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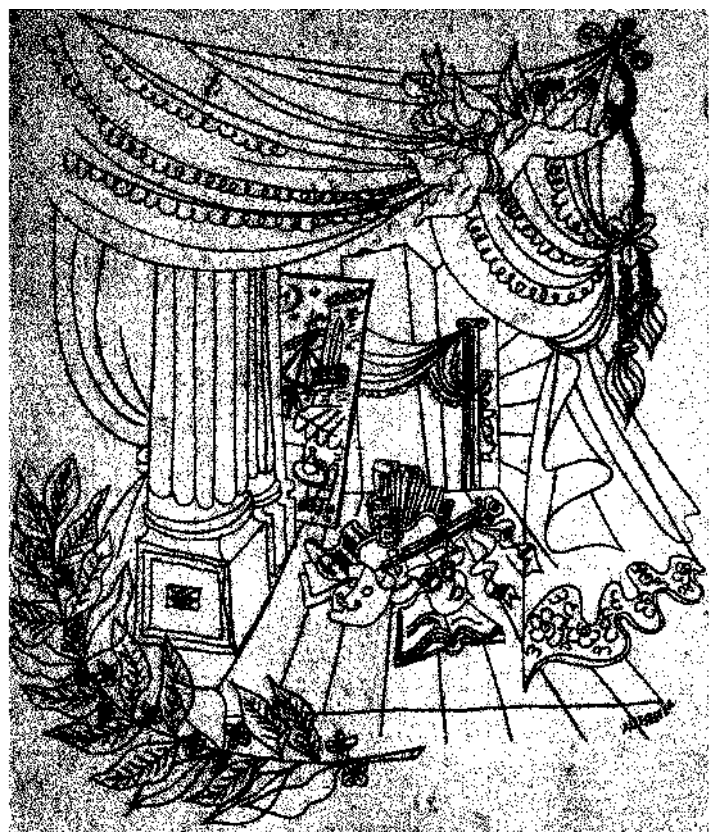
DATE *Aug 22 1954* NAME *W. W. W. W. W.*

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REVUE



REVUE

by

BEVERLEY
NICHOLS



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED, JANUARY 1939
SECOND IMPRESSION, FEBRUARY 1939
JONATHAN CAPE LTD. 30 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON
AND 91 WELLINGTON STREET WEST, TORONTO

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE CITY OF OXFORD
AT THE ALDEN PRESS
PAPER MADE BY JOHN DICKINSON & CO. LTD.
BOUND BY A. W. BAIN & CO. LTD.

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FOREWORD
FOR
FRANCES DAY

My dear Frances,
There are certain Reasons why the public may identify you with one of the characters in this book, whose name is Fay Pearl.

Fay has your hair, and your voice. And like you, she has an instinctive genius, on the stage, for drawing every man, woman and child so close to her that she has only to whisper to them to wring their hearts.

Fay has courage and grace. So have you. She can be extremely stubborn. So can... but that would be hardly polite. Nor would it really be relevant. For all these points of identification might have been ignored, were it not for the damning fact that I once composed a revue for you, in which you sang a song about daffodils. In case you have forgotten, you looked like a Botticelli angel, and sang to match. And Fay sings the same song. The very same song, which I have had the impudence to publish in these pages.

How am I to defend myself? *Tou* know that you are not Fay, and so do I, but how can we persuade the public that this is the case? And how can I, as an author, escape from the very obvious criticism that if I wished to avoid confusion I could have done so very simply by giving Fay another song to sing, and making a few changes in her personal appearance.

'All you needed to do ...' people might say ...
'was to give her another name (say Ruby Garnet) and

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different coloured hair (say a firm but discreet red), and make her sing a song about some other sort of flower (say, petunias).'

However, strange as it may seem, a red-headed Miss Garnet, singing about petunias, would not do the same things to me as a pale-haired Miss Pearl, singing about daffodils. More important, she would not do the same things to herself. She would strike out on a very different line, in every activity of her life. She would eat different things, laugh at different things, fall in love with different things. She would be different altogether. Just because of her name, and her hair, and the lilt of her song? Maybe. I don't know. All I know is that it had to be Fay Pearl, that it had to be that colour hair, and that it had to be daffodils.

Perhaps you did creep in, now and then. An echo of your voice, a glint of your hair, the swift flash of your dress as you sped down some draughty corridor on the way to your dressing-room. When one is writing a novel on a broad canvas, which is concerned with a life that one has personally experienced, it is difficult to say what creeps in and what doesn't. It is like improvising on the piano. A tune that seems, at the moment, to have drifted, fresh and sparkling, on the wind of one's own fancy, is later revealed, when it is written down, as one of the most hackneyed products of Tin Pan Alley. It is all very confusing.

All I can say, with complete honesty, is that I had Fay in mind, long before I ever met you. If you have unwittingly given her an added charm, that is her luck, and mine, and nobo4y's misfortune.

And this applies to all the other people in my book.

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If any leading lady wishes to identify herself with that amiable monster, Miss Thelma Ganges, she is at liberty to do so. My own relations with leading ladies, and, I may add, with managements, have always been of the happiest. Indeed, I should like to take this opportunity of paying a personal tribute to the unvarying courtesy, the quiet common sense, of men like Mr. Charles B. Cochran, Mr. A. E. Fournier, and Mr. Bronson Albery, to name the three managers with whom I have been associated in revue.

But Fay is the only one that matters. And as long as you do not care, I shall be happy. One day, perhaps, if the alarums and excursions of this age permit, I might follow her career in greater detail. And I should not be surprised if she reached the same heights as you have reached, and twinkled almost as brilliantly. If that happens, and if I should chance to record it, I shall have to write you another letter. Which will not worry me at all, for in writing to you I seem to capture (if only in my head) something of your own gay and enchanting spirit.

B. N.



CHAPTER I

PARTY

I

THELMA GANGES did not wish to go to the party at all. She had been filming all day, and though tomorrow was Sunday, she felt that she really ought to go to bed at eleven, with her features encased in scented clay, and at least half a bottle of hot Vichy circulating gently through her system. The latest 'rushes', which she had seen at the studio, had revealed signs of fatigue, and though she had immediately accused the make-up man, the camera-man, the director, and even the librettist ... ('Darling, how *can* I say lines like that? They *screw* one's face up! Look! That is *not* the sort of line people expect of me. You should have given it to Miss B.') ... in spite of these frontal attacks on all who were concerned, and many who were not, she knew that the fault lay in herself.

No. That would be an over-statement. It was impossible that any fault could lie in herself. It **was** simply that she *gave* too much. Not financially, **of course**. Ectoplasmically. She was always '**giving** out'.

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The organizers of any charity performance could be **sure** to count on her services, provided that they put **her** top of the bill and guaranteed the attendance of Royalty. The compilers of newspaper symposiums on 'Why I have not Married', 'My Ideal Man', and other burning topics, were never sent away empty-handed (on the understanding that the other contributors were put in smaller type). 'Giving, giving... always giving/' she sighed, and as if to convince herself of this fact, she took another glance at the batch of press-cuttings which was scattered on her lap. It was gratifying to see that the very first one she picked up showed her presenting parcels of a new patent food to queues of poor people in a soup-kitchen.

MISS THELMA GANGES IN A NEW ROLE Famous Star of Stage and Screen Sees How The Poor Live

But even that, she felt, hardly did her justice. 'In a New Role' indeed! As if she were not always sacrificing herself. (The fact that she had been paid a hundred guineas for her services on this occasion had momentarily escaped her memory.) And it was ridiculous to put in that bit about 'seeing how the poor live'. *She* knew how the poor lived, what with income tax at such a cruel level and a surtax that always seemed to her like a personal affront.

She glanced at the clock. Nearly eleven. Soon she must make up her mind about whether she should go to the party. In the meantime she would have one more look at the press-cuttings, to see what these wretched newspapers had put in, or worse, what they had left out.

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She lay back on the *chaise-longue*, one arm behind her head. Against the green Cushions her auburn hair shone as though it had an inner light of its own. The magnolia must inevitably be called into service to describe her skin. Her green eyes were enormous, even without the aid of the Kurlash tongs with which she coaxed her lashes to stand at attention. Her mouth was so nearly perfect that she never used more than three dabs of lipstick . . . one on each of the two tips of her Cupid's bow and one in the centre of her lower lip. The lines of her figure were subtly moulded by the thin black silk of her gown. Her feet were bare, and very white, and her small and elegant toe nails had been painted with a cherry-coloured cosmetic. She looked most alluring, but a little out of date. Not old . . . she was only twenty-eight . . . but old-fashioned. Like a Gibson girl in her prime. The bust, the small waist, the swelling thighs, the hair . . . it was to observe ladies with such attributes that one's father used to stand up on chairs in Hyde Park, thirty years ago. One's father no longer stands up on chairs in Hyde Park, partly because he has reached years of discretion, but principally, one suspects, because the attributes of the ladies in question have suffered, like a number of other things, a singular shrinkage.

Thelma could have shrunk, too, if she had so desired. She could have lunched on lettuces and dropped tablets of saccharine in her coffee; she could have dined on a cutlet and a slice of pineapple, and attained that look of spirituality which is the natural accompaniment of a ceaselessly rumbling stomach. But she was shrewd enough to realize that one's father is a permanent type.

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One's father is Everyman. And whatever gentlemen may prefer, Everyman prefers curves.

She was about to throw the press-cuttings away when she noticed that one had escaped her attention. A glance at it was enough to annoy her very much indeed. She sat up, shook her hair, and cried:

'Sitters!'

The Honourable Gerald Sittingbourne emerged from her bedroom. He was a fair-haired young man with a weak, amiable face. He had endeavoured to impart some character to his face by wearing horn-rimmed glasses. (He lived in terror that one day it would be discovered that they contained clear lenses, and were only worn for effect.) But their effect was other than he had hoped. They merely made him look like a bewildered American.

'Yes, darling?'

He regarded Thelma with a mixture of anxiety and adoration. In view of his emergence from her bedroom, it must be explained that there was nothing, as one says, 'between them'. Which means that there was a great deal between them, in the shape of doors that had been firmly locked by Thelma in a large number of hotel suites. Nor was there any desire, on the part of Thelma, for a closer relationship. She was more than content with Sitters as he was. He did all the work of a secretary, without being paid for it, she could bully him to her heart's content, and the fact that his father was a peer gave her, she felt, a certain *cachet*.

As for Sitters himself... though he was not satisfied, he dimly hoped. Even these hopes caused him to blush and tremble and look guiltily over his shoulder, as

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though he had snatched the veil from the face of a forbidden goddess. But it was not hope that kept him at her side. It was glamour. To live in contact with Thelma was like living in contact with a powerful dynamo. Sometimes it might give you painful shocks, but it never failed to charge you with its own vitality.

'Sitters, darling . . . lookP

He took the cutting and studied it. It was a photograph from *The Tatler*, showing Thelma and Sitters in the vestibule of His Majesty's Theatre at a recent first night. It was very good of Thelma, he thought, and for once in a way, *it* was very good of him too. Usually he appeared as a small grey smudge, largely obscured by mink. On many occasions they cut him out altogether.

'Oh I say,' he said, in an agreeably boyish voice, 'it is good. And they've got me in too.'

'Yes, darling, they've certainly got you in. So much so that they've nearly got me *out*'

'Oh Thelma, I don't really think . . .

'No dear, you don't really think, and that's the trouble. Look at it again.'

He looked.

'Well, dear?'

'I don't see anything wrong.'

'Don't you, darling?' Her voice was very sweet. 'Can you tell me if you can see my orchids?'

'No, I can't see *them*, but. . .'

'And why not, dear?'

'Well,' he said, miserably, 'I suppose I was in **the** way.'

'Yes dear,' She nodded and smiled. 'That's **all** I

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wanted to **say.**' And as though dismissing the subject, she lightly began to hum a tune.

But Sitters was well aware that it was by no means all she wanted to say. In a moment, as though recollecting the subject, she said:

'You see, dear, that dress is *nothing* without the orchids. It was *made* for them. If you take them off, it's just a shroud. And I don't very much like being placarded all over England in a shroud. It's damaging, dear. I don't suppose you could help it, though I did notice that you seemed rather anxious to get in front of me ...'

'I didn't even know they were taking it,' protested Sitters.

'No, dear? Then I expect that's why you've got such an odd expression on your face. You must try to control yourself more in public, dear.'

'But Thelma, I did *not* know.'

A strange deafness assailed her. 'If you feel you *must* have publicity, darling, I'll do my *utmost* to get it for you. I'll push you in front of me. I'll turn my head away. I'll go and lock myself up in the lavatory. It's only ...' she added reflectively, 'I *have* my living to make, and publicity is important, although you know how much I hate it.'

'Oh all right,' he said desperately, 'I'm sorry.'

'Darling!'

She felt much better now. Quite restored. She moved her head, ever so slightly, to indicate that he might kiss her. He did so. And once again the guilty thought flashed through his mind that perhaps . . . some day, she might unbend. In the meantime he was

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at once miserable and exalted, thrilled and depressed. A normal state of mind, for Sitters, and one that seemed to suit him very well.

'Yes,' sighed Thelma, as she patted his flushed face, 'I think we'll go to the party after all.'

She had just remembered that there would be several people there to whom she could say a number of scratchy little things.

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At the same time that this scene was taking place, a young man was leaning out of the window of a flat near the Marble Arch, looking at his first London fog, and finding it very beautiful.

It was a bitter night in early November. When Robin Frost had arrived in London from Australia, ten months ago, the season of fogs had departed, much to his regret. He had always longed for a London fog. The Australian sunlight, which strikes so harshly from the Southern skies, was only tolerable towards the hour of evening, when the shadows under the gum trees were a deep translucent blue. He longed for mists, for colour whose beauty was half hidden, instead of blazoned as from a hoarding. Nature, in Australia, always seemed to be advertising herself. In England, she was of a more reticent disposition.

How lovely was this fog! The buses, crawling cautiously along, looked like dragons from some ancient pantomime. The white-gloved policemen, the dim pedestrians, were part of a mysterious harle-

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quinade. Even the street lamps were beautiful, haloes of saffron against a series of drifting veils.

He turned away reluctantly and shut the window. He glanced at the clock over the mantelpiece. Ten past eleven. Could he go now? Or would it still be too early? One never knew, with these London parties. In Melbourne, the idea of setting out to a party shortly before midnight would have seemed preposterous. One dined at seven, if one dined at all. At eleven, one was in bed. If one was not in bed at eleven, it was a sure proof that it was New Year's Eve. Yes, life was as simple as that in Australia, for the vast majority of the population.

In view of the fog, which would certainly delay the guests, he decided to wait another ten minutes. After all, the party was only just round the corner.

He went over to the desk and began to tidy up a few papers. He took up his memorandum book, and frowned.

Friday, November 10th. Mail 'An Old-Fashioned Welcome' to Sydney Times.

He groaned as he saw this entry. To-day was Saturday, and 'An Old-Fashioned Welcome' was not mailed. Nor was it written. Nor, to tell the truth, had he yet experienced it. How could he write, with any conviction, of blazing hearths, and open doors, and country squires standing with outstretched arms to receive their Colonial kin, when his only taste of English hospitality was to have been snubbed by a Canadian schoolmistress at the English-Speaking Union? English people were all right, he supposed, but they were really rather frightening. And he had not yet learned to see the

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joke of being told that all Australians were descended from convicts. Perhaps, when he had lived here long enough, and when the fog had really got into his system, he might think it funny. But he rather doubted that.

Saturday', November nth. Swim T.M.C.A. Go Perkin Warbeck Publishing Company 10.30. Lotus Music Publishing Company 12. Humbert's party in evening. D.J.

Well, that was better. The swim had been grand. The Y.M.C.A. was the best investment he had made in the old country. Perhaps he might try to fake his 'Old-Fashioned Welcome' article from his experiences there, and stick the country squires (with outstretched arms), in the entrance hall of the building in Tottenham Court Road? Again, perhaps not.

The Perkin Warbeck expedition had not been so good. Of course, the idea of being offered a £200 advance for a first book, which he had not even written, was fantastic. But it became less fantastic in view of the dirty nature of the work they wanted him to do. To write a slashing attack on England from the point of view of an unwanted Colonial. To produce thinly concealed libels on all the people who had 'misled' the letters of introduction he had sent them. After all, it probably wasn't these people's fault. Why should they bother about an almost unknown Australian, particularly when he was painfully shy?

He was afraid he had been very rude to the Perkin Warbeck Publishing Company. In fact, if it had not been November 11th, there would probably have been a fight. For just as he had begun to shift in his chair

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and clench his fists, the maroolls had sounded, and Mr. Warbeck, with evident relief, had scrambled to his feet, held up his finger and lisped: Tleathe! The two minutes' thilenth!

After which, any resumption of hostilities would have been in the worst of taste.

The Lotus Music Publishing Company had made up for all this. True, £10 for a couple of songs, complete with lyrics, was outrageous. But he didn't care. At last he would be able to see his own music in print. Not scribbled all over odd bits of paper, but actually in print. With every semi-quaver beautifully formed, and all the phrasing done in copper plate. *Silver Rain*. Words and Music by Robin Frost. *Magic Pavements*. Words and Music by Robin Frost.

'The first time I hear anybody playing them in public,' said Robin to himself, 'I shall get drunk.'

He went over to the piano. It was an old Bluthner, pre-war, and still very sweet. A piano that flattered you. With a soft singing treble and a rich mellow bass. It was just the sort of piano on which to improvise a prelude in commemoration of an evening like this. A prelude in the manner of Debussy's *CathSdrale Engloutie*. But instead of that strange liquid quality which Debussy obtained by the genius of his harmonies one would have to veil every phrase; one would have to write something like this . . .

He played a few bars. And then, reluctantly, lifted his hands from the piano. It would have been fun to develop that phrase. But what was the use? Nobody would publish it. They only wanted cheap stuff.

Good Lord ... it was twenty past eleven. He must

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fly. He got up, hurried to the long glass, and tugged his tie straight. If there had been any vanity in his character he might well have paused and observed himself with considerable satisfaction. Twenty-four, six foot, broad shoulders, straight nose, firm chin. The only features which differentiated him from a typical 'hearty ' were his eyes, which were wide and restless, and his hair, which no amount of fixing cream could prevent from curling madly.

An awful thought assailed him. He dashed to the memorandum book. No.. It was all right. There were the letters D.J., as clear as possible. D.J. implied dinner-jacket, and dinner-jacket implied black tie.

He pulled on his coat, switched out the light, and ran down the stairs so boisterously that Mrs. Thomas, in the flat below, paused in the act of smearing her face with Pond's, and muttered, 'These Colonials 1 Why *can't* they stay at home?'

111

Humbert Finch, with the assistance of Lou Lancaster, was preparing for the party. That is to say he had just swallowed half a Benzedrine tablet, and was squirting Omy all over the room.

'Darling,' said Lou, 'there's enough fog in here already, without that.'

'On the contrary,' said Humbert, 'it clears it up.'

She watched him enviously.

'Let me have a squirt, dear.'

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'No. You'll take it too near the fire and then it'll explode.'

Lou wrinkled her nose and registered disgust. However, her face was too amiable to keep this expression for long. Indeed, her whole being radiated amiability, which is saying a lot, for she was a whale of a woman. She secretly longed to be hurled about by strong, silent men, but as she looked like a policeman in disguise, she only attracted very timid ballet dancers. Which, not unnaturally, maddened her.

'Who's coming to-night, dear?'

Humbert went on squirting. Then he stood still and sniffed appreciatively. 'Heaven!' he said.

'Hell!' retorted Lou. 'Who's coming?'

'Don't fuss me, dear. Look round the room and tell me what's wrong.'

Lou looked round. She saw nothing wrong.

The studio was delightful. It was wide and lofty, with whitewashed walls. The principal feature of the room was a new Steinway piano, on which Humbert had paid the second instalment. There were two long sofas (third instalment), and a number of arm-chairs covered in sackcloth, which looked as if they had been designed for giants.. The colour was mainly obtained from the cushions, which were in all shades of red and near-red... scarlet, crimson, rose, geranium, pink, magenta, puce, pillar-box. The walls were bare except for two designs by Dentin and a reproduction of a *nature morte* by Braque. However, since Humbert was giving a party, Oliver Messel had lent him an ivory-coloured mask, crowned with golden flowers. It hung over the fireplace.

