatre is a highly complex affair, and as yet it has never been analysed.