'I don't see anything wrong,' she said.

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'No **eye.**' he said. 'No eye, at all. Oliver's mask is **crooked.**'

He adjusted it.

'Is Oliver coming?'

'Of course.'

'Who else? I shall scream if you don't tell me who else.'

He told her. It was a very distinguished list. It contained a number of the best-known actors and actresses in London, a sprinkling of the intelligentzia, and several not entirely bogus peeresses. It was a tribute to Humbert's personality, for he had little else to offer. He could not be called good-looking, though his swarthy face had an impish intelligence. He was comparatively obscure ... in spite of the fact that he had produced several intimate revues so swiftly and wittily that he had run away with the notices. He had no money at all. By which we do not mean that he had £500 a year in gilt-edged securities, free of tax, which is what most young men mean when they say that they have no money. Humbert had nothing . . . rather less than nothing, indeed, for he was absurdly generous.

'And by the way,' he added, when he had finished telling her the more important people, 'there's a new young man. Robin Frost. Australian.'

'Darling! *Not* a life-saver?'

'Not a what?'

'Not one of those *gods* that rush in and rescue *one* from sharks?'

'If he rescues people from sharks he can begin with me. My landlord's a fiend. But I don't know if he does. He swims at the Y.M.C.A., though.'

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'Then he *must* be one.' She sprang to her feet, and opened her bag. 'Damn. My lipstick's all googed up. Give me one of those sausages.'

'You can't ungooge it with a sausage.'

'I know. I only want the stick. Thank you, darling.' She coaxed out a small piece of lipstick, and said, between half-closed lips, 'If Thelma gets him, I shall kill her. I've got dozens of photographs of them. They're the *end*'

'Life-savers?'

'Yes. I put them in an album. If there's anything wrong with their figures, I snip little bits off.'

'I should have thought you'd have stuck little bits on.'

'There's never any need, dear. Mercy . . . who's that?'

It was |tobin. He *would* be the first to arrive.

i v

Time marches on, so swiftly that we cannot pause to record Robin's first impressions. For when the party was well under way, several things happened, of considerable importance to this chronicle. The first was at a quarter-past twelve, when Thelma arrived. The second was at one o'clock, when Robin played. The third was at half-past one, when Robin sneezed. And the fourth was somewhere between three and four.

By midnight, the studio was packed, and as full of noise as a concertina. Because of the noise, and the

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heat, and the thrill of seeing so many great people all at once . . . and also because Humbert's champagne cup was really made with champagne, and not with sparkling Asti, Robin had shed his repressions for the first time since he came to England, and was revealing himself as the charming, amiable young man that he was. At first there Had been moments of embarrassment. When Lou had insisted on feeling his muscles, he needed quite a big gulp of champagne cup to brace himself up, and rise to the occasion. And when a young woman with mauve eyelids and a concave chest had stood in the door, pointed at him, and shrieked 'Bags IP he had felt like diving under the sofa. But now he was at home. Indeed, he already had enough material for the article on 'An Old-Fashioned Welcome '. Though, perhaps, the word 'old-fashioned', for this occasion, was *not* entirely apposite.

One curious thing had happened. Just before the others arrived, Humbert, who knew that Robin played, and wondered if he would be good enough to make noises when the other pianists were tired, asked him to give them a tune. Robin had sat down, and played a song called *A Touch of the Sun*. When he began, Humbert and Lou were still talking. Then they suddenly stopped.

He finished the song.

Humbert said, 'Did you write that?'

Robin nodded.

'My God.' began Lou, 'it's ...'

'Shut up, Lou.' Humbert turned to Robin. He sounded as if he were talking about something tremen-

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dously important. 'Will you sing that again, just like that, when Thelma's here?'

'Well ... if you think she wouldn't be bored,' said Robin.

'She won't be bored,' said Humbert, Then he turned to Lou and snapped, 'If you say anything more for the present, I shall sock you one on the jaw.'

On which remark the door opened, people began to stream in, and every other word, for the next five hours, was 'darling'.

V

A quarter-past twelve. Episode Number One. Thelma's entrance.

The perfect timing of Thelma's entrance was not due to luck. No woman ever makes a perfect entrance, or a perfect exit, by luck. It is all a matter of taking pains and exercising patience.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she heard through the open door the voice of Lou, whom she detested. 'Lou was doing her celebrated imitations. Thelma paused, stiffened, and put her finger to her lips. She turned to Sitters.

'I *knew* she'd be here,' she said. 'Really!' She shuddered and drew her furs more closely round her. 'I don't understand Humbert.'

'She's doing Mae West,' observed Sitters, somewhat obviously.

Thelma shook her head. 'No, dear.' She listened carefully. Lou's voice echoed down to them. 'Come

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up 'n see me sometime,' said the voice. Thelma frowned. 'No, dear,' she repeated. 'Not Mae West. It must be somebody we don't know.'

However, there was not much fun in wasting these barbs on Sitters, who was probably immune from them by now. And Thelma would have certainly continued her ascent of the stairs, and burst into the room at the most critical moment of the next imitation, had not the voice suddenly announced:

'Miss Thelma Ganges!'

She turned to Sitters. 'I knew it,' she hissed. Then she listened.

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but this was more than imitation. It was reincarnation. And it was reincarnation on a lower plane, where every little trick is underlined, where every talent is twisted, and every virtue turned into a vice.

'I'm a little gipsy!' came the voice. 'Just a great big little gipsy!'

Thelma's eyes flashed. Sitters, automatically, retreated two steps downwards. Somebody, he was quite sure, would have to pay for this.

And somebody did. For when the imitation, which was as brief as it was cruel, was over, and when the applause was at its height, Thelma advanced, and swept in. Quickly, a little breathlessly, as though she had run up the stairs in a few seconds, instead of crouching on them for ten minutes. And somehow, by the force of her personality, she made the applause her own ... she gathered it to her, smiling delightedly round the room, seeing everybody but Lou. Then, with a start, she saw Lou, and her cup of joy, you

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would have said, was full. She danced **over to her** with **extended** arms. And in a voice that **was very** soft, but so clear that you could have heard it in **the street** outside, she said 'Darling! Your imitation. Divine! Who was it?'

Outrageous, you will agree. Too obvious to be true. Everybody knew that she had recognized Lou's imitation. And she knew that everybody knew that she knew. But the sting of the question lay in the fact that there was no reply to it. Lou, baffled, muttered 'Gandhi', which was as good as most of us could have managed on the spur of the moment. But Thelma, by saying, 'Who, dear?' made her regret that she had spoken at all.

Thelma had certainly scored. And she continued to score, from that moment, by the simple method of causing so much trouble that nobody could concentrate on anything else. She sat on the sofa and asked for champagne cup. When it arrived, she had altered her mind, and would like a little iced water. She *must* have a Camel. But when she saw that there was only one Camel left in Humbert's case, she made so many protestations that Humbert would willingly have thrust it down her throat. She didn't really *mind*, but wasn't it a little hot? And when the windows were opened for her, she was the first to blink, and choke, and proclaim that the fog was killing her.

'How I bear the winter in England, I really don't know.' she moaned to a little group of adorers.

'It must be agony, darling,' murmured Lou, 'after so many years in sun-drenched Peckham.'

But we have no time to chronicle the amiabilities

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of these two ladies. Time is still marching on. It is one o'clock. And Robin is beginning to play.

VI

Now and then, at parties, people choose to be silent when somebody is doing a turn. Nobody knows why. Some are in the middle of stories which they want to finish. They do not finish them. Some are on the sharp edges of sofas from which they long to detach themselves. They do not detach themselves. They suffer in silence.

So on this occasion they listened to Robin. He was a lucky young man. For though, from a pictorial point of view, they were only a conglomeration of white shoulders, sparkling paillettes, crumpled dinner-jackets, silk-stockinged legs, patent-leather shoes, permanent waves, scarlet finger-nails, and sock suspenders, all veiled in a lavender haze of cigarette smoke, there were a number of important people in this m6l£e. And it is not often that young men, whom nobody knows, have an opportunity of doing their stuff before such an audience. It is even less often that the young men get away with it. But Robin did get away with it.

The effect on the audience was out of all proportion to the song's merits. As he sang the la^t words, in a voice that he could not stop from trembling, they swarmed round him. '*Darling* ... it's the top!' 'Again please, over and over again!' 'My dear, he's a genius!'

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There were several explanations of this enthusiasm.

The first, of course, was alcohol. At any party, in the small hours of the morning, when the guests have been primed, one will be hailed as a genius if one plays chop-sticks with sufficient ferocity.

The second, undoubtedly, lay in the personality of Robin himself. Everybody had heard Noel. Everybody had heard Elsa. Everybody had heard Cole. And unless one retired, for ever, to Barbados, one would presumably go on hearing them for the rest of one's life. But nobody had heard Robin. He was not in the least like Noel, or Elsa, or Cole (which is not intended as a reflection on these immortals). He was something New.

The third reason for their approval must be sought in the song itself. For though it had a swing rhythm which would have delighted the jitterbugs, it was an old-fashioned song. It went back, way back into the twenties ... to *Dance, Dance, Dance Little Lady* ... to that remote period when a young man sat in the Embassy Club in Bond Street, and was shocked by what he saw there. Robin had been shocked by what he had seen, five months before, on the Riviera. He had gone there on the sum of fifteen pounds, and had stayed for two weeks in a noisy little hotel in a back street of Cannes. The two weeks had been more than enough. For, he had seen, in that brief period, the madness which the sunlight can engender ... the blisters which it can burn into the brain. He had seen young women going native in smart cocktail bars, and young men so drugged by sea and sun that they needed other drugs to pull them through. Beneath a

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facade of radiant health he had detected a mortal sickness . . . and he had translated the first shock of his horror into his song, and the music which accompanied it.

That was really the principal cause of the excitement. Sincerity is the one thing which hrgftfoftjjhrniigh all the rules.'and soars far above the trammels of faulty technique.

But time is still marching on, and we are nearing the point where Robin sneezed.

v II

After *A Touch of the Sun* Robin could do no wrong. The more he played, the more they demanded. And Thelma was not quite sure that she liked it.

She was accustomed to being the star. Even when other people were doing their turns, one always felt that they were performing *for* her, and sometimes that they were performing *through* her, as though she were a sort of mysterious sound-box. But Robin was not even looking at her.

Actually, Robin would have liked very much to look at her, but he was too humble to imagine that she could be interested in what he was doing. However, Thelma did not know this. She decided that she must take action.

But what sort of action? A glance at Lou decided her.

Lou had obviously fallen for Robin. Indeed, she looked as if she might well have fallen *on* him, had she

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not been so tightly packed in the crowd. As it was, all she could do was to register adoration, and to push her elbows out as sharply as possible in the hope that some of the others would go away.

'Look at her!' said Thelma to Sitters. 'It's indecent. That poor boy ... somebody really ought to go to the rescue.'

'He seems to be able to look after himself.' muttered Sitters, in a rather sulky voice.

That settled Thelma, If at one blow she could make Sitters jealous, triumph over Lou, and annex the biggest prize of the party, the blow must be delivered. And at once.

She did not waste a moment. Just as Robin was finishing a song, she drifted over to the group at the piano and stood behind him.

At exactly the right moment she dropped her glass of iced water. It splintered at Lou's feet, and spattered a few spiteful drops over that lady's stockings, causing her to scream and bend down to brush them off.

Then she touched Robin on the shoulder.

'Robin, dear, I've got to go now,' she said.

He looked up with astonishment.

'Yes, dear,' she said, 'I really can't stay.'

He rose to his feet. He was quite at a loss. Here was the celebrated Thelma Ganges calling him 'dear', and telling him that she was going away, before they had even been introduced. This was 'an old-fashioned welcome' with a vengeance. What did one do?

'I ... I'm so sorry,' he stammered. '

'Yes, dear,' she sighed. 'So am I.' She turned, as if to go, and then paused. 'Oh, by the way,' she said,

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'if you're going to let me have that ... (mumble mumble) •. • you might let me have it now.'

'I beg your pardon?'

But Thelma had already seen Lou's eye upon her. She was pushing round the piano towards the keyboard. It would be too dangerous to risk repeating the sentence she had just delivered so artistically, for Lou was not as simple as Robin, and might be rude enough to ask what the mumble mumble was. So Thelma, with a vague smile and a little beckoning movement of the head, walked away. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Robin had risen from the piano and was following her. In a moment she had him safely ensconced by a screen near the window.

'My dear,' she said, 'I'm terribly sorry to have done that. But I thought you needed a rest.'

Her voice was so friendly, her smile so frank, that he was quite disarmed.

'Oh I say,' he said, 'that was jolly decent of you.' He laughed. 'If it isn't another way of saying you were sick of me.'

'You know it wasn't.' Her smile, for a moment, faded. She had seen Lou approaching ... a baffled, angry woman. She leant forward and spoke hurriedly. 'By the way,' she said, 'I think Lou is coming to drag you back. Perhaps it would be better if we said we had something very important to discuss. Yes?'

'Why ... of course.' What else *could* he say?

Lou was upon them. She was very angry indeed.

'Well ...' she said loudly, '. . . I've seen rape in my time . . .'

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'I'm sure you have, dear,' cooed Thelma. 'Often!' And she nodded sweetly at Robin.

'But I've never seen anything like this,' she snorted.

'We had something rather important ...' began Robin, faintly.

'Important my foot,' proclaimed Lou. She continued to glare at Thelma.

' 'Is there anything you wanted, dear?' inquired Thelma after a moment's silence.

Lou swayed slightly.

'A glass of water, dear?'

Lou gave it up. If only she had not had that last brandy, she could have coped with Thelma. But now, all she wanted to do was to go and howl in a dark room, all by herself. She could not even think of a parting shot. So with a harsh and unconvincing laugh, she turned on her heel, and left them.

Robin looked worried. 'I do hope she wasn't ... I mean ... do you think she thought I was rude?'

'You? Oh my dear! What nonsense! She's one of my oldest friends. It's just that the poor dear should *not* have so much to drink.' She shook her head sadly. 'Such a pity ... such a very *capable* artist ... however ...' she shrugged her shoulders. 'But don't let us talk about her. Let's talk about you. Why has nobody told me about you?'

Robin could not blush any deeper. So his face, throughout this conversation, retained a perpetual glow.

'I don't think there's very much to tell,' he murmured.

'There's *everything* to tell,' proclaimed Thelma.

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Which, in view of the fact that she knew nothing at all, was certainly true.

She leant back, and regarded him obliquely. He was really very attractive. She fished in her bag for her handkerchief, which was saturated with Chanel's Gardenia. Absent-mindedly, she thrust it towards Robin's nose. It had an effect precisely opposite to that which she had anticipated. He sneezed.

Now this sneeze was, as we have indicated, one of the most important things which will occur in this book. If Robin had not sneezed, it is possible that Thelma, who was doing a purely mechanical seduction act, would have been so caught up in her role, so anxious to complete the gestures which she had begun, that she would have carried him off with her, there and then. In which case there would have been nothing to record but an act of nature, a quarrel or two, and a bitter end.

From Robin's point of view the sneeze was equally providential. Thelma was looking far too attractive. He was young. He was human ... in spite of his bathes at the Y.M.C.A. He might well have followed where she led, have decided that this was one of the necessary experiences of life. (Chanel's Gardenia, you may recollect, is a very alluring perfume.)

The sneeze stopped all this. It chilled Thelma. It appalled Robin. For a moment or two they did not speak. They mentally re-adjusted themselves. Then Thelma said:

⁴ You must let me have a copy of that song *A Touch of the Sun*'

'I'm afraid it isn't published.'

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'That doesn 't matter. Send me the manuscript'

'Would you really like it?'

Oh dear, she thought, he's getting eager again.

'Of course.'

A fearful thought struck her.

'Have you • •. I mean ... you haven't promised to give it to anybody else?'

He flushed. 'I did promise to send a copy to Miss Lancaster.'

'OhP She stared at him. 'I don't think that was very wise.'

'She said she'd sing it in cabaret.'

'Oh!'

'I didn't think she was really right for it . . . but still...'

'Still what?'

'It's better than nothing. She wants them all.'

And this time Thelma said 'Oh!' very sharply indeed. Lou was a shrewd woman. She might be quite shameless in her affaires, but she never allowed sentiment to interfere with business.

'How much is she paying you?'

'We hadn't discussed that. But she wanted me to see her agent to-morrow.'

'Oh my dear ... really ... I do think I'd be careful. I really do. You *cant* go selling those divine numbers in little scraps and having them murdered in cabarets. Why ... you've got the material for half a revue in the things you played to-night.'

'Perhaps I have. But who's going to put it on?'

'If you had a star ...' she murmured. And then without thinking of anything except the necessity of

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cooking Lou's goose, she said, 'Why don't you write the revue for *me*?'⁹

She spoke without reflection. Her sentence meant no more than a hundred conventional sentences. It was in a class with 'Do ring me up sometime', or 'We *never* see each other, do let's get together'. The person to whom such remarks are addressed would be simple indeed if he were to take them at their face value.

It was therefore with a certain shock that Thelma observed the effect which her casual question had upon Robin. He sat up, with a start. He looked quite wild. And without any warning at all, his hand shot out and gripped her knee.

'I'd give anything in the world.' His voice was breathless.

'My dear!' breathed Thelma, uncomfortably.

What an extraordinary young man, grabbing one's knee like that! It was torture. But since Lou was probably watching, she bore it.

'Do you really mean it? That I could? And that you'd be willing?' He gripped even harder.

'Oh my dear!' Thelma, wincing, extracted herself from his clutch. 'Of course I mean it,' she said.

And suddenly, as though she realized for the first time what she was saying, she too sat up sharply. Was it possible that perhaps she *did* mean it? There was nothing in the least coquettish about her now. Her face was keen, alert, intelligent.

'Don't say anything,' she said. 'I want to think.'

She shut her eyes, and stayed quite still. A great many thoughts flashed through her brain. The first was that she was terribly tired. If she did another film

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without a long interval, she'd die. She *must* have a change. The second was that it was vital that she should return to the theatre in some form or other, fairly soon. She wasn't growing any younger. Twenty-eight, even if one looks twenty-three, is a substantial age for a film-star. Whereas on the stage she could be at the top, even in musical comedy, for another fifteen years.

And thirdly, that song . . . *A Touch of the Sun*. She could do something big with that. And with a good many other things he had played.

'Have you decided yet?'

She opened her eyes. The eagerness in his face was appealing. She smiled. She nodded.

'And the verdict?'

One last thought occurred to her, as she looked at him. He'd be terribly easy to manage. He'd slave all day and night. He'd be cheap, too. And if she got hold of Humbert, to work with him and produce, it would be a risk worth taking. 'Besides,' she reflected, 'it isn't as if I'm putting him under contract. I'm only making a suggestion. If he doesn't deliver the goods, that's his funeral.'

So she said, 'Yes.'

VIII

In five minutes the news was all round the room. In five and a half minutes, Lou had gone home in disgust. But everybody was so excited that her departure was not noticed.

'Darlings, he's going to write me a revue! Isn't it heaven?'

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They all screamed. Too much heaven P **darling**
ThelmaP 'Darling Robin!' *'WhatiunV*

And as always happens on these occasions, the situation was ruined by a plain girl whom nobody knew . . . (actually, she was a stage-struck cousin of Humbert's, and had paid for the champagne). In a flat, adenoidy voice that seemed to pierce through all the little shrieks and ejaculations (like a cod, swimming soberly through a crowd of agitated angel-fish) she said:

'When will it be put on?'

What a remark! Really, the adenoidy girl was intolerable. She should have them out.

Everybody spoke at once, even more feverishly than before. It was too *delicious*, to think of Thelma in revue again. She had left the stage far too long. ('Far too long,' echoed one or two minor actresses, in sinister tones, as though referring to an event in ancient history.) And obviously, Robin's music was exactly what she had been waiting for. Would Humbert produce? Oh . . . Humbert *must* produce. And who would do the decor? My dear, who *could* one have but Berard?

And then the adenoidy girl did it again. In even flatter tones, she demanded:

'When will it be put on?'

The maddening thing about it was that she didn't even want to know. She was just making conversation. Codfish conversation.

It was too much for Humbert. 'Darling,' he said, hurrying up to her, 'Aunty's waiting downstairs in **the fog, and** she's going *mad*' **He hurried her out, threw**

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a shawl over her shoulders, and almost pushed her downstairs. By the time he got back, they were talking of something else. But for the next half-hour, Humbert and Thelma and Robin were not seen by the revellers. They were sitting on Humbert's bed, and Humbert was doing all the talking. He was a great one for clinching things.

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Time marches on. But no ... it limps, on weary feet. For now the clock showed seven twenty-five.

The last guest had gone. The last taxi had rolled away. Humbert dragged himself wearily up the stairs.

'Well, ' he said to Robin, as he shut the door. 'That's that. It was good of you to wait. But I felt we ought to have a last word. Are you dead?'

'Of course not.' And indeed, Robin looked, and felt, as fresh as a daisy.

'It's slightly revolting to be so healthy.' sighed Humbert, He glanced round the room. 'Hell! Why do I give parties? The place is a sKambles.'

'Shall I clear it up a bit?'

Humbert winced. 'Plejtete don't make such hideous suggestions.' He walked to the window. With a single gesture he drew the curtains. The cheerless light of dawn shone on the walls.

'I like letting dawn into a room,' said Humbert, as though he were speaking to himself. 'It's the only time I can get the satisfaction of being a sadist without actually being cruel. This light's cruel to things, not to people. Look what it does to those piles of cigarette

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ends. How ghastly they are ... squashed, disembowelled, with the stains of lipstick all over them. And Oliver's mask ... it was so gay and lovely with the firelight flickering on it, and now it's dead and evil and all its flowers have turned to tinsel.' He went over to the fireplace, took down the mask, and covered it with a piece of newspaper. 'And that sideboard,' he went on, 'with all the drinks still left in the glasses. Flat champagne. Stale beer. Cup, with the ice all melted, and the fruit turned to a sodden mess. What could be more terrible than a drink that has not been drunk? God ... I think that if ever I commit suicide, it will be at this hour, when the party's over, when it's no use pretending any more.'

He sighed, and threw away his⁷ cigarette, 'Come over here, and look at the capital of our mighty Empire.'

Robin went to the window. Humbert put his arm over his shoulder, 'What do you think of that. .. eh?'

Robin pressed his face against the glass. As far as his eye could see there were roofs. Grey, brown, leaden, black with here and there a square of watery silver, where the faint sunlight fell on a sheet of tin. Sprouting from these roofs, like some monstrous form of vegetation, at a multitude of levels and an infinity of angles, were the chimneys . .. some tall, some squat, some straight, some crooked . . . chimneys that were cowed, chimneys that were not, chimneys from whose ebony mouths the smoke drifted disconsolately, chimneys that gaped, lifeless, to the sullen sky. It was like some picture of a devastated area, and its inhumanity seemed to be enhanced by the gaunt branches

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of the great plane tree which sprang from the courtyard below.

'Anything would look beautiful to me, just now,' said Robin. 'But that's beautiful as it is.'

'All that grey, and all that death?'

'All that colour, and all that life.'

'It looks as if we'd make a good pair.'

'For the revue?'

'Don't use that word at this time of the morning.'

'I feel I could start now.'

Humbert smiled ... a smile that was merely a contraction of the muscles, a mirthless twitch. 'Look here,' he said, 'I will speak now, and then for ever hold my peace.'

'As long as you don't say we can't do it.'

'We can do it, all right. I think we *shall* do it. I believe in you. I also believe in myself. The money may be difficult to get, but I've got it before and I can get it again. Besides, if we come up to scratch, Thelma will see to that side of it. There are fifty thousand difficulties in the way, but we can get over them.'

'So what?'

'It's just this. I want you to understand what you are letting yourself in for. I may sound like a Victorian uncle warning his niece against hurling herself too impetuously into the family charades, but .. '

'You do. You'll soon be telling me that I'm clean-limbed,' said Robin (who was picking up the dialect quite quickly).

'Considering all those bathes at the Y.M.C.A., you ought to be,' replied Humbert. 'But joking apart, man to man and all that ...' he paused, and turned

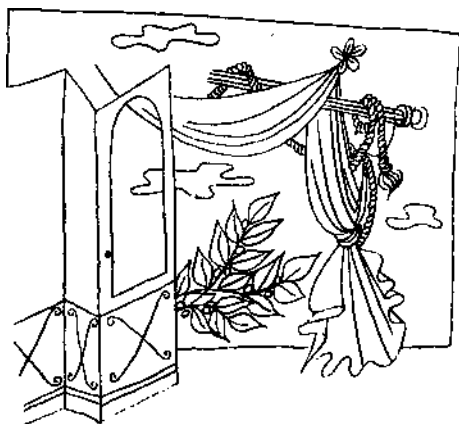
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away. He suddenly felt self-conscious. In spite of that, he went on :

'I want you to know what you are letting yourself in for. None of your dreams will come true. None of your music will sound as it sounds in your head. The things that make you laugh will be received in silence, the things that make you cry will get the bird.'

He paused and took a deep breath. 'In fact,' he said, 'when Kipling wrote *If*, he was addressing his remarks exclusively to the misguided authors of revues. So what do you say about it?'

Robin smiled. 'I don't think we need bother about if ' he said. 'Or ifs.'



CHAPTER II

FOLLOW A STAR

i

THELMA GANGES leaned forward, and struck her breast dramatically.

'All these little people in here,' she husked, 'waiting to be born!'

Robin looked uncomfortable. He could not think of the correct *riposte*. So he said, rather weakly, 'Yes'.

'AH these little people in here!' repeated Miss Ganges, striking herself quite hard.

A waiter, who had been trying to dodge her gestures for nearly two minutes, took the opportunity of slipping a grape-fruit under her elbow, on to the plate in front of her. She stared at it with unseeing eyes.

'That's what I want him to do for me.' she said, referring to Robin, but talking to the grape-fruit. 'To give these little people life!' (More breast-striking.) 'To bring them out into the light and air ... to make them sing and dance and cry. Oh God!'

And she bent over the grape-fruit with an air of extreme depression.

'It was three months later. February nth, to be precise. The date when our story really begins. Thelma, Robin, Humbert, and Mr. Harris, the well-known theatrical agent, were lunching at the Savoy Grill.

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The revue was written. That is to say, there **was** a sufficient mass of material, in the form of songs **and** sketches, to give a manager a fairly comprehensive idea of what he was buying. Robin was still clamouring to be allowed to write a ballet, and Humbert was still demanding more low comedy. But these things could wait until the cast had been settled.

The only person who had been definitely engaged was Lou Lancaster.

'I know Thelma detests her,' said Humbert, 'but she'll be a perfect foil. Besides, she's gone so dopey about you that if you wrote something which obliged her to stand on her head throughout the entire performance, she'd do it.'

The engagement of Lou was a mystery to Robin, who did not see how people could sign contracts to appear in a revlie which was incomplete, and for which no financial backing had been found.

'Mr. Harris managed it,' said Humberf tersely. Mr. Harris was a genius at his job. With his uncanny capacity for doing mental arithmetic at the same time that he was paying the most graceful compliments, he could be trusted to 'manage' anything.

The main thing was that Thelma seemed to be satisfied. It would have been rather strange if she had not been, for they had already provided her with so much material that even if half of it were cut, she would still have too much to do.

And that was why her reference to those 'little people' was so disturbing. It seemed to suggest that she wanted more, and more, and still more.

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I I

And she did.

It was only by a constant exercise of self-control throughout this luncheon-party, that Robin prevented himself from saying to her, 'But I thought it was all settled? I thought you'd agreed to everything? And now you're talking as if we'd got to begin all over again! What does it mean?'

What did it mean? Why, here she was, at this moment, playing havoc with *A Touch of the Sun*, which she had pronounced to be perfect.

'It wakes something in me!' she cried.

Again she beat her breast, to the imminent danger of a bottle of Evian water which the waiter had just placed before her. 'Something *here*!

Robin bowed.

'But I see much more in it than you've seen,' she said. 'I see a whole woman's life. Something very rich and Southern.' She leaned forward, and in a strangled voice proclaimed the word 'Gipsies!'

Humbert's heart sank. Rightly or wrongly, he was not a gipsophile. If gipsies cantered on to the stage . . . which, in most musical entertainments, they did far too frequently . . . he knew that he was in for a bad time. There would be crossings of palms. There would be flapping of shawls and oh . . . such a tinkling of earrings. And a heavy set-piece of a mountain, which the heroine would run down, and then, for no adequate reason, run up again. He also knew that there would be a chorus of men as manly as Max Factor's

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Number Three grease-paint, allied to very hairy side-whiskers, could make them.

And he knew that, in the end, there would be a gipsy wedding, celebrated by the slashing of wrists. Which, even on the stage, struck him as a little nauseating, and more suitable for Guy's Hospital.

It was therefore with astonishment that Robin, to whom he had often explained these sentiments, heard him exclaim:

'Oh my dear, *what* a gipsy you could make!'

Miss Ganges bridled. 'But didn't you see *Mountain Lovers?*' she retorted. 'And *The Scarlet Scarf?* And *Cross My Palm?*'

(She was naming three of her more celebrated gipsophilian achievements.)

'I didn't say *would*, darling. I said *could*. They were stupendous. But it was *you*. It wasn't the material.'

'Ah yes . . . *that's* true enough,' replied the mollified Miss Ganges. 'I suppose I shouldn't say it, but the material simply didn't *exist*. There was no material. I had to create everything. Now if only somebody would *give* me something . . .'

Robin could hardly believe his ears. *Give* her something? Why, they'd given her a whole revue. They'd sat up all night playing it to her. She'd been thrilled by it all. Had she suddenly gone crazy?

Then Robin . . . sweet, innocent Robin . . . understood. For Humbert raised his hand to his eyes, and winked so broadly that his whole face was contorted.

'It's exactly what Robin's longing to do,' he said, 'To give you material.'

'Tell me!' demanded Thelma, putting her hand on

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his wrist. 'Tell me!' And then, to his great relief, she proceeded to tell *him*. Using *A Touch of the Sun* as a jumping-off place, she had soon reached the wilds of Ruritania, and long before the grape-fruit was finished, she was whirling, in imagination, in the footsteps of every gipsy who had ever trodden the stage.

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They had now reached the chicken course.

Robin made a rapid mental summary of their progress to date. As far as he could see, *A Touch of the Sun*, which had been intended as a rather grim little satire on the people of pleasure, was to be scrapped. In its place, it appeared, was to be substituted something which, for lack of a better name, must be described as a 'gipsy number'.

Instead of the Riviera, there would be the mountains of Ruritania. Instead of a monotonous, throbbing blues, there would be a high-spirited girlish waltz. Instead of bathing-costumes and Chanel bracelets, they were to have shawls and earrings.

And instead of an icy little dialogue and a frightening, quiet death, there would be Miss Thelma Ganges, stalking through the stalls in Russian boots, telling the fortunes of old gentlemen with twitching palms.

'Well.' he thought to himself, 'we live and learn.'¹

He certainly did. He continued to do so throughout the lunch. Long before it was over, he had had an invaluable lesson in star psychology. He had learned

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the three cardinal rules of stardom. They are as follows:

1 . Every star wishes, or imagines that she wishes, to play a role exactly opposite to the sort of role in which she has made her success. Every comedienne wishes, or imagines that she wishes, to play Lady Macbeth, and every tragedienne is positive that she is a glamour girl.

The exceptions to this rule are not more than ten per cent.

2. Every star, in spite of the aforesaid wishes, or imagined wishes, has a rooted aversion, when it comes to the point, from doing anything new. If a comedienne has once had a success by singing a song about a sailor, she will be devoured by a passion to go on singing songs about sailors for the rest of her life. Ask her to sing a song about a soldier, for a change, and she will be affronted. Soldiers are not sailors. Soldiers do not pull up their trousers, at least in public. Soldiers do not smell of the sea. Search a soldier and you will fail to find any anchors on his person. Soldiers are out.

All the time she will be protesting that she wants to *create*, to break out of the rut, to show the world the immensity, the universality, of her talent. She will give you the impression that she is only waiting for the opportunity to sing like Grace Moore in the first half and to dance like Danilova in the second. But if you should suggest that she dances to anything more Russian than the hornpipe, she will burst into tears, and tell you that nobody 'understands'.

The exceptions to this rule are not more than five per cent.

3. No star has the faintest comprehension of **the**

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reasons for her own success. If the stalls fill up because she has an absurd little croaky voice and an intriguing wink, she will attribute her drawing capacity to the perfection of her profile. If the gallery is packed because the curves of her figure are so pronounced that they register to the roof, she will be quite positive that they come to see her because she lifts a tea-cup like Marie Tempest. If she attracts the pit because of her *chic*, she will be convinced that she is filling the dress-circle because of her sex-appeal.

To this rule, there are no exceptions whatsoever.

i v

Thelma Ganges was not among the exceptions.

Although, by now, the ices were melting untouched before them, she was still beating her breast (to the distraction of the waiters). She was still proclaiming her desire to create, to bring to life the embryonic creatures who were struggling for expression, to flower into a thousand new and fantastic shapes.

Then, quite suddenly, she turned to Robin, and in a very different tone of voice inquired:

'You remember my Spaniel Number in *High Lights*?'

The transition was so abrupt that Robin, for a moment, was at a loss.

'Spaniel number?'

Miss Ganges was an impatient woman. She liked quick returns ... economically, emotionally and conversationally.

'Spanielnumber,' she snapped. 'Spanielnumber.'

FOLLOW A STAR

Robin pulled himself together, 'Well, I don't. . .' he began.

'*What?*' Miss Ganges' eyes opened wide. Was it conceivable that she was confronted (at luncheon, too) with some eccentric who had not seen her Spaniel Number?

Robin realized that the atmosphere was tense. He swallowed a spoonful of ice, hastily and painfully, and gulped, 'I'm afraid I wasn't in England'.

'Oh!' There was a mixture of pity, incredulity, and contempt in her voice. She looked as though she thought it very strange that any sane young man should go abroad when he could stay at home and hear her sing the Spaniel Number.

'But of course, I heard all about it.'

'Where?' demanded Miss Ganges. She was evidently not yet quite appeased.

'In New York,' he lied. 'Everybody was raving about it.'

She nodded. That was better. That was as it should be. 'They offered me two thousand dollars a week, just to sing that song once a night in the Rainbow Room,' she proclaimed. And suddenly her eyebrows lifted, her eyes opened very wide, her mouth parted even wider, and she lisped:

'I have a spaniel
He's called Daniel.
He loves me
And me loves he ...'

When people sing songs at one, unaccompanied, **there** is nothing to do but to look at one's fingers with

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a sickly smile. If one looks directly at the singer, it is fatal. The smile either fades, to be replaced by a nervous glare, or it stretches into a static grin, which may be misinterpreted. So Robin looked at his fingers. When the song was over, Thelma said:

'Now *that* is the sort of thing. Humbert agrees, don't you?'¹

Poor Humbert did.

'I did it quite simply, in a black dress, sitting on top of the piano. No spaniel. No dog. No nothing. Yet everybody said you could *see* the spaniel, I put so much into it. D'you remember Sir Henry Bloomer?'

He was a vague relation of Humbert's, but as he was usually in a state of chronic alcoholism Humbert did not boast of the fact.

'Sir Henry,' boasted Thelma, 'whom I know *intimately*, wouldn't believe it when I told him there was no spaniel. He *swore* he'd seen him wag his tail!'

Humbert would not have been surprised if Sir Henry had seen snakes emerging from the spaniel's stomach, but he assumed the correct expression of awe.

'That's the sort of thing,' she said. She turned to Robin. 'You see? I only want you to *see*.'⁹

'Yes.'

'I *don't* want to influence you,' she averred. 'You are the creator. *What* you say must be final. Final! I'm an artist ... at least, I try to be an artist ...' (pause for affirmation) ... 'and I should consider it impudent on my part, *impudent*, to attempt to interfere. All task is that you should *see*.'

FOLLOW A STAR

Robin, with complete truth, assured her that he saw.

She gave him a melting smile, put her hand once more on his wrist, and crooned:

'Je swee ah votre disposishiong.'

And having delivered herself of this howline lie, she ordered a double kirsch.

Robin by now was feeling a little weary. The strain caused by endeavouring to be intelligent, subservient and tactful all at once had given him indigestion. His soul called out for bicarbonate of soda. He would have ordered one had he not felt that such a request might be interpreted as a reflection on Miss Ganges' charm. So he suffered in silence, hoping against hope that he would soon be allowed to go.

However, he was soon to realize that flight was out of the question. For Miss Ganges, having consumed her double kirsch and ordered another, suddenly directed the conversation into very alarming channels.

She pulled her hat over her eyes, shook her bracelets, folded her arms, placed her elbows on the table, looked Mr. Harris in the eye, and asked, in the sweetest of tones:

'What's this I hear about Lou Lancaster?'

The eyes of Humbert, Mr. Harris and Robin met simultaneously. Their look was not lost upon Miss Ganges.

'What have you heard, Thelma?'

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'Some idea about her being in the show.'

Well, darling.' began Humbert, nervously, 'we thought she'd be such a marvellous foil....'

Toil?' Her voice was not quite so sweet this time. 'Foil? Is a female elephant a foil dear? Are we producing a circus? Is that the idea?' She turned back to Mr. Harris. 'Well?'

'What's your objection to her, my dear?'

Her eyebrows lifted. 'Objection? I haven't the least objection. Why should I have? I only think she's a mischief-maker. That's all.' She spoke very airily, as though the matter were of little importance.

(Robin, as time went on, was to discover that no leading-lady in revue has ever referred to any other leading-lady in the same profession as anything but a 'mischief-maker'. He was not yet acquainted with this universal custom. So he was somewhat disturbed.)

'I won't let her make mischief,' said Humbert '

Thelma ignored him. 'She brings a nasty atmosphere into the theatre,' she continued. 'She only has to set foot in a theatre and there's trouble. And .' like a company to be happy. I can't work properly in that sort of atmosphere.' She studied her finger-nails.

Nobody spoke.

She glanced at Robin. 'I can't understand, how Mr. Frost can possibly have written any material for her.'

'Well, there are only a few bits and pieces,' began Robin.

'Her mind is like a sink,' she interrupted. 'I simply don't see how anybody who had written *A Touch of the Sun* could write anything indecent.'

FOLLOW A STAR

'But, darling, he hasn't written anything indecent. And anyway, I shall control her.'

Thelma gave Humbert a sweet smile. 'Oh no, dear, you won't. If Miss Lancaster sang *Land of Hope and Glory* she'd put some dirt into it somewhere. She couldn't sing *God Save the King* without making you blush. You can't control a mind like that.'

She looked at Mr. Harris. 'Is she engaged?'

'Well, she's been approached.'

Her voice was very sharp indeed. 'I suppose that means she's signed her contract?'

Mr. Harris looked miserable. 'Not exactly.'

'Has she?'

Considering that he had the signed contract in his pocket, Mr. Harris lied fairly creditably.

'I see,' said Thelma. She was quite convinced that the contract *was* signed, and she had a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Harris had it on him. Her fingers itched to snatch at his breast-pocket, but she felt that such a procedure would not be quite ladylike, so she refrained. She tried other tactics.

'Well,' she said, returning to her finger-nails, 'if she's going to be engaged, she's *going* to be engaged. And so I suppose we must make the best of it. But as her contract *isn't* signed yet. . .'

She paused, and pierced Mr. Harris with an eye of steel ... 'I think that was what you said, Mr. Harris?'

Mr. Harris faintly agreed.

The steely eye switched to Robin and then to Humbert. If only they had spoken at that moment, if only they had admitted the truth, a number of people's lives would have been radically altered. A number of

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events, large and small, would never have occurred. But they remained silent. .. cowed and craven.

'As her contract is *not* signed'. . . she was determined to rub it in . •. 'there is one little detail which I think ought to be decided, once and for all, before we discuss any terms which may concern *me*. And that' . . . she paused, and asked for a match.

Mr. Harris' fingers trembled as he gave it her.

'And that,' she repeated, savouring to the full the delicious sensation of prolonging the agony . . . 'damn it, it's gone out.'

Mr. Harris proffered another match.

'And that' ... a long, luxuriant puff ... 'is the billing.'

Mr. Harris sighed with relief. Poor innocent. He little knew what was coming.

'But, Thelma, anything you say.'

She waved him aside. She ^{^as now} convinced that she had them all where she wanted. As a result, she was feeling thoroughly pleased with herself. So she could afford to gush once more, though she could not resist the temptation of prolonging the agony for just a little longer. •

She turned to Humbert.

'Humbert, darling.' she crooned, 'you *know* me . . . no darling, don't interrupt.. . you *know* me, don't you?'

Humbert agreed that he knew Thelma. He also knew that Thelma was getting just a little tight, but he did not see fit to mention that.

'No darling, let's get this Straight. Don't let there be any misunderstandings. You *do* know me, don't you?'

FOLLOW A STAR

With extra emphasis, Humbert agreed that he knew her.

'*There, you see!*' said Miss Ganges, triumphantly, turning to Robin. '*He knows me.*' She cast a gimlet eye upon Mr. Harris, and added, '*Whatever illusions some people may have. And he will tell you that I am not thinking of myself. Am I, Humbert?*'

Humbert was positive she wasn't. Mr. Harris was also about to say he was sure she wasn't, when she waved them both aside.

'Just a minute, darlings. Let me speak for just a minute, and then you can all say what you want. I am *not* thinking of myself. I am thinking of the SHOW. Don't you agree, Humbert?'

The wretched Humbert did.

'It's the SHOW we must all think of,' continued Miss Ganges. '*Not ourselves.*' And here a high moral tone crept into her voice, as though she were an evangelist describing the amenities of a Californian paradise. '*We have to forget about ourselves. That's what I always try to do. Don't I, Humbert?*'

Humbert by now could only gulp.

'It means nothing to me whether my name is in letters six feet high,' she went on, 'or whether it's not put up at all. Absolutely nothing: If you want to put up Lou's name in letters ten times the size of mine, I should be delighted. *Nothing* would please me more.

'But my dear,' said Mr. Harris, 'there's no question of Lou's name being larger than yours.'

'I should hope not,' replied Miss Ganges, tersely. 'It's a question of whether it's to go up at all. Isn't it?'

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'Is it?' echoed the disconsolate Mr. Harris.

'Personally,' she said, 'if you want to make *money*, I should suggest... give me a pencil.'

With the pencil that Humbert handed her, she wrote on the back of the menu card:

THELMA GANGES
IN
BLANK

They gazed at this announcement with suitable respect.

'That's if you want to make *money*> she said. 'Though of course,' she added, 'I don't know what Mr. Harris' ideas are on that subject.'

Mr. Harris gave a sickly grin.

'And if we have a comedian,' she continued, 'I would suggest:

THELMA GANGES
IN
BLANK
WITH
JOHN SMITH.'

Robin began to wonder where he was coming in. But he held his peace.

'The most I could possibly consider, if Lou is engaged, would be:

THELMA GANGES
'IN
BLANK
WITH
JOHN SMITH AND LOU LANCASTER.'

FOLLOW A STAR

'I don't think she'd agree to that,' ventured Mr. Harris.

'No?' She smiled gaily. 'Such a pity!'

Mr. Harris, with trembling fingers, produced his own pencil. 'Wouldn't something like this be possible?' He wrote:

THELMA GANGES

AND

JOHN SMITH

IN

BLANK

WITH

LOU LANCASTER

'And Old Uncle Tom Cobley and all,' she snapped. 'My dear, don't be funny.'

'What about this?' Humbert took the pencil.

BLANK

WITH

LOU LANCASTER

JOHN SMITH

AND

THELMA GANGES

'No, dear.' She shook her head. 'The public would be confused. They wouldn't know what to expect. You can't afford to muddle the public up like that. No,' she continued, 'the only possible billing is what I've suggested. At least it's the only possible billing for *me*!'

She glanced at her watch.

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'Oh dear .. .'she cried. 'It's ten past three I I've got a fitting at three, I must fly.'

She rose. They all rose. She kissed her hand to them. 'Darlings 1' she murmured. 'Too much heaven, isn't it? I'm so thrilled. Ring me up, Humbert dear.' And before they could say more, she had swept out.

'Well,' said Humbert cheerfully, leaning over and sipping the remains of Thelma's kirsch, 'it looks as though we were all going to be one big jolly family party in this show. What do *you* think, Robin?'

Robin was speechless.

Humbert grinned, and put his hand on Robin's shoulder. 'Don't worry, old man. The little scene you've just witnessed takes place in every revue, with every star, under every management. Doesn't it, Mr. Harris?'

Mr. Harris agreed. 'Though this time,' he sighed, 'it seemed just a little . . . how shall I say? Just a little over-written.'

On which they got their hats, and went out into the comparative sanity of the Strand.

CHAPTER III

SONG AND DANCE

I

AFORTNIGHT later, in the long shadows of Humbert's white studio, after dinner, the revue made its first bow to a professional audience.

It is possible that so bald a statement may cause the reader to demur, to complain that a great deal has been left out.

How, for example, are managers inveigled into studios? And how, in a state of inveiglement, are they kept there, while who plays . . . well, while who plays *what*? And after who has played what, or which, what makes them decide to buy what? And what do they buy which *with*, i.e. where does the money come from?

The very confusion of the above verbiage must convince the reader that he had much better leave such questions alone, or he will go mad.

Nobody, not even Mr. Cochran, could give a coherent account of the stages which lead up to the first audition of a revue.

All 'ou can say is that some man, in some place, begins to play tunes or make jokes. And that some actress, or some manager, likes the tunes or laughs at the jokes, and thinks there is money in them.

After which, a great deal of alcohol is consumed in a number of unexpected places. An inordinate amount

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of blasphemy ascends to the skies. A quantity of mendacious paragraphs appear in the press. And the strangest people begin to ring the author's doorbell.

Among the first of these people was Madame Lilian Fortescue, for whom Robin felt an immediate liking, which warmed to real affection. She stood in his doorway clutching a shabby portfolio under her arm. She was short, about forty, with a handsome, sharp-featured face. She looked as if she were about to fall asleep from sheer fatigue. She very often was. For Madame Fortescue was one of the hardest-worked women in London. And since she is largely responsible for dozens of the melodies which have haunted you during the past twenty years, it is time that she received a little credit.

You have never heard of Madame Fortescue as a composer. Of course not. You sit in your stalls, glance at your programme, and learn that you are about to hear *Dawn Love* ... an operette which has been 'composed' by some Englishman or American who has set the whole world dancing. The lights go down and an orchestra of forty performers begins to play an overture of almost intolerable lusciousness. The muted strings sweep up and down, the harp sparkles in its corner, the wood-wind gurgles. Then the mutes come off, and the brass proclaims itself against a swelling background of the drums. It is all most effective, like real music. And you say to your companion, 'What an extraordinary young mat ' Mr. Robinson Jones must be, when you think that in addition to writing all the tunes, he wrote such a wonderful orchestral score'.

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Unfortunately, Mr. Robinson Jones did nothing of the sort. Nor Mr. Roosevelt Jones, nor Mr. Cohen Jones nor almost any of the conquering army of Joneses, whether from Charing Cross Road or Tin Pan Alley. You see, they have discovered that it is much easier to make friends with Madame Fortescue than to learn the elements of composition themselves.

Robinson summons Madame Fortescue to his apartment. As she enters, he springs up from the piano.

'Lilian, darling ... I've done a divine new waltz. Listen!'

He plays, very badly, a waltz that is neither divine nor new.

'It's the top, don't you think?' he says, when it is finished.

'One of your very best, ducky,' lies Lilian, amiably. 'But there are just one or two things that you *might* consider. For instance .. .'

She sits at the piano and shows him the one or two things. They may be numbered as follows:

- i. The range (B flat to high G), is impossible. She therefore 'arranges' the main phrase, bringing it within the capacity of normal human beings. 'Something like this, do you think?' she says to Robinson. Robinson nods. She writes the phrase down.

2. The middle section, she discovers, is lifted bodily from Strauss. 'A *little* reminiscent, dear, perhaps?' Robinson agrees. Perhaps it is. 'What about this? Of course, it's only an *idea*' She plays the 'idea'. Robinson tells her to write it down, informing her

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that he will 'consider' it. Which he does, to the extent of retaining it in its entirety.

3. The whole tune, Lilian suggests, might be better if it were written as a fox-trot instead of as a waltz. This involves further 'arrangement' of the original melody. And by the time she has finished, a brand-new fox-trot is in being, 'written and composed by Robinson Jones'.

It is the same with the orchestration. That is done by some underpaid little musician struggling away in the suburbs. The melting harmonies, the delicious counter-melodies, the many ingenious devices which give colour and brilliance to the original theme . . . Robinson has written not a note of them. If you asked him to write *God Save the King* for piano, violin and cornet, it would be a task far beyond his capacity. Yet it is Robinson who receives all the credit, and, incidentally, all the royalties.

And this, ladies and gentlemen, is true of a regrettably large number of your popular composers to-day.

11

It was owing to her prolonged association with the Robinsons of this world that Lilian, as we will now call her, was so agreeably surprised when she discovered that Robin had actually written a score. She had expected the usual farce, the usual vampings of stale tunes on the piano, the usual 'Do you think we could do anything with this?' And to be quite frank, she was getting a little sick of it.

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'My dear!' she cried in astonishment, when **she** saw the piano littered with manuscript. 'I hadn't bargained for *this*!

I'm afraid there's rather a lot,' began Robin, apologetically.

'There's usually nothing at all,' observed Lilian, with a certain grimness.

Seeing his look of astonishment, she added, 'I've worked for X . . . and Y . . . and Z . . .' (naming three of the most prosperous composers of the Anglo-American firmament) . . . 'and the most they've ever given me is a top line. And usually they don't even give me that. They just sit down and make noises. And I have to turn them into music'

Hardly had she spoken, than the bell of Robin's flat rang again. On opening the door, he was confronted by a thin, sunburnt woman in a pink hat. **Her** eyes blinked at him very rapidly, & la Betty Boop. Then, catching sight of Lilian, she trotted in, threw her arms round that lady's neck, exclaimed, 'Of all the goddam things!' and sank into a chair, shaking with inexplicable laughter.

Lilian turned to Robin and said, 'Don't worry, ducky. It's only Sally.'

'Sally Waters, sir,' boomed the woman, whose voice had a rich Virginian flavour. 'At your service.'

'Are you at our service, ducky?' inquired Lilian. , (Her eyelids were so nearly closed that Robin was afraid she was about to go to sleep standing up.)

'I don't know. My agent says to come along.'

'Mr. Harris?'

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'Yes, sir.' And she suddenly broke into a negro spiritual,

'Go down Moses,
<Way down in Egypt's land.
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go.'

After which, she closed her eyes and once more began to heave with mirth.

'Are you tight, ducky?' inquired Lilian amiably.

'No, sir,' gasped Sally. 'I'm happy. I got an idea for a routine that'd turn the Archbishop of Canterbury into a jitter-bug. That's all.'

'Show us, ducky.'

Sally sprang up from the sofa. 'You the composer?' she demanded of Robin.

'Yes, but . . .'

'Play the hottest number you got. Quick.'

Robin's face fell. A few moments ago he would have felt capable of playing as hot as was required. But now, in the presence of Sally's abounding vitality, every tune he could remember sounded like a dirge.

Lilian came to his rescue. 'We haven't had time to go through the numbers yet, ducky,' she said. 'I'll vamp something.'

She went to the piano and began to play a blues. For a moment Sally stood still, her eyes closed, her fingers flicking softly. Then, suddenly, she began to sway. The effect was strange, disturbing, and . . . , in Robin's opinion, rather horrible. For while one side of her body seemed to vibrate and quiver, the other side remained still and dead.

SONG AND DANCE

'Get the idea?' whispered Sally, in a voice that sounded husky and very far away. 'It's called the *Half Dead Blues*:

Robin watched her. He could not help thinking how crazy it all was . . . how unexpected these paths along which his ambition was causing him to walk. If somebody had described this scene to him, a few weeks ago, he could not have imagined himself as playing any part in it. Not, indeed, that the part he was playing was very active. He felt that he was condemned to the role of spectator. A feeling that is common to all writers of revue, as soon as their material begins to take shape.

The music rolled on. Sally continued to sway. Robin watched, half fascinated, half repelled. She was silhouetted against the tall window. Outside there was a sunset sky . . . one of those skies of late February which decide, for a few miraculous moments, to foreshadow the colours of all the flowers that are still sleeping in the cold earth below . . . a sky that is a herald of the crocuses. Splashed against this curtain of gold and purple was the shivering shape of Sally, crowned by her pink hat. It was the hat, Robin thought, that gave to her performance its touch of the macabre. Without the hat one might have seen her only as a body, twisted by primitive rhythms, against a savage sky. But the hat linked her with civilization. It subtly corrupted her. Its chemical pink seemed to scream at the pale beauty of the roses in the clouds.

It was with a sigh of relief that he heard the music crash to its close. And with a start of alarm

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that he heard a shrill voice behind him proclaiming:

'Très, très chic. Et très extr-r-aordinaire!'

He turned round. There, framed in the doorway, was Humbert, with a tall, gaunt woman, very smartly dressed in black, holding a bulldog under one arm, and an immense cardboard folder under the other.

III

By now, Robin felt that if a troupe of midgets knocked at the door, and demanded that he should instantly give tea to their performing seals, he would be able to rise to the occasion.

The woman in black proved to be Princess Turbulenoff, the celebrated stage designer. Humbert, in a few rapid asides to Robin, explained the situation.

'Didn't they give you my message? My dear ... I *couldn't* be more sorry. But everything's divine. Thelma's got Winterton ... he's the big boy behind the Burlington Theatre, which would be *ideal*. . ., she's got him madly interested. I've fixed up an audition for next Sunday night. And in the meantime I've been getting these people together. We *must* have Lilian, for transpositions, arrangements and all that. Sally's absolutely essential. And Olga Turbulenoff is a genius and we can get her for practically nothing.'

'Très ... très chic et très extr-r-aordinaire' repeated that lady, before Robin had time to express his own opinion on the situation. But she was not commenting upon Sally's performance, but upon her own. She put the bulldog on the arm-chair, where, to

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everybody's relief, it promptly fell asleep. Then **she** spread out her portfolio on the table, seized one of the largest designs, put her hands on her hips, regarded the design with rapture, and announced:

'Ca ... c'est quelque chose!'

They all drew round. The picture, Robin observed, was indeed quelque chose. Though what precise chose it might be was more difficult to determine. To his unpractised eye it looked like four guillotines, stuck together. Above the guillotines, Princess Turbulenoff had painted some very menacing clouds. At the foot of one of the guillotines stood a widow, in deep black, bowed with grief.

'Marvellous, ducky.' breathed Lilian.

'Gee!' gasped Sally.

'You see, darlings, it's *practical*!', said Humbert to everybody. 'There's no *nonsense* about it.'

Robin blinked. Was there, indeed, no nonsense about it? Apparently not. But what was it? Was it a scene from the French Revolution? And if so, would he be required to write a snappy sketch to fit it? Before he had time to ask these questions, Princess Turbulenoff had switched away the design, and revealed another.

'Et voil&!' she cried. 'La mSme chose! Ce n'est pas k croire .. . hein?'

Robin, over Sally's shoulder, regarded this latest marvel. To his surprise, it proved to be exactly the same design, but in different colours. The guillotines, this time, had gone gay. They were suffused in a rosy pink. And instead of the widow, there was a naked woman with red hair, poised in an attitude of firm abandon.

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'If you light him grey, he is Stonehenge,' observed Princess Turbulenoff. 'If you light him pink, he is the boudoir of a cocotte. *Tris extr-r-raordinaire.*'

Robin felt that she did not exaggerate. Nor would he now have been surprised if somebody had told him that it was essential to light him pink and grey at once, so that he would be required to produce, at a moments notice, a sketch in which the action took place simultaneously in Stonehenge and the aforesaid boudoir. Well, he supposed it would be possible. One might begin by the seduction of an early British maiden by a Druid.

Princess Turbulenoff pushed aside the picture, and drew out the one underneath.

'Encore une fois!' she cried. 'Le style Coco!'

It proved once more to be the guillotines. But this time, they were draped with muslin curtains, and at the foot of them stood a group of aspidistras. The cocotte had been replaced by a gentleman with Dundreary whiskers, waving a butterfly net.

'Vous n'auriez pas pensé que ça serait possible?' she demanded of Robin.

'Indeed no,' he said faintly.

'It's the economy of it that I adore,' breathed Humbert. 'The amount of hideous, hairy stage-hands that we'll be able to dispense with! Why, once it's built, we can set it, and keep it up all through the show.'

'What... *that?*' There must have been something in Robin's tone of voice which Princess Turbulenoff did not like, for she turned on him sharply.

'You not like?'

SONG AND DANCE

'But of course. I think it's marvellous. It's just that I didn't quite see how we can use it *all* the time. I mean . . .' he looked despairingly at Humbert . . . 'I was thinking that there might be a certain amount of low comedy.'

'What is that ... les femmes nues? Why can you not 'ave les femmes nues in this beautiful design?'

Robin, who still retained enough of his Colonial repressions to find a discussion of naked women embarrassing, began to blush. 'I wasn't thinking *quite* of that,' he stammered.

'They would look ravissantes!' snorted the Princess, who was determined not to be done out of her femmes nues. 'In England, we will light them from the be'ind, and we will say they are the Vestal Virgins. When we go to Paris, we will light them from the front, and we will not 'ave to say they are anything but le grand nu. No?'

'No. Of course. I mean, yes. Quite.'

Humbert, who was thoroughly enjoying Robin's discomfiture, turned to the Princess. 'For once in a while,' he said, 'our young author was not thinking exclusively in terms of le grand nu. All he wanted to say was that he didn't see how you could use this set for . . . what is low comedy in French?'

Nobody knew.

'Leave him to me,' he said. 'Excuse me, Princess.'

He drew Robin into a corner. 'I know it all sounds raving lunacy to you,' he said. 'But actually that is a grand design. It's only a skeleton, but it's marvellously adaptable. It looks idiotic as she's drawn it, but when it's filled in with curtains, and properly lit, you can

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use it as a background for anything from Hamlet to custard-pie.'

'Til take your word for it.' agreed Robin, doubtfully. 'But what's all this about femmes nues?'

'Don't look so alarmed.' Humbert, had he liked Robin less, might have been very malicious indeed at that moment. 'If you like, we'll have the entire chorus permanently swathed in crSpe. It's simply that the Frmcess seems to have a thing about le grand nu, and so I agreed with her. I agree with everybody. I agreed with Sally this afternoon when she said we ought to call the revue *Tickle Toes*.'

Robin winced.

'I said it would be divine. I agreed with Lou yesterday when she said she wanted to recite three Shakespeare sonnets, dressed as Mr. W. H. In black velvet. She'd look exactly like Goering, but I said *that* would be divine. I heard from Thelma to-day, who wants to make her entrance on a white horse. I shall write and tell her the horse is already under contract.'

'But what will happen when it comes to rehearsals?'

'Nothing. They'll have forgotten all about it. They'll do as they're told, and like it.'

'Aren't you rather optimistic?'

'Madly. If I weren't, I should realize that there's only a hundredth chance of getting the revue on at all, and only a thousandth chance of its being a success. But I haven't the faintest doubt that the thousandth chance is the one that will come our way.'

SONG AND DANCE

i v

Buoyed up by Humbert's enthusiasm, Robin met the ordeal of the audition with Mr, Winterton, on the following Sunday night, with comparative calm, in spite of the fact that it had been decided that he should be the sole performer.

'But I can't play my own stuff nearly as well as Lilian plays it,' he protested, when Humbert had suggested this arrangement. 'And it's absurd for me to read the sketches. I've never acted in my life.'

'You don't want to act. If an author tries to act when he's reading, everybody feels sick with embarrassment. Just say you can't act, and you can't play, and you've a sore throat. And leave the rest to me.'

'But honestly . . .' began Robin.

'Honestly my foot. This audition's only a formality. Winterton's shrewd enough to trust Thelma's judgment, which is infallible. If Sally took off everything but her hat and hung naked from the candelabrum . . . (le nu perversi, as the Princess would say) . . . Winterton might show an academic distaste. Otherwise, nothing makes the least difference, as long as Thelma's with us.'

'Not in the flesh, I hope?' asked Robin in alarm.

'Not in the flesh. But in the spirit. And in case there's any doubt about it, I shall send myself a long telegram, signed Thelma, which I shall produce at the crucial moment.'

The audition was supposed to begin at nine. By that hour, Humbert, Robin, the Princess, Madame

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Fortescue, Sally, and Mr. Harris were congregated round the log fire. There were also three or four other people, whom nobody seemed to know. (Robin was to discover, as time went on, that there were always three or four other people, whom nobody seemed to know, at every audition.) They were all talking loudly about Revue. Not, of course, about *this* revue. It seemed to Robin, that one never did talk about *this* revue. One talked about le grand nu, and about gipsies, and about billing, and about Half Dead Blues, and about a great many other things, but if one ventured to steer the conversation to any particular sketch or song that one had written *iovthis* revue, the subject was abruptly changed.

He leant against the mantelpiece, sipping Amer Picon, and listened to their conversation.

'My dear, is it true Monty's taking up crooning?'

'Quite, dear. And he's so pompous nowadays that he'll croon himself into Parliament.'

'I *live* on his last record, don't you?' By a common signal they all sang . . .

Don't dance
Petite!
Life is
Too sweet
For dancing!

'I think you're too unkind. He's such *value*.'

'Yes, dear . . . but only below the belt.'

The firelight flickered, casting sharp shadows over their faces as though in malicious comment on their conversation. Through the shadows, Robin saw

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Humbert advancing towards him, whispering as he came.

'I'm telling people to stop talking and to get ready to listen,' he said.

A hush was already noticeable. Those who had been singing a moment ago, began to drift into corners, or to sit on the floor. As they made themselves comfortable, they turned towards Robin. They seemed to be noticing him for the first time.

Robin groaned.

'I feel an awful fool.'

'You needn't. They're a divine audience. I've told them to laugh like hyenas.'

By this time there was silence. The rest of their conversation had to be carried on in whispers.

'If you can get through this,' hissed Humbert, 'we're set.'

'But . . . but what shall I begin with?'

'A sketch. Any sketch. Something funny.'

'But all the sketches take about half an hour to explain. Except the one about sun-bathing.'

'Well, begin with that.'

'But it's so slight, and we were going to put it right at the beginning of the first half.'

'For God's sake don't *argue*. Read it. We've got to get him laughing.'

'Get him laughing,' echoed Robin. He glanced at Mr. Winterton. He was a silvery-haired man, with a keen, ascetic face. He was leaning back in the arm-chair, his eyes half-closed, listening to Mr. Harris. Occasionally he nodded, but whether from agreement or somnolence, it would be difficult to say.

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'Go on.' urged Humbert. 'It's nearly ten o'clock already.' With which he meanly retired to the fireplace and began to whisper to Lilian.

Robin took the manuscript of *Sun-Bathing* in a trembling hand. He cleared his throat.

'This is a little sketch about sun-bathing,' he began, 'and I think . . .'

'Pardon?'

Mr. Winterton opened his eyes.

'This is a little sketch about sun-bathing,' he repeated. He spoke as though he were confessing something extremely discreditable.

'Is it funny?' gently demanded Mr. Winterton.

Robin said he hoped so. And as a matter of fact, the sketch was quite funny, as revue sketches go. At least, it was funny on paper. It was vulgar, but not unpleasantly so. It concerned a young suburban couple who were endeavouring to get a tan in their back-garden. Anybody who has made a similar endeavour, in his back garden, during an English summer, will appreciate the comic possibilities of this theme. For a start, there are usually only a few square feet of garden which offer both privacy and sunshine. If the posture is shifted six inches to the left or the right, an unorthodox view of the sun-bather's posterior will be offered to the windows of the neighbours. Again, in all but the most salubrious districts, large flakes of soot descend upon the sun-bather's body. Most important of all, the sun, having come out and lured its worshipper into the garden, invariably goes in again at the earliest opportunity, leaving him with his **teeth chattering in the wind, staring at the heavens,**

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cursing the small round cloud which has obtruded itself between the sunshine and his person.

The humour of the sketch, however, lay in the representation of the sun by a spot-light, which constantly shifted, so that the comedians were forced to crawl about the stage, chasing it. (The device of the shifting spot-light is one of the oldest tricks of the comic stage. Perhaps for that reason it is one of the funniest.)

How Robin was to convey all this ... the crawling about, the comic movements, the gestures and the back-chat ... all before the restless eyes of Mr. Winterton and the other guests, he had no idea. He felt naked and ashamed. However, he had to go through with it.

'Shall we proceed?' suggested Mr. Winterton in alarmingly courteous tones.

'Well,' said Robin, 'it's rather difficult. Because the sketch really begins with Mr. and Mrs. Smith ...'

'Mr. and Mrs. Who?'

'Smith. It's the name I gave the people.'

'I see. Go on.'

'It really begins with Mr. and Mrs. Smith walking up to the footlights, saying nothing at all, and very solemnly undressing.'

'Very solemnly *what* V

'Undressing.'

'Oh!' Mr. Winterton pursed his lips and glanced at Lilian.

'There's nothing in the least objectionable about it,' added Robin hastily.

'Then, why ... V

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'Well, you see, they're going to sunbathe. '

'Oh!'

Robin glanced at Humbert. He would not meet his eye. Nobody was being of the least assistance, moral or practical. It was hell.

'We thought it might be funny,' he said hopefully.

Silence.

'But as of course I can't undress, you'll have to take that on trust.'

Silence. He cursed them under his breath

'So we'll assume they've undressed.'

Silence.

'Then they sit down.'

Silence. Was nobody going to speak at all?

The corners of Robin's mouth were now beginning to turn down. He could feel them turning. And he was sure that his voice sounded like the voice of an undertaker. Undertaking. But he had to go through with it.

'I suppose I'd better sit down on the floor,' he said.

Silence while he sat. He twisted his ankle. A lot they'd care if he broke his neck. He wished he *could* break his neck.

'Then Mr. Smith says to Mrs. Smith ... ' he paused ... 'I thought they might be sort of lower middle-class people, not cockney, but refined ... you know, *refaned*. But I won't attempt to do it in that accent.'

Silence.

'Then Mr. Smith says to Mrs. Smith ... '

And he told them what Mr. Smith said to Mrs.

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Smith, And what she replied. **And what Mr. Smith** said then. And how Mrs. Smith took it.

And he slid about the floor ... ('You see, they're chasing the sun now ... it would be a spot-light, of course.') And he turned over on his stomach, and turned back again, and put his whole quaking soul into it, and got dusty and hot and dizzy. And at last the thing was over.

Silence.

At last Mr. Winterton spoke. He spoke one word. The world's most terrible, shattering word, in the circumstances.

He said, 'Next?'

Just ' that. 'Next.' No comment. No suggestions. Nothing. Just 'Next'.

All the grovellings, slitherings, sweatings had been wasted. The sketch was a flop. Everything was a flop. All these months of work, of concentration, of sleepless nights .. . useless. It would have been better to stay in bed.

The corners of Robin's mouth were now definitely earthed.

'A little music?' suggested Humbert. His voice seemed to come from a long way off. Even so, Robin could tell that *he* was in a dither too. That was some consolation.

He went to the piano with the same brisk step as criminals who leave the dock after being sentenced to a term of life-imprisonment.

'I can't play and I can't sing,' he observed, into space. 'All the same ...'

'No composer ever can.'

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Robin almost jumped to hear Mr. Winterton speak. He could almost have embraced him for this sudden manifestation of humanity. And he had used the word 'composer '. That word was so sweet that it almost atoned for the bitterness of 'next'. It was great ... it was inspiring! It amounted to public recognition. His spirits soared.

'All the same.' he said, 'I'll try.'

He sang . .. *Something to Sing About*.

v

It is the custom among all really cunning novelists to leave the achievements of their characters, if those characters are creative artists, in a merciful mist. When Mr. A. creates a great scientist who discovers a serum that will transform the life of nations, he wisely refrains from giving us a chemical analysis of that serum. It is much safer to draw a portrait of the scientist (pale, drawn, and beetle-browed), standing in his laboratory, holding up a tube of It, and regarding It with the exaltation which humbler men reserve for a glass of Chambertin 1919.

In the same way, when a really cunning novelist draws a portrait of a Wit, he seldom runs the risk of allowing the Wit to be witty. That would be tempting Providence. Instead, we are shown the Wit before speaking, and after speaking. But never speaking. We observe the expectant faces of his hearers as he opens his mouth, and we hear the *6cfat* of their laughter as he closes it. But we do not know what he said. Nobody will ever know.

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The voices of the great prime donne of fiction sound only in our imagination. No really cunning novelist would dream of supplying a gramophone record with every copy of his book. Even the faces of the great beauties of fiction must nowadays be drawn in our heads. No really cunning novelist would ever include a portrait of her, let alone a photograph. It would be far too dangerous.

And though it must by now be evident to the least charitable reader that these pages are quite without guile, we dare not print the music that Robin actually played as he sat at the piano on this nerve-racking occasion. It would be running too much of a risk to print even the lyric. Was it not that master of revue, Mr. Noel Coward himself, who wrote in the foreword to his *Collected Lyrics and Sketches* that he had deliberately refrained from re-publishing some of his most sensational successes, 'because they really do look too silly in plain print?

And so, we must leave the song to our readers' imagination.

Personally, we agree with Mr. Winterton, who said nothing at all.

VI

But despite the Wintertonian silence, despite the abrupt fall in the corners of Robin's mouth when he finished, the song seemed to do something to the audience. It brought them to life. They began to drift out of their corners, to come round the piano, to light fresh cigarettes, to pour out new drinks.

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In fact, it suddenly became a party.

Robin, in a daze, heard Humbert whispering in his ear . . .

'Quickly . . . before we flop again . . . something hot.'

He played something hot. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sally cavorting in her pink hat. She was making weird gestures at the Princess, who was actually clapping her hands in what she presumed was a rhythmical accompaniment.

Then suddenly Humbert rapped on the piano. 'Ladies and Gentlemen.' he cried, 'listen to this!' He turned to Robin. 'Play *A Touch of the Sun*. Quick. Til sing it.' And before Robin could even give him the key, he had started off on the verse. His voice was appalling, and he had landed on the key of five sharps, so that Robin had to fake half the accompaniment. But Humbert was so intense, his face twisted into such insane grimaces, that the song gripped the audience.

The last croaking note of the chorus echoed through the room. People lifted their hands to clap. Humbert was too quick for them. He seized the manuscript book, flicked it open, and began to read another sketch, in a high falsetto. And when *that* was over, he was at the piano again, crying for another song.

Humbert, it will be observed, was 'putting over an act\ And he was putting it over pretty well. He had deliberately made a martyr of Robin for the first twenty minutes. He had known quite well that Robin would flop. That was why he had not asked him to play any of the numbers which were assured of success.

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And he had chosen the psychological moment to take command.

'Speed, speed, speed. Don't give 'em time to think. Don't give 'em time to breathe. Just go bang ahead. Cut in on laughs. Sacrifice applause. Get your black-outs so slick that you're lit up again on a new scene before anybody realizes you *have* blacked out. It's the whole secret of revue.'

That was what Humbert always preached. And it was what he was practising now. Strangely enough, he detested every minute of it. He was not an actor, and he hated having to clown before people he despised. He was lazy, and he loathed being forced to galvanize himself into activity. He knew that his audience only vaguely understood him. If he had been a rich man, he would have chosen a very different method of displaying himself. He would have designed backgrounds of baroque absurdity. He would have disposed the lighting in such a manner that he alone was glorified, while all the others were dimmed or dazzled, as the case might be. His role would have been delightful. He would have seen that he had all the best lines. And when his wit had failed him, he would always have been able to fill in an awkward interval with the flutter of a cheque.

He *should* have been rich. There would have been such charming parties. So many orchids, which have blushed, not unseen but unbought, in Bond Street, would have flushed a deeper purple oh the shoulders of so many inexplicable women. So many gold cigarette cases would have snuggled into the trouser pockets of so many neglected young men. So many delightful,

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useless people, would have had a few more days of crowded life, a few more days in which to flaunt their pretty little wings in a golden sunset.

But as we all know, none of the right people have money.

VI I

He was as one possessed. He tore the heart out of Robin's lines, and spat them at Mr. Winterton. He slid . . . yes, *slid* . . . across the floor, sweat pouring from his face, as he proclaimed the superlative virtues of this revue. Robin had long ago given up any attempt to compete. He could only watch, hypnotized. And when Humbert ordered, he played. He found himself playing in impossible keys, accomplishing feats of transposition of which he would not have thought himself capable.

At last it came to an end. With a final chorus of *A Touch of the Sun*. Everybody joined in. Sally in her pink hat, Mr. Harris in his fawn waistcoat, Princess Turbulenoff, shaking the bulldog up and down, and all the rest of them. With the poker-face of Mr. Winterton beaming amiably over the sofa.

Humbert disappeared, to a round of 'My dears, it's terrific' . . . 'But darling, it's a *cinch*' . . . 'Angel, if *only* I'd got five thousand.'

But before they had time to think, before the superlatives had time to diminish into comparatives, he was back again. He stood in the open doorway, holding a telegram above his head. The draught bellied out the great white curtains, and swept the cigarette smoke

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towards him in a blue cloud. It was as though he were a magician, about to announce the final stage of some strange ceremony.

'Listen P he cried. And he read the telegram (omitting to mention that he had sent it himself):

'DARLINGS ALL THE LUCK IN THE WORLD STOP I
KNOW THAT MR. WINTERTON'S GENIUS WILL MATE
WITH YOURS STOP WHY NOT CALL IT SOMETHING TO
SING ABOUT STOP THELMA STOP '

More screams. 'Something to Sing About!' 'Divine title!' 'Divine everything!' 'What Heaven!'

Robin, who by now had consumed so much whisky that he was already making dim and rather muddled dates with himself at a Turkish bath, found himself looking into the face of Mr. Winterton, hearing the incredible words:

'Well, young man, Mr. Harris'll talk to you about the business side. Where's my hat?'

In a trance, he took him to the door. It was the signal for a general exit. Everybody was spluttering with superlatives. It would be unprofitable to record them.

All we need do is to throw a final spot-light on to Humbert's face, as he stood at the top of the stairs, his hand on Robin's shoulder, wishing his guests good-bye.

He said:

'Darling . . . so glad.'

'Yes . . . isn't it?'

'Do you really?'

'My dear, that, from youY

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And many other things.

In a different voice, softer but sharper, he said: 'To-morrow then, at eleven o'clock. And this time, my dear Mr. Harris, I'm on a percentage.'

The bald head of my dear Mr. Harris disappeared down the stairs. Outside, there was a sound of motor-cars being brought to life, choking, spitting, roaring, purring . . . loudly, less loudly, softly, until at last there was silence. Humbert slammed the door.

He turned to Robin.

'I seem to be always slamming doors, turning towards you, clutching the handle, and making the sort of speech that is usually reserved for senior prefects in the changing-room,' he said, with an air of intense fatigue.

'My God, you were marvellous,' breathed Robin.

'That is what the scrum half usually says to the wing three-quarter when the honour of the House is at stake.'

'May I write that down?'

'Yes, my dear Robin. Write it down. Write it all down. Write down that I'm a wasted genius. Degraded. Serving up my brain, which is quite a good one, on small pieces of brightly-coloured toast for the delectation of the great British public. Never mind. We'll make 'em pay for it. And how!'

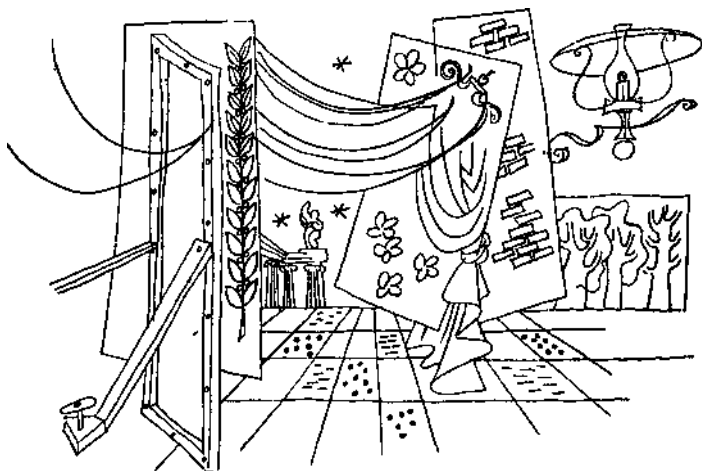
They suddenly began to laugh. Drunkenly. Delightfully.

Robin went to the piano. All he could play was *God Save the King*. He played it. He tried to stand up. It was far too difficult. So he fell down, and went **fast** asleep.

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So did Humbert. With his strange, bitter face turned towards the dying fire.

All the same, he kept his appointment with Mr. Harris at eleven o'clock. And it is possible that the inflammation of his liver was responsible for the extra half per cent that he managed to introduce into his contract.



CHAPTER IV
JUVENILE LEAD

i

'DARLING JUST BACK FROM PARIS STOP DARLING
WHAT IS EVERYBODY DOING STOP MUST HAVE
SUPPORT STOP HAVE WIRED NOEL COWARD PAUL
DRAPER IVOR NOVELLO STOP THEY ALL SEEM TO
BE ILL STOP SUGGEST MARTIN EARLE IDEAL SUPPORT
STOP PLEASE GET INTOUCH WITH HIM IMMEDIATELY
STOP ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL I HAVE SUPPORT
STOP THELMA'

'The word of the moment would seem to be "support",¹ said Humbert.

Robin frowned at the telegram. 'Isn't Martin Earle a dreary sort of British Gary Cooper?'

'He is. He'll want a preposterous salary. He'll never be able to rehearse because he'll always be doing a picture. And he'll be completely useless in the revue. All the same, we shall have to see him.'

It was a week later. And a hectic week it had been. Accompanied by Mr. Harris, Humbert had stormed Mr. Winterton in his office. By a shameless mixture of lies, threats and flattery he had extracted two contracts from that astonished gentleman, before he had time to realize what he was doing.

'You should have been in our business,' remarked

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Mr. Harris, stuffing the contracts into his pocket, and regarding Humbert with reluctant admiration.

'Thank you, Mr. Harris. I'd rather sweep the streets.'

'There is *nothing* wrong with this contract,' returned Mr. Harris with an amiable smile. 'Two hundred advance. Percentages quite in order.'

'And ten per cent for Mr. Harris,' snapped Humbert. 'You'd better earn it.' Then he relented. 'Sorry,' he said. 'You're such a dear that you ought to be getting twenty.' After which, he jumped on a bus and left Mr. Harris to his own mysterious devices.

That was on the Monday. Before Robin had time to get over the shock of realizing that he actually had enough money to last him for four months, his telephone began to ring. The great British Press had need of him. A lady of uncertain age arrived from the *Daily Picture*, put him through a ruthless cross-examination and finally discovered the fact that he swam every day at the Y.M.C.A. A bright light dawned in her eyes at this piece of news, and when she returned to the office she wrote a story which was so full of the great open spaces, the sound of the surf on Manley beach, and the fresh breeze that was going to blow through the English theatre from Australia's distant highlands (the sub-editor ought to have blue-pencilled that one) .. . that Robin suddenly became 'news'.

The other papers followed like the hounds of spring on winter's traces. On the next morning an enterprising photographer arrived at the Y.M.C.A., concealed himself near the swimming pool, and took a flashlight photograph of Robin as he was diving. This photograph, when published, caused his rapidly

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growing army of fans to flutter feverishly. They seemed to be undeterred even by the news that he was a clean young man, who was writing a revue that could be safely witnessed from the front row of the stalls by the entire Fairchild family.

Robin was alarmed and annoyed. It was one thing to live a reasonably healthy life and to confine oneself to the milder variety of dirty story. It was quite another to be labelled as 'clean'. This word seemed to arouse the strangest reactions in various breasts. Wistful manicurists wrote to ask him how they could stop themselves having such frightful dreams. Angry town-councillors asked if he was aware that Little Seeping was a den of vice, and demanded that he should 'give a lead '. Amateur dramatic societies requested lists of 'nice' plays. And dozens of girls sent him their photographs, to show how clean *they* were, too.

If he had not been worried to death by the revue, he would probably have shut up his flat, and gone to stay at some village pub till he was forgotten. As it was, he had to content himself with locking the door, ignoring the bell, and taking off the telephone receiver.

11

Thelma's telegram, demanding the engagement of Mr. Martin Earle, was the first time that Robin was brought to realize the implications of the star system.

In his naive way, he had imagined that once his words were written, and his music composed, that was

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an end of the matter. It was now to be impressed upon him that it was hardly even the beginning.

Mr. Earle arrived at Humbert's studio in a pale green Rolls Royce coupe, driven by a very good-looking chauffeur, of whom he appeared to be rather frightened. However, he was not at all frightened of Robin or Humbert. He threw himself and his profile into an arm-chair, and produced a cigarette case made in eight different shades of gold. This was filled with very fat Russian cigarettes which, Robin felt, would doubtless have been delicious were it not for the fact that the elegance of the case had punctured his in several places, so that it refused to draw.

However, by putting his finger over the holes, he managed to produce a few reluctant fumes, and trusted that Mr. Earle would not notice.

Mr. Earle did not. He was far too interested in himself to notice anything else.

'Now,' he said, 'of course I realize there's no money in this.'

(Only £150 a week, thought Robin.)

'But then,' he added, 'I think one should be prepared to make sacrifices.'

Humbert and Robin assumed polite smiles. They were both hating him very much.

'My theory,' said Mr. Earle, 'is that it is a film star's *duty* to face the public, in person, from time to time.'

He rose slightly in his chair, observed himself in the mirror, and sank back again with a contented sigh.

'And I think that time has come for me.'

He held up his hand to prevent interruption.

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'Now.' he said, 'there are one or two things on which I must insist: Firstly, I do not wish to be on the stage *all the time*?

Humbert and Robin exchanged glances.

'I think one should never give people as much as they want. Leave 'em asking for more. If I have two or three big things in each half, and perhaps a couple of solo songs (apart from my special numbers with Thelma, of course) ... I think that would be enough.'

'I think it would,' said Robin and Humbert simultaneously.

'Then again,' said Mr. Earle, 'about rehearsals. I can only give you the inside of the week before we open.'

They stared at him.

'Five days at the outside,' he continued firmly. 'Of course,' turning to Humbert, 'I could see you out at the studio quite often. We could run through things together.'

Humbert, keeping calm with an effort that was painful to watch, indicated that as he would be rehearsing forty other people, from morning till night, it might be a little difficult to motor twenty miles out of London every day in order to hear Mr. Earle his lines.

Mr. Earle shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, that's up to you,' he said.

He then proceeded to lay down a few more conditions. The object of these conditions was to ensure that the revue, if and when it was produced, should be written entirely round the personality of Mr. Earle. It should be *for* Mr. Earle, *about* Mr. Earle, and as

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far as Robin could judge, *by Mr. Earle ...* for as he rose to go he added casually ... 'I suppose there'll be no objection to my writing my own dialogue when I feel that way?'

That was the last they saw of Mr. Earle. A few days later, they received a slightly insulting letter from his agent, informing them that after finishing his present picture Mr. Earle had decided to accept an offer to star in a new mammoth something-or-other in Hollywood. So the whole thing was off.

'Merciful release,' said Humbert when they heard the news. 'If I'd had to produce that profile I should have bitten it.'

111

'DARLING THIS IS DESPERATE STOP WHEN I SAY SUPPORT I MEAN SUPPORT STOP HAVE WIRED LESLIE HENSON HARRY RICHMAN FRED ASTAIRE STOP THEY ALL SEEM TO BE GARDENING STOP PLEASE TRY NUGENT STRANGE AT ONCE STOP CANNOT CONSIDER ANYTHING WITHOUT SUPPORT THELMA STOP'

'Support!' snorted Humbert, after reading this epistle. 'If anybody wants support, it's Nugent Strange. He's sixty if he's a day. *And* a tragedian.'

Robin sighed. '*Must* we see him?'

'If Thelma says we must. It's fantastic, of course, because he's practically forgotten in England. Been in America for twenty years. And to think that he should fly home to roost on *our* doorstep!'

The interview with Mr. Strange was one of the most painful episodes in the whole history of the revue. It

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took place in the 'den' of Mr. Strange's house in Victoria Place. As soon as Robin and Humbert were shown into this 'den', at six o'clock one evening, a weird woman rose to meet them, dressed from head to foot in mauve tulle. This was Mr. Strange's sister, who had shared his triumphs. Indeed, she might almost be said to have obscured them, for she was, first and foremost (especially foremost), a dancer. And many was the awful little prologue in which she had mourned for this, or been merry about that, or peered into the distance, swaying on tip-toe, in search of the other.

'My brother,' she said, 'will be with us in a moment.' And with the same gesture which she had used with such effect when proffering papier-maché goblets to endless successions of Bacchuses, she invited them to have a cigarette. Intimidated, they both took one, and lit it at the cotton-wool end.

Into this atmosphere capered Strange. Frock-coated, tight-waisted, maquille, with a yellow daisy in his button-hole, which echoed the sunflower yellow of his hair. His sister regarded him fondly. To her, he was the same Nugent Strange who, in the days when Trees were spelt with a capital, had caused so many golden sovereigns to tinkle into the box offices.

'Hal' cried Mr. Strange, as he strode to meet them, 'I see you have made friends!'

Considering that Robin and Humbert were cowering in a corner, half suffocated with smouldering cotton-wool, looking as if they feared that Miss Strange might at any moment envelop them in some of her mauve tulle, this was perhaps an over-statement.

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They sat down. Robin stared at him. He certainly looked remarkable. Not a day over ... well, forty. And bubbling with a vitality which suggested Mumm 1915, which still has quite a lot of fizz left if you stir it up with a little wooden stick.

'Well, young men,' he said, 'I've seen our Miss Ganges. She only left me about an hour ago. I gather that everything is fixed.'

Robin and Humbert, with a great effort, prevented their faces from falling too abruptly.

'She's given me a very fair outline of what you want.'

'But have you read it?' inquired Robin.

'Bless you, my boy, I don't have to *read* things!' He smiled, revealing a perfect set of false teeth. And with a movement which was remarkably youthful, though a trifle jerky, he recrossed his legs.

'The main thing that interested me, of course, was the scene from *Robin Hood*'

'The ... er ... the which?'

'*Robin Hood* ... in the second half.'

Humbert gave a broad wink to the astonished Robin. 'Oh, of course,' he said, 'Did you work out the details?'

'No. But you can leave that to me.' He smiled complacently, and examined his finger-nails. 'Perhaps I oughtn't to say so, but I think it will be sensational.'

Humbert agreed, with sincerity.

'I've never done revue before,' said Mr. Strange. 'But what people nowadays don't realize is that a Shakespearean training prepares you to play *anything*. Show me a man who can walk as I can' ... and his

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feet did a terrible little tattoo, Who can make love lightly, gaily, as I believe I may say I can do'... and he spread out his arms in a circular gesture and protruded his lips at an imaginary victim ... 'Show me a man with all that swift technique ' ... and he flicked his fingers, once, twice, thrice ... 'and I'd bet he'd play, well, the Merry Widow, better than some of these schoolgirls nowadays.'

He checked himself. His brain did not work quite so quickly as it used to do. He remembered that he must *not* talk about 'schoolgirls'. He must *not* show himself conscious of this gap between his generation and the present. He must *not* use that word 'nowadays' so often.

He must efface the bad impression that, he felt, his speech might have made.

He rose from his chair, so lightly, so gaily, that one hardly noticed the cracking of his knees, and the little wince of pain that caused him to narrow his eyes, so that the crows' feet showed round them.

'But of course,' he said, 'my *Robin Hood's* going to be .. just a, shall we say, a *tour deforce*? It'll be a contrast to all that's gone before. And *that* ought to be ultra modern. Not just yesterday, or to-day, but to-morrow.' (He'd show them that he was as young as anybody.) 'I haven't seen your sketches ... I don't have to .., but the sort of thing I'd like is *this*.'⁹

Miss Strange interrupted. With a little laugh, as gay as a funeral bell, she explained what he wanted. It was a story which, Robin felt, could only have been omitted from the *Apocrypha* by an oversight. It contained so many runnings in and out, so many

JUVENILE LEAD

elephantine misunderstandings, so many threadbare coincidences, that at least three-quarters of an hour would be needed in order to establish the 'point', which ought never to have been established at all.

And all the time that Miss Strange was telling the story, her brother was illustrating it . . . leering with his false teeth, making sinister little *moues* with his cracked lips, and occasionally springing from his chair, and mincing round the room, in imitation of a lady of easy virtue.

Robin watched this exhibition with a sort of horrified fascination. As Mr. Strange became more heated, he himself became more chilled. As Mr. Strange endeavoured to shed his years, so he felt age creeping over him. It was like a story by Edgar Allan Poe. He would rather die than lend his name to any entertainment in which such unnatural phenomena were possible.

How they got out of the house, Robin hardly realized. All he remembered was that they ran down the stairs very quickly. But not too quickly for Mr. Strange. (*He'd* show them he was as nimble as they were!) He was at the front door to show them out. And as they said good-bye Robin noticed, in the sudden sunlight, that Mr. Strange was carefully but heavily made-up, and that little beads of sweat were beginning to show through the ochre maquillage which covered his forehead,

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i v

They walked into the Park, and sat down.

'We must see Thelma at once,' said Robin. 'This can't go on.'

Humbert shook his head gloomily. 'It's so damned humiliating,' he said. 'I'm supposed to be producing this show. You're supposed to be writing it. And we've been landed with a ravening tigress.'

'And we can't do without her.'

'I wish I were Reinhardt, or somebody she'd *have* to obey.'

'I wish I had control of the money.'

Robin felt very depressed. The interview with Strange had moved him more than he cared to admit. He felt as though he had been at a funeral where the deceased had suddenly made an embarrassing recovery. That house, so crowded with memories of a vanished age, was perfectly adapted for an owner who would sit, grey-haired, by the fire, warming his hands and gently chuckling at his reminiscences of the good old days. If it had possessed such an owner it might have been charming. As it was, with that terrible automaton jerking up and down its stairs, making itself up in its tarnished mirrors, raising its cracked voice in a fevered effort to recapture the echoes of youth ... (why was it so natural to think of Strange as 'it'?) ... the house was a loathsome anachronism.

He shuddered.

'I know what you're going through,' said Humbert, suddenly. 'And I want you to promise me something.'

JUVENILE LEAD

'What?'

'When I'm forty-five and you're forty, we'll ask two young men to dinner.'

'What sort of young men?'

'Very rude young men. And very intelligent. And we'll ask them to give us advice about whatever we're doing. *And we 11 take it!*

He nodded to himself. 'That's the main thing. When one isn't young any longer, to ask the people who are, and to do as one's told.'

'We shall never be forty,' said Robin. 'To have reached forty is to have failed in life.'

'That's not original.'

'I don't care. It's true. And anyway, I feel better now.'

They walked on. In this twilight of early March the Park was exquisite. The drifts of white crocuses under the plane trees were tipped with sunset gold. There were yellows and blues in the shrubberies, from the winter jasmines and the scillas that clustered beneath them. As they walked past, the thickets rustled with the scurrying of birds retiring for the night.

It was a day to fill one's room with flowers ... a day for making mixed bunches of double cherry and white lilac and plum blossom and narcissi. A day for going just a little mad.

But now they had arrived at Park Lane. Thelma loomed ahead. And there was no question of life or youth or happiness any longer.

CHAPTER V

SPOTLIGHTS

i

SHE was in deep black. She was very pale. And she smelt strongly of gardenias.

'Darlings, *don't*Y she said, in a strangled voice, before they had even shut the door. '*Don't* tell me.'

They sank wearily into chairs, wondering what was coming. 'Don't say a word. I *know!*' (Which was more than they did.) She rushed to the telephone and jiggled the receiver as though she were calling for an ambulance. 'Three double side-cars', she cried, 'at once.'

She trailed round the room. She pulled aside the curtain with a dramatic gesture and looked out on to Park Lane. 'To think,' she said, in tones of deep melancholy, 'that we should all have to come to that, in the end!'

Her back was towards them. 'Stays!' she cried. Her back shuddered. 'False teeth!' Her back shuddered again (and Robin at last realized what she was talking about). Her voice rose. 'Rheumatism!' She turned. 'And *Robin Hood* ... ye gods!'

She struck her forehead, 'The *things* I have to go through!'

This was, indeed, a surprising volte-face. They had come straight from the man whom she had commanded them to see. They had been informed that 'everything

SPOTLIGHTS

was tixed\ They had been steeling themselves to argue with her, to point out, as gently as possible, the utter impossibility of Mr. Strange, from every point of view, physical, intellectual, and if necessary, archaeological. And here she was demanding not argument, but sympathy. Instead of hurling her darts from the opposite camp, she was wailing, wounded, in their own. It was all most confusing.

'But, Thelma dear,' said Humbert, 'he told us he'd just seen you. And that it was all fixed.'

'Fixed?' She snorted, 'was fixed. I was *transfixed*. What are you to do when you go into a house of the dead? That room! If Mrs. Siddons had come in and done the rumba I shouldn't have been surprised. Did you notice his make-up? My dear . . . third-row chorus make-up at four o'clock in the afternoon! And the windows shut tight. I nearly fainted. And just to get out of the room I agreed to everything he said . . . even *Robin Hood*.⁹

She began to trail round the room again. Robin absent-mindedly bent his head towards some white roses by his side. She sprang upon him.

'Robin darling, do *not* stick your nose into every flower you see. It's very unhealthy.'

'But why?' began Robin.

'Because they're full of insects. If you get them up your nose you may have to have an operation. I'm very fond of you, darling' — giving him a look of considerable hostility — 'and it worries me.'

'I wasn't going to ask why I shouldn't smell flowers,' replied Robin with a certain heat. 'I was going to ask why you ever thought of Strange at all.'

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'Me? .' didn't think of him. Why ever should I? What do .' know about antiques? Nugent Strange is just a name to me. Like Lindbergh or Aimée Semple McPherson. How am I to know he gave command performances before Albert the Great? We had to have a name. I wired everybody I could think of. Then I bought a copy of *Spotlight*, saw a picture of Strange looking *divine*, and that was thatP

A waiter entered with the cocktails. She swallowed hers in a single gulp, and looked rather enviously at the two that were left. 'Heaven, how I needed that! Bring some more quickly, and some olives. No, *black* ones, you know I never eat the green. And Robin darling, the bottom of your glass is wet, so if you *wouldn't* mind not letting it drip on to that cushion ...'

'I rather think we might have been consulted.' observed Humbert, not too warmly.

'Darling T And she looked pained, but oh, so brave. T've been working. I've been *doing* things.'

'You certainly have.' said Humbert.

'Is that quite nice of you, Humbert dear? Is it?' She shook her head. 'I don't think it is. What do you think, Robin dear?'

Robin choked into his cocktail. She frowned. 'If you swallow things, like that, dear, you'll ruin your digestion. Don't think me fussy. I just don't like to see a boy like you ruining his health, that's all.'

She turned and went to the window again. She looked out. She repeated the word 'stays' in a gloomy voice. Mr. Strange's stays had evidently made the worst impression on her.

'I thought I should die,' she said, 'I really did. I

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came home and gargled. I shouldn't wonder if I came out in a rash that he caught from Sir Henry Irving. Thank God!'

The last ejaculation was addressed to the second lot of cocktails. She swallowed hers greedily and again looked grudgingly at the two that were left.

'Bring some more at once,' she said to the waiter. 'No don't. Bring a bottle of brandy and a bottle of Cointreau and some lemons and a squeezer and some ice and some Chesterfields and tell my maid to go away and don't slam the door. Darlings, what *are* we to do? Who *are* we to *get*? Robin dear, you're still dribbling on that cushion. Do try to concentrate, dear.'

Humbert fired off a list of names which, one would think, exhausted every juvenile or near juvenile in the English theatre. To each name Thelma raised an immediate objection (usually a very sensible one). And since this little scene is played, in one form or another, by the creators of every musical entertainment, during its preparation, we will reproduce Thelma's answers to Humbert's suggestions.

'A?'

'I've tried him. He's finishing a film, and starts another in a fortnight.'

'B?'

'He's going into something of Noel's and they won't release him.'

'C?'

'My dear, *not* West End. I know we've got to get *somebody*', but he's just plain fish and chips.'

'D?'

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'Drunk every other night, darling. Oh I know ... brilliant. But what's the use?'

'E?'

'Wants £250 a week and five per cent of the gross.'

'F?'

'Won't come without *her*. No. I've gone down on my bended knees.'

'G?'

'Won't come without *him*. And I do think people are tired of pansies now.'

'H?'

'He's gone all repertory. I know, *heaven*. But he just won't do another revue. Darling, Fve done *all*. Hopeless.'

'He'd kill anything. I know he was, but he's never done anything since. Fatal.'

'K?'

'If you're prepared to write a completely new show for him, exclusively in Lancashire dialect.'

'L?'

'He hasn't got a name. And I must have *support*.'
And so on, and so on.

Robin, as he listened to this dialogue, asked himself for the hundredth time how any revue ever got produced at all. He found no answer. There *is* no answer. It is one of the great mysteries of this world, why the curtain rises.

For strange to say, the curtain does rise. However hard the Fates may tug against it in the wings, however heavily Destiny may pull it back, the curtain rises. To soft lights, and sweet music, on to a rose-coloured

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world. It is a very remarkable tribute to the patience of the public. For after all, it is the public that pulls the ropes.

11

So they were still where they were.

And gloom might have descended on the party had not the waiter arrived, at this moment, with materials for the extra cocktails. His appearance was the signal for another display of energy by Thelma.

She turned to Robin.

'You make it, dear, will you? Yes, equal quantities of brandy, Cointreau and lemon juice. I thought everybody knew that. Darling . . . oh . . . you mustn't cut a lemon like that. You'll cut your finger completely off, and I *cannot* endure the sight of blood. *That's* better.'

She smiled at him, and nodded, and turned to resume her conversation with Humbert. But she could never bear to let other people do things.

'Oh dear,' she cried, 'you've let a pip go in. You shouldn't squeeze so hard, darling. Fish it out. What? Of course it matters. I might swallow it and get appendicitis. Robin, *sweetie* not with your fingers! There's a spoon there. Now do hurry up, darling. What *are* you doing? I said equal quantities. Yes, but you can't *guess* it. Fill up one glass with nothing but lemon-juice first. Of course there's enough lemon. You just haven't squeezed it hard enough, darling. Oh hell . . . there's another pip. No, it isn't. It's the

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same one. Really, Robin, one would think you'd never made a cocktail before.'

She shook her head at him, but her expression was still very amiable.

'Now the brandy. That's it. Oh dear, it nearly went on the carpet. Now the Cointreau. At last. Now, three cubes of ice. No dear, that is enough. If you put in any more it'll be just ice-water. Now put on the top. Don't jam it so, darling, it'll stick, and then we shan't be able to make any more. Well, if it has gone up your sleeve that's your own fault. Run and get a towel from the bathroom.'

He ran. He paused, for a moment, and saw himself reflected in the chromium-plated mirror that overhung her bath. A flushed, slightly puzzled face . . . eager, but amiable, far too amiable. And all round the reflection, on glass shelves, were ranged her various aids to beauty. Her cleansing lotions. Her astringents. Her pink powders. Her mauve powders. Her depilatories. Her Molyneux Numero Cinq. Her Optrex. Her pair of Kurlashes. Her Listorine. Her Vince. Her cold creams. Her vanishing creams. Her pore creams. Her Ritz sunburn lotion. Her muscle oils.

'Oh God!' he groaned. 'This is the sort of thing one lets oneself in for, when one becomes interested in the theatre. Shaking icy messes in front of chromium-plated mirrors. With women screaming at one day and night.'

'Robin!'

He blinked, pulled himself together, and ran back.

'Darling, what *were* you doing in there all that time? Do have some consideration, dear. After all, we *are*

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trying to settle this. Do you think there's anybody in Australia?'

He shook his head.

She turned to Humbert.

'Africa? New Zealand? Canada?'

'My dear,' he said, 'I'm a producer. Not a recruiting sergeant.'

'Well, dear,' she snapped, 'you don't seem to be producing very much just now.'

There was an awkward pause. She began to pace the room. 'It's fantastic,' she proclaimed. 'The world's largest Empire, and not a single juvenile in it. No wonder the Germans get in such rages. I've a good mind to write a letter to *The Times*.'

'My dear . . . *what* a grand idea!' Humbert was determined not to let slip this opportunity of changing the subject.

She looked at him suspiciously. 'Do you think so?'

'But of course. It'd be marvellous publicity. And the sort of publicity you *should* have.'

She pursed her lips. She felt slightly mollified. 'At least it would be more dignified than the things your Mr. Harris wants me to do.'

'Let's do it now,' cried Humbert, jumping up.

She hesitated. She had still a few pleasantly poisoned darts concealed in her bosom, which she would have liked to hurl at somebody. Perhaps, however, it would be better to reserve them for the non-existent juveniles of whom *The Times* was about to be informed.

'Very well,' she said. And added, 'Nobody ever gives me a moment's peace.'

It was during the concoction of this letter that Robin

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managed to escape, almost unobserved. Needless to say the letter was never published. And Thelma went about for several days announcing that *The Times* was, undoubtedly, in the hands of a 'claque'.

11 i

And then, suddenly, the whole thing was settled.

'DARLING THREE CHEERS STOP WE HAVE DEFINITELY BOOKED DUSHAN STARR STOP HE IS AN ABSOLUTE SENSATION AND ARRIVES VICTORIA FOUR THIRTY THIS AFTERNOON FROM YUGOSLAVIA STOP PLEASE MEET HIM AND TELL HIM WE ARE ALL HONOURED STOP BLESS YOU STOP THELMA '

Robin rang up Humbert.

'Yes, I know,' he said. 'Winterton told me. She blackmailed him into it.'

'But what is he?'

'Very hairy. And very intense. About forty.'

'Yes, but what does he *do*?

'He just rages about the stage being hairy and intense. What more do you want?'

Robin rang off. He was plunged once more into despair. As far as he could see there was not a single thing in the revue which could possibly be suited to any forty-year old Yugoslav, smooth or hairy.

Nevertheless, they were both at Victoria to meet him.

'Good afternoons. Zat is all I am saying ' Jetzt wollen wir Deutsch sprechen.'

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It was with this singular greeting that Dushan Starr announced himself.

'I'm afraid,' began Humbert weakly ... 'I mean, mein Deutsch ist schlecht.'

'So? Nicht so schlecht wie mein Französisch. Jedenfalls . . . je suis enchantée.'

He bowed low to both of them. Robin studied him with awe. He was an enormous man with a huge nose, and the sort of Adam's apple which really did suggest original sin. Hairy was not the word for him. His chin was blue. His hands were furred. And the general effect of hirsuteness was enhanced by an overcoat with a collar of shaggy yellow fur.

They both, in very bad French, observed that the enchantment was all on their side.

And indeed there *was* something quite enchanting about Starr. Neither Robin nor Humbert could imagine him, for one moment, in any of the scenes which they had created. It seemed impossible that he could dance, or croon, or slip in and out of doors with the agility of a revue artiste. It was inconceivable that he could flit gracefully before the curtain in the role of compare. An audience who saw him march out, in this manner, would instantly jump to the conclusion that some part of the premises was on fire. And yet, in his odd way, he was distinctly loveable.

'She asked for support,'¹ muttered Humbert to Robin, as they stepped into the taxi. 'She's got so much that she'll be suffocated.'

Starr, in a mixture of French, German, English, and a language which they assumed to be Yugoslav, kept them enthralled during their journey to the Savoy

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Hotel. He informed them that he had begun life in a circus, that he had won the Serbian Victoria Cross, that he had played Hamlet, in German, throughout the Red Revolution in Budapest. He also informed them that he suffered from indigestion, and was therefore obliged to travel with a bag of charcoal biscuits, which made his teeth black after he had consumed them. He proceeded to demonstrate the truth of this assertion by diving into his pocket, clapping two biscuits (which looked like lumps of coal) into his mouth, munching heroically, and then grinning out of the window with such black ferocity that the policeman on duty in Trafalgar Square wondered if he ought to telephone to headquarters about an escaped gorilla.

'L'anglais,' he proudly announced, 'je ne le connais pas. Pas un mot. Nein. Das ist nicht wahr. Ich Kenne many wards. Mais ils ne sont pas gemutlich. Au revoir. Water closet. Good-bye. Weel you lof me to-night? No?'

Again the terrifying grin to the policeman.

A poster caught his eye. It referred to a woman who had been suspected (with every reason) of murdering her husband, dissecting him, and arranging his remains in a cabin trunk, which she had deposited in the cloakroom of Victoria Station. This woman was, at the moment, endeared to the British public under the name of 'Trunk Woman '. The trial was at its height, and she was being cross-examined by a famous K.C. The inevitable poster, therefore, was

TRUNK WOMAN IN BOX

'Trunk womans?' inquired Starr, flashing his tongue

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over his charcoaled teeth. 'Qu'est-ce que c'est? She is an elephant? Yes? '

'Not quite,' gasped Humbert.

'Non? Un monstre, vielleicht?'

'Oui, Ja. Un monstre.'

'How come she in box? Es ist nicht mouglich. Ein monstre in box. Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho!' And he clapped another charcoal biscuit into his mouth and crunched away like an angry animal.

At last they arrived at the Savoy. It will surprise nobody that this hotel immediately produced a concierge who spoke Yugoslav with almost insolent assurance.

And there they left him. He informed them that he was very happy. That he had all he wanted. That for three weeks (until rehearsals began) he proposed to devote himself to the mastery of the English language.

He spoke with such superb self-confidence, that they did not dare to doubt him. In three weeks, he said, he would speak him like the Oxford. And that was that.

'He will speak him like the Oxford,' repeated Humbert in a daze, as they emerged into the Strand.

'Like the Oxford.'

'What will Thelma say when she sees him?'

'She will speak her like the Billingsgate, I imagine.'
On which, they went and had a drink.

CHAPTER VI

A U D I T I O N

I

THREE days later Robin took his place in the front row of the stalls at the Burlington Theatre, and prepared to be amused.

He had been assured that this occasion, which was the first audition of chorus-girls for *Something to Sing About*, would be wildly funny. But after a few minutes, sitting by himself, he began to wonder if it was going to be so amusing after all. For the amiable Mr. Winterton had been stricken by appendicitis, with the result that the ceremony was now in charge of a walrus-moustached, hoarse-throated under-strapper named Llewellyn. And Mr. Llewellyn, without intending any offence, had none of the Wintertonian polish when dealing with his inferiors. Humbert disliked his methods. He put up with him, however, partly because his bark was worse than his bite, but principally because he had a shrewd flair for talent.

The theatre was in semi-darkness. It had an air of squalid desolation. The curtain was down. Two or three naked lights glittered in the orchestra pit, and a few rays of sunshine filtered through the exit doors.

Everything was very quiet. An old charwoman crawled about between the shrouded stalls, brushing up cigarette ends, bits of cellophane, empty chocolate

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boxes, and other debris from the night before. Now and then Lilian, bending over the orchestra piano, played a couple of bars of music which she was transcribing. Otherwise nothing but whispers, and the muted hum of traffic from the streets.

Suddenly Mr. Llewellyn gave a roar. 'Bert!'

The startled head of the stage-manager appeared through the curtain, 'Yes, sir? '

'What are we waiting for?'

'We are waiting for you, sir.'

'Lord help us, we've been ready half an hour.'

'Very good, sir.'

The head disappeared. Mr. Llewellyn spluttered. There was a bustle of activity behind the curtain. A shuffle of many *feet*. Voices, twitters, whistles, giggles.

'Get in a line. No, in a *tine*, ladies.' It was Bert's voice. More shuffling.

'Well then, two lines. Ladies,*please*. We're waiting. '

A sound of scrambling, and many audible protests.

'AH right. That'll have to do. Curtain up!'

11

Robin's first impression, when the curtain went up, was that all the women in the world had congregated on the stage of the Burlington Theatre. Actually, the records state that on this particular afternoon only one hundred and twenty-three ladies were present. But the effect was of an overwhelming mass of womanhood.

'How many you got there?' demanded Mr. Llewellyn. It was a reasonable question, but to Robin it sounded as if he were talking about cattle,

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'About ten dozen, sir.'

'Well, take away eleven dozen and we'll begin.' he yelled back. All the women assumed mechanical smiles, as though a great compliment had been paid them.

Robin, who had been watching in a sort of daze, decided that he was going to dislike some of the incidentals of this theatre business very much indeed. He had been coming to this opinion for some time, and it seemed as though this afternoon was likely to confirm it. He had not cared so much as long as people's rudeness was confined to himself. But it was a very different thing when it was directed against a crowd of women who could not answer back. That, at least, was how he reasoned. He did not realize that these girls were used to rough treatment; that they might indeed have been slightly embarrassed if Mr. Llewellyn had shown himself too courteous. However, we are watching this scene through Robin's eyes. And to the amateur, any audition must seem pretty grim.

He heard a giggle behind him. He turned round and saw a pale vacant-looking young man in a morning coat. He was one of those mysterious hangers-on who, as we have previously observed, are always to be found at auditions.

'Just a minute,' growled Robin.

The young man stared at him in surprise.

'Are you here for fun?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Because if you are, kindly remember that those women aren't. And take that silly grin off your face.'

He switched round again, leaving the young man

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gaping. 'I suppose he's a backer.' thought Robin. 'I suppose he'll go straight out and cancel his cheque. I suppose I've upset the applecart.' He folded his arms and made a grim resolution to lie low. It was very difficult. For those women, most certainly, were *not* there for fun. It was not to amuse themselves that they had thronged up from the suburbs and the provinces, clutching their shabby attach[^] cases in their hands. It was in no party spirit that they had changed into these strange rehearsal clothes .. . shorts, bathing-costumes, attenuated ballet-skirts and the like.

'We're out of luck!'

The comment came from Mr. Llewellyn. He thought that he was whispering, but his voice was not exactly adapted to whispers. It was impossible that the women should not have heard him. But the smiles remained on their faces.

Robin folded his arms even more tightly than before. By a great effort of concentration he tried to persuade himself that perhaps it wasn't so bad for them as he imagined. Perhaps they were used to it. He turned his attention to the stage, and for a time he managed to keep it there.

They were being sorted out. In rows, according to their height. As they moved about, it became more and more obvious that most of them were impossible. Thick, ugly legs. Flat chests. Pointed chins. Scrawny necks.

How could they imagine that anybody would want to engage them?

Robin had never been to any of the provincial music-halls, had never sat with the crowd at a seaside

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pierrot show, had never explored the so-called 'cabarets' of the East End of London, or he would not have asked himself this question. He would have realized that these tired, battered women had a market. Just because they were women. He would have known that no parody of womanhood was too gross to have some value, to some men, provided that the parody was thickly painted and that the men had had enough to drink.

'Never mind, old chap; they aren't all as hungry as they look.'

He turned round with a start and saw Humbert leaning over the seat behind him.

'Is it always as bad as this?'

'Sometimes it's a good deal worse.' He drew his hands across his eyes with a gesture of fatigue. 'Llewellyn isn't a bad sort, really. All the same, whenever I go to an audition I always wish I weren't in theatre business at all. I wish I were in something restful, like dry-cleaning.'

III

There now ensued an hour which, to the old hand, would probably have been boring. To Robin, however, it was crowded with excitement, with comedy and tragedy.

The girls were still being sorted. Miss Ganges had issued an ultimatum that no chorus girl must be engaged who was over five feet four inches in height. **Bert** had **therefore** provided himself with a foot-rule of

AUDITION

this length, and was carrying it with him as he walked down the ranks.

The sense of being in a cattle-market became stronger than ever. Bert went down the rows tapping girl after girl on the shoulder. He approached them from behind, and each time a girl was tapped, the smile faded from her face, and she turned round slowly, as though reluctant to learn her fate.

It was almost as bad for Bert as for the girls because he was the kindest man alive , . . besides being one of the slickest, most ingenious stage-managers in London.

Some girls at the end of the row, having learned what was going on, shuffled off without waiting to be tapped. Others, although they were far too tall, although they knew it was hopeless, stood still, staring out into the stalls, a fixed smile on their faces. The smile grew wider and wider, more and more tense, as Bert came nearer.

At last the final tall girl had been dismissed. Only two rows remained.

'How many d'you get rid of then?' yelled Mr. Llewellyn.

'Forty-one.'

'How many's left?'

'Eighty-two.'

He turned to Humbert. 'Want me to go up and pick 'em before you make the final choice?'

Humbert nodded. 'If you pick any duds, I'll wave a handkerchief.'

Robin watched Llewellyn lumber forward, thankful that he had not to perform such an odious task himself.

He stood in the centre gangway, as near the foot-

REVUE

lights as possible, a large, heaving figure, leaning on his shooting-stick. He would have been astonished if you had told him that he looked intimidating. He was only doing his job. If he scowled, it was only because his scrutiny was so intense.

His approach had an immediate effect on the girls. A spasm seemed to pass over them. They shuffled and twisted and pecked nervously at their blouses.

'Smile please!'

It was like a sergeant-major roaring to a squad of raw recruits.

The girls started. Some smiled. Some just looked scared.

'Smile ladies, *please*.'

They smiled.

The smiles hypnotized Robin. As he stared at these women it seemed, for a moment, as though their bodies faded away and he saw nothing but an endless line of teeth. Teeth that were being bared with a terrible effort, as though the lips that should hide them had been jerked back by wires.

'All right,' croaked Mr. Llewellyn. 'Relax.'

And remember ... he was only doing his job.

i v

In some ways it was fortunate that Mr. Llewellyn decided to change his usual routine this afternoon. And in some ways it was not.

It was fortunate because instead of adopting his normal habit of 'rooting out the duds' he decided, instead, to 'spot the winners'.

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By which we mean that instead of telling numbers four, five, six, and seven to 'hop it', and thereby humiliating them in front of the whole crowd, he told number eight (or whatever the number might be) to step forward.

On the other hand, this procedure, though comparatively humane, led to appalling errors. (Appalling, that is to say, to Robin.)

Mr. Llewellyn shuffled to the end of the stalls, and very slowly began walking down the line. He paused in front of a very pretty blonde girl in blue shorts. She was standing next to a tired-looking woman of about thirty-five.

'Number ten,' croaked Mr. Llewellyn.

The blonde girl blinked. The tired woman started, and over her face crept a delighted smile. She stepped forward, almost jauntily.

'Sorry dear. Number *ten*'

The tired woman flushed. The smile faded from her face. 'I am number ten,' she stammered.

'No you're not. The line's been lengthened. Stand back.' He beckoned to the blonde girl. 'You,' he said ... 'in the blue pants.'

Robin flinched. It was odious. The tired woman was obviously so near to tears ... it was evident that she wanted to die of shame. It was nice for the blonde one, and of course, Llewellyn was right. But *she* could always get a job ... she was young, and pretty and desirable.

'Oh, Lord.' he thought to himself, 'if ever I'm a millionaire I shall have an audition and I shall choose all the duds. I shall choose all the oldest, the ones who

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are too fat, or too thin, or too ugly, or too tired. I shall engage them and pay them huge salaries and dress them exquisitely and fill the theatre with people who will be paid to applaud.'

The mistake which had occurred over number ten occurred again over number eighteen, number twenty-seven, numbers thirty-two, six, and nine, and a great many other numbers up to the final number of eighty-two. However, at last the ordeal was over. A row of reasonably pretty, ^reasonably young girls faced the footlights. Most of the rejected had already gone home. The rest stood about in disconsolate groups, still in their rehearsal costumes, hoping against hope.

'How many's left?' wheezed Llewellyn.

Bert counted. 'Thirty-six.'

'O.K. Now sort out the brunettes.'

It was already five o'clock. And though it seems difficult to believe, the audition had not yet begun.

V

Sort out the brunettes.

This was one of Humbert's artful dodges.

Like the admirable producer he was, he regarded Thelma objectively as a piece of raw material to be shaped to his desires. No detail escaped him. And there was the simplicity of genius in the first thing that his agile brain had decided about her . . . namely, that Thelma, as an aggressive Titian, must always be surrounded by blondes.

'Contrast,' he explained to Thelma, when he first

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thought of it. 'Artistic contrast,' he added, in case her somewhat literal brain misinterpreted him.

It was a matter of indifference to Thelma whether she was surrounded by blondes, brunettes or albinos. She was so sure of her own magnetism that she was quite certain that as long as she was on the stage, nobody would look at anybody else. So she let him have his own way. As though she were making a great concession, of course.

Actually, Humbert's judgment was sound. The sight of Thelma's celebrated aureole, flaming against a background of varying shades of platinum, was to prove exceedingly effective. Her hair seemed to deepen her personality. It gave a promise of passion. In fact, it put ideas into young men's heads.

'Now listen dears,' murmured Humbert, coming forward and taking control. 'Miss Ganges doesn't like brunettes.'

They all started.

It was lucky that Thelma was not there. Putting the blame on her, indeed! When one of her cardinal principles, in the theatre, was to make herself adored by the chorus. (A task which, strangely enough, she found very easy. They *did* adore her, even when she was most impossible.)

'I can't think why,' continued Humbert, in a serpent-soft voice, which nevertheless echoed through the whole theatre. 'I adore them myself. But Miss Ganges is rather complex. So any brunettes we choose will have to promise to turn blonde overnight. Any complaints?'

The brunettes began to whisper together. The blondes assumed superior smirks.

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'Hurry up, dears. Make up your minds.'

Once again Robin felt acutely 'un comfortable. It seemed all wrong that any talented, pretty girl, eager to work hard, should be shown the door merely because she happened to be a brunette.

Bert came forward tactfully.

'Pixie Waterford won't dye her hair.'

'Who's that?'

Tixie.'

(Pixie happened to be a great favourite with Humbert, both on and off the stage.)

Humbert pursed his lips. Then, in the same serpent-soft voice, whispered, 'Pixie, dear.'

No reply.

Tixie, my little poppet.'

No reply.

'Aren't we being a little difficult, dear?' crooned Humbert, into space. 'Would Mummy be quite pleased with us, darling?'

Whatever Mummy would have been, Pixie wasn't having any. A hard bang from the pass door at the back announced the fact that Pixie had departed. Somehow, Robin was glad of this little manifestation of independence. It made him think that perhaps some of the girls weren't so desperate after all. And yet, when he looked again at those who were left, he wondered.

Humbert shrugged his shoulders philosophically. 'It seems,' he sighed, 'as though we shall have to do without our little Pixie after all. Now, is there anybody else?'

Silence.

'Quite positive?'

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Silence.

'Good. Then perhaps we'll be able to begin.'

He disappeared, once again, into the darkness of the stalls.

And at this point, the audition began.

VI

By now, Robin was prepared for the worst.

He was not to get it . . . yet.

The first few girls were almost boringly efficient. They sang their little songs with a self-possession that was almost irritating. Their smiles seemed to cost them no effort at all. They tapped as though they liked it. They were arch, pleading, coquettish. You felt that any of them could step into the part of leading lady without a moment's hesitation.

Robin began to feel almost at ease. The hard professionalism of these young women deceived him, lulled him into a temporary complaisance. He had no longer to shudder at the sight of awkward limbs, ageing faces, tortured smiles. He forgot that the owners of those encumbrances were going to their homes on a bus, wondering about the rent.

And then, something terrible happened.

'Miss Wendy Thomas.' announced Bert.

A grotesque figure stepped out of the ranks. How she had got there, nobody will ever know. Presumably she had been 'liquidated' in the first round, and had crept back, unseen by Bert or Mr. Llewellyn, in the desperate hope that by some miracle she would 'get

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through '. The fact remains that she was impossible. Too old. Too fat. Too . . . too everything.

'What in the name of . . .' began Mr. Llewellyn.

But it was too late. She had begun to sing. She stood there, with a smile on her face like a tortured animal. Robin could see that she was shaking all over.

She sang *Thanks for the Memory*. It is a haunting little tune. The words may be slight, but for some of us, at least, they have a capacity for evoking a certain nostalgia. But as she sang them they were raucous and ridiculous.

'Thanks' . . . how unattractive that sort of mezzo-soprano can be . . .

Thanks for the memory
Of candle-light and wine
Castles on the Rhine
Your cosy chair and parties
 where we sang Sweet Adeline
How lovely it was!

Mr. Llewellyn heaved in his stall. He made signs to Bert to stop her at all costs.

But she was dauntless. The ugly voice grew louder, and in spite of the shaking limbs, the smile did not fade.

Thanks for the memory
Of sunburns at the shore
Nights in Singapore
You might have been a headache
But you never were a bore . . .

Robin covered his eyes with his hand. It was in-

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tolerable. He wanted to take this ugly trembling thing outside, throw a cloak over that body which should never have been exposed, and send her home to bed. He wanted to give her a cheque, and put his hand on her forehead, and tell her that she could wipe all that paint off her face. That she needn't worry any more. That she could go away . . . somewhere into the sun. And rest, and relax, and take off those torturing stays.

Thanks for the memory
Of lingerie and lace
Pilsener by the case,
And how I jumped, the day you trumped
my one and only ace . . .

'Hell's bells!'

The words came from the mysterious hanger-on behind Robin. The woman heard them. Her voice failed for a second. She pulled herself together. She got through the next two lines. And then she stopped. Silence. 'I'm sorry . . .' she began. 'I don't remember all the words.'

'That's all right, ducky,' muttered Mr. Llewellyn, with an unwonted softness in his voice, and a fierce glare at the interrupter.

She hesitated. Half turned. Looked back towards the dark stalls.

'Next please.'

She shuffled to the wings.

And as she did so, Robin had a sudden vision of all that this woman had lost, and always would lose. Of all that life had denied her, and would continue to deny her, till death closed her eyes. There were no memories

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for which this woman *could* be thankful. She had never known what it was to dine in moonlight on the enchanted coast of southern France, with the scent of the jasmine blowing from the mountains, and the warm glow of the Sun still lingering in one's shoulders. She had never felt the tang of the wind in the Alps as she swept down the glittering hills into the valley. No figures of romance had ever beckoned to her from the Venetian alleys. She had never felt the sharp intoxication which comes to the spoiled ones of the earth, when they first lift a cocktail to the sky-line of New York.

Yet, she had sung this song!

She had sung this song, which had celebrated, however inadequately, all the loveliest moments of sophistication! And she herself had been born an outcast. Nor had she ever possessed the allure with which she might have stormed the gates. It was completely tragic. And it was all the more tragic because it was meaningless and petty.

These thoughts flashed through his brain so quickly that he could not collect them. He only knew that he was profoundly moved.

And that was why there was a 'scene'.

For suddenly the raucous voice of the same man croaked through the theatre. It was a harsh, sneering voice, that seemed to have an almost material quality of attack, as though it could inflict a physical wound on the person to whom it was addressed.

'And thank you' ... this was his parting shot to the figure in the wings ... 'thank you, for the memory.'

She looked at him. A look in which fear pre-

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dominated. Fear of the life that was so much too strong for her. Her face fell. She was an old woman. She shuffled off.

There was a general titter. Discreetly hushed, but unmistakable.

Robin turned round. He felt sick with anger and shame. The muscles of his throat were so tense that he could hardly speak. But when he did speak, his words sounded very clearly indeed.

'And thank *you*, whoever you are, for giving such an illuminating exhibition of a complete cad.'

A round, startled face loomed before him. 'Eh?'

'A complete cad.' Something in him, like an angry gramophone, repeated it. 'Or, to use your own sort of language, a bloody cad.'

'Now! Now!' said Mr. Llewellyn, in great agitation.

He secretly agreed with Robin, but then, the young man (who was now making a haughty exit) *might* be a backer. With Winterton away, all sorts of odd people were drifting in and out. You never knew. He turned to ask Humbert what he should do, but Humbert, with a frozen smile that boded extremely ill for the young man, was already following him out. So all that Mr. Llewellyn did was to say, 'Now! Now!' once more. After which he took out his silk handkerchief, and blew a trumpet blast, to indicate his scorn of the world in general.

['Thanks for the Memory', by Leo Robin and Ralph Rainger, is quoted by courtesy of Victoria Music Publishing Co. Ltd., England, and Famous Musk Corporation, U.S.A.]

CHAPTER VII

ENTER FAY

I

IT is quite possible that Robin's outburst had a decisive effect upon the course of this chronicle. For at this point in our story a very remarkable young lady came down to the footlights; a young lady who would most certainly have walked off the stage with her head in the air if *she* had been insulted. Which would have been a great pity, for all concerned.

It was some moments before Robin, who was still shaking with indignation, realized that a girl was standing there at all. But when he saw her, he sat up, opened his eyes very wide, and forgot about everything else.

When he first saw Fay Pearl, standing on the stage, he felt that by some odd celestial coincidence a small truant angel had fallen off the edge of a cloud and had tumbled down and down, with the light of the sunset sparkling on her wings. And that when the roof of the theatre had opened to receive her, she had drifted gracefully to the footlights, taken one glance at the strange mortals by whom she was confronted, summed up the situation, and decided to play a little trick on them.

He looked at her again. He observed, with relief, that she had not got wings. She was, after all, just a

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chorus girl. But surely not quite an ordinary chorus girl? It could not be only a trick of the light that gave her that queer shining look. It was not only her hair, which was of the palest gold, nor her eyes, which were large and childish. It was as though there were some inner light which gave a radiance to her whole body.

Suddenly, he wished that she would go away. Disappear, for ever. It was not that she was disturbing him physically. It was merely that this brief vision, floating before his eyes, had been perfect, and he would have liked to have kept it so. Even now, as he stared at her, he saw that she had a turned-up nose, and angels, he felt, do not have turned-up noses. He also saw that her mouth was non-angelic. Not that it mattered, but what about the sounds that might come from it? Supposing she talked Cockney? Oh, she should certainly go away at once!

But it was too late. They had already begun.

'Name?'

'Fay Pearl.'

As soon as Robin heard this absurd name, he sighed with relief. And he said to himself, 'That girl's got to be engaged.' To call herself 'Fay Pearl' was, in itself, a stroke of genius. It was inspired cheek. She *was* Fay Pearl. She couldn't be anything else. Particularly, when she spoke her name so exquisitely, in a sort of silver, 'whisper, on an ascending scale ... as though, really, it were foolish for men to ask her name.

'Do you sing?'

Very gently she inclined her head.

'Dance?'

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She swept the ghost of a curtsy, and then studied her finger-nails.

There was a moment's pause. Something strange seemed to be happening. For the first time in the auditorium, there was absolute silence.

It was broken by Mr. Llewellyn. In normal circumstances he would have roared. But he too felt that there was something uncanny in the air. It was all most irregular. He knew that he ought to bawl somebody out. But his voice refused to bawl. Instead, it wheezed:

'Say ... what's all this? What is all this?'

And then, the incredible. For Miss Pearl lifted her skirts, with a delicate gesture, as though she were a lady of high degree, stepping through the mud. She took three paces forward. She lifted her hands to her eyes (which were wide and innocent). And in the sweetest possible tones she said:

'What is all *what*% Mr. Llewellyn?'

Robin's heart leapt with delight. This was the sort of thing one read about in novels. And it was happening before his eyes . . . the chorus girl standing up to the big bad wolf! He rubbed his hands with joy. He could not resist the temptation to turn round and chortle at Mr. Llewellyn.

As he did so, he saw Humbert hurrying through the stalls, hot from trouncing the mysterious interrupter. (The trouncing was done *after* he had discovered, in honeyed tones, the meagre amount of backing which this person had guaranteed.) He went swiftly 'to Llewellyn.

'This girl's got something,' he whispered.

'She's got a damned cheek.'

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Til take care of that. Tell her to go on.'

It was part of Humbert's technique to act, at auditions, as the power behind the throne.

Llewellyn sniffed. Then he grunted, 'Do your stuff.' 'I shall recite a poem.'

'You'll . . . you'll . . .' Mr. Llewellyn's voice failed.

'I said' . . . she spoke in one of those whispers which can sweep the world . . . 'I said that I should recite a poem.'

And even as she spoke, she clasped her hands before her.

11

'I'm dreaming,' sighed Robin, entranced. 'I *must* be dreaming. But I'm not going to wake up yet. If anybody wakes me up, I'll kill him.' And his face, at this thought, assumed an expression of unwonted ferocity. Since he was half turned towards Mr. Llewellyn, that unfortunate man came to the conclusion that for some reason Robin was angry with *him*. Meanwhile Miss Pearl was allowed to continue her eccentricities.

The theatre was silent.

She spoke. ..

I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils ...

You know the rest.

Her voice was the voice of a child. It was not the

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Voice of a woman at all. It was a silver flute echoing over a valley that was golden with flowers. She herself was the wind that blew over them, and about her were the scents that drifted from their petals, and round her glowed the radiance that shone from them.

There may have been times when this lovely lyric has been recited with greater accomplishment, when its undertones and overtones have been more ingeniously pointed. But never, felt Robin, could there have been a time when the poet himself would have been made more happy. For in her words, as she spoke them, the daffodils seemed to sing together.

When it was over, she bowed and walked away. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. Bert turned, and followed her with his eyes, scratching his head in considerable perplexity.

III

It was five minutes later.

There was a consultation in the stalls.

Mr. Llewellyn, Humbert, Bert, Lilian and Robin.

For the first time in his life, Robin was putting his foot down.

'If you don't have her,' he was saying, 'you don't have the revue.'

It was not only Fay of whom he was thinking. It was of himself. Ever since the revue had been conceived, he had given way, sacrificed himself, accepted ideas which he detested, thrown away ideas which he loved. Just for once, they should listen to *him*.

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He hadn't fallen in love with Fay. Indeed, he hardly thought of her as a woman. But he knew, deep inside him, that something could be done with her, as an artist. Even if she never came out of the chorus, she would give that chorus an extra sparkle. But she *should* come out of the chorus . . . now and then . . . if only to say a single line, in that childish, silver voice.

'All right ... all *right*Y Mr. Llewellyn scowled at him. He agreed with Robin. But when authors began to butt in, there was always trouble. T've nothing against the girl. I think she's got a damn' cheek, that's all. But can she sing?'

'Oh yes, I've heard her, dear,' said Lilian, in her soothing tones. 'It's a nice voice. Not a big voice would you say, Bert?'

Bert shook his head.

'No,' continued Lilian. '*Not* big. But sweet.'

'I don't have to ask if she can dance,' said Humbert.

'First class,' agreed Bert.

'How do *you* know?'

'I've seen her in cabaret. In fact' ... he grinned sheepishly ... 'the missus and I were so'taken with her that we told her to come along to-day.'

'Did you put her up to that trick?'

'No sir, I did *not*." Bert shook his head. 'Fairly took the wind out of my sails, she did.'

'Well, chimed in Mr. Llewellyn, 'she sounds all right. Provided she doesn't start walking in her sleep reciting Shakespeare. It's up to Humbert.'

'I think she's divine,' Humbert said. 'I also think she ought to be slapped. Hard.'

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'She will be.'

'By me, Mr. Llewellyn, if you please,' purred Humbert. 'My touch is a shade more fairy-like.'

Robin grinned happily. 'That's settled, then?'

'Yes. Somebody'd better go and take her address.'

Humbert for once was tactful. 'I wish you'd go, Robin. I've simply got to go through these notes with Bert.'

He needed no second invitation.

IV

He found her in the little room which the girls used for changing.

He had expected to find a cool, hard young woman, who would sit on the edge of a table, smoking cigarettes, regarding him with calculating eyes. He had been prepared for the usual story about 'consulting my agent'. And he had assumed a middle-aged boyfriend waiting for her outside in a sports car.

Instead, he found a frightened, trembling little girl.

When he came in she was bent over the table, packing a pair of shoes into a shabby valise made of 'leatherette'. He saw that the valise also held a cheap edition of Maurois' *Ariel*, a sixpenny bottle of lavender water and a paper packet that looked as if it contained cake.

She closed the lid on these revelations, and tried to press down the lock, but her hands were shaking so violently that she could not do it.

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'Let me,' said Robin, hurrying forward. He was thankful for the respite.

'Oh, thank you,' she said. 'I'm all thumbs.'

'There! That's got it.'

'Oh, dear!' she said. She sat down, not at all gracefully, on a chair. 'Wasn't I *terrible*?

'Certainly not.'

'Oh, but I was. It was a terrible thing to do. Dreadful. I don't know what you must all think.' And she meant it, from the bottom of her heart. She was not saying it in order to be contradicted. She was not seeking sympathy, but confirmation.

'I don't know what came over me,' she went on. 'When I walked off I could have sunk through the floor. Oh dear! And Bert. . . what *can* he be thinking. It was Bert and Mrs. Bert who told me to come along. And now I've let them down.'

'On the contrary, they're delighted.'

'Oh dear no.' She was so convinced of her own misdoing that she hardly took in what he said. 'They couldn't possibly be. I don't know how I shall ever look them in the face again. And I *did* bring my shoes, and a song to sing too. Look . . .'

She put out her hand towards the valise and then recollected that it contained the remains of the cake, which was not the sort of thing, she felt, that she should show to an author. 'Perhaps we'd better not open it again,' she said.

'I wish you'd tell me why you did it.'

'I wish I could. And, I expect there'll be others who wish that too. Mother, for instance. What *she'll* say when she hears!'

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'But there must have been some reason.'

She glanced at him shyly. 'Well, I suppose it was you, really.'

'Me?'

'Yes. You and that poor girl.' She went rather pink. 'Oh, I think you were wonderful to stand up to him like that. It really must all have gone to my head. I was so angry. She was in here only a minute ago. And she was still crying. I made her . . .' she was going to say she made her take a loan of five shillings, which she could ill afford. But one did not talk about such things to authors. So she ended, a little lamely, 'I tried to make her feel better. '

'Do you always recite Wordsworth, when you're angry?'

For the first time, she smiled. 'It wasn't because I was angry. It was because . . .' she looked down at her shabby gloves. 'I wanted to be grand.'

'I understand.'

She shook her head. 'I don't see how you *could* understand. You see, I've often thought of being a star . . . every girl does, I suppose . . . and coming on at an audition and doing what *'wanted* instead of what *they* wanted. Of just drifting about, instead of doing those wretched taps, and singing those silly songs. I *can* do them,' she added hastily, 'or Bert wouldn't have sent me. I wouldn't like them to think I recited just because I can't do anything else.'

'They don't think it,' said Robin.

She sighed. 'Well, that's *something*'

She rose to her feet. 'I must go and catch my bus.' She paused, and then held out her hand shyly. 'Thank

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you so much, Mr. Frost. It was nice of you to come round. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Robin.

She turned to go.

'Oh, by the way,' he said, 'the first rehearsal's on Monday. Ten sharp. 14 Acacia Road. Waterloo.'

She stared at him.

'Bert asked me to tell you not to be late.'

'But . . . what do you mean?'

Robin was grinning all over his face.

'I mean you're engaged.'

'Me?'

He nodded.

'Oh!' A long drawn-out sigh. She blinked, as though she were coming out of the darkness into the daylight. Then, slowly she smiled, a smile of utter happiness. And once again Robin had the strange sense that she was shining, as though some hidden light were glowing, deep inside her.

'Engaged!' she repeated. 'But *why*?

'I can't imagine.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Nothing to do with me. The author doesn't count, you know.'

A shadow crossed her face.

'All the same, I'm delighted,' he said.

'Are you really?' The shadow flew away again. 'I will try, really. I'll never make any more trouble. Oh dear . . . engaged!' She shook her head. 'I can't believe it. I must go and thank Bert.' She held out her hand again. 'Then this time it's *au revoir*'

'Till Monday.'

She nodded, clutched her valise, and ran out.

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'And don't forget to bring your Wordsworth.'
shouted Robin, after her.

But so swiftly had she run, that his words echoed
up an empty flight of stairs.



CHAPTER VIII

ROUTINE

I

MONDAY next.

Ten sharp. 14 Acacia Road, Waterloo.

Robin alighted from his second-hand Ford (which he had bought on the same day that he received his advance) and stared up at the barn-like building which Llewellyn had chosen for rehearsals.

It appeared to be part of a disused factory. Many of the windows were cracked. Grime lay thick over the walls of saffron-coloured brick. In the back-yard there was a quantity of disused dustbins, and the stump of a solitary acacia tree.

The prospect of entering such a building, on a morning when the fog was shrouding the city, and the street-lamps were already lit, would not normally have thrilled him. But to-day it was different. 14 Acacia Road to-day was not, for Robin, an ugly barracks. It was an enchanted edifice. It was a temple in whose precincts men and women would worship at his shrine. By which he meant that he would hear, for the first time, the sound of feet dancing to his music, the sound of voices echoing to his words.

Moreover, he would see Fay Pearl again.

If life had been a little less hectic, he would certainly have managed to see her before. It might **not** be

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etiquette for an author to make friends with a chorus girl, and of course he wouldn't intrude himself if it was going to embarrass her. But as far as he was concerned he didn't care tuppence about etiquette. And he did care a great many tuppences about Fay. Nothing romantic of course. Oh no. But she was so damned *nice*. That was it. That, and the way her hair seemed to have a light in it. And the way her nose wrinkled. And the way you felt she would stand up to any fate, however outrageous, like a kitten arching its back at a mad bull. But principally, he told himself, it was her niceness that made him want to see her again. It was a consoling thought, for obviously you couldn't be romantic about a girl if you thought she was 'nice'.

Or could you?

He had no time to answer the question. He was at work from early morning till after midnight. Only yesterday had he completed the words and music of the opening chorus. The finale of the show was not even roughed out. 'It'll just have to be a divine shambles,' said Humbert, distractedly. Half the sketches had to be cut and simplified to fit Starr's English, which, he felt, was not likely to be nearly so 'Oxford' as had been promised. There were choruses without verses, and verses without choruses. There were still not nearly enough front-cloth scenes. In spite of this, the show, as at present designed, would last at least five hours, even if it were played at top speed.

'Shall we *ever* get it into shape?' he had asked Humbert, for the hundredth time, at the end of a particularly harassing day.

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'If you ask that again, I shall walk out.' snapped Humbert.

'But look at it all! Robin indicated a pile of manuscripts, top lines of songs, designs for sets, half-finished lyrics, jumbled together on the piano.

Humbert put his hands on Robin's shoulders.

'Listen,' he said. 'This is the fourth revue that I have produced. I have never had a failure yet. Touch wood. And I assure you, once and for all, that this revue is far nearer completion than any of the others were, at a similar period.'

'Well, all I can say is . . .' began Robin.

'All you can say is nothing,' interrupted Humbert. 'Just trust me.'

So Robin trusted him.

II

Meanwhile it is still ten sharp, still 14 Acacia Road, and still the district of Waterloo.

Robin slammed the door of the Ford, gathered his papers together, and entered the yard.

For a moment he paused. He could hear the jangling of several pianos, the sound of shrill voices, and the echo of many dancing feet. Although he was unable to distinguish any of the tunes or the words, he could not but feel thrilled at the thought that all these people were interpreting, in one form or another, the ideas that had sprung from his brain.

At the same time, it was alarming. Obviously he would be expected to play an important role. They

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would come to him for advice. Perhaps they would ask him to make a speech. Oh Lord ... if he thought of all that might be coming to him he would stay out in this back-yard for the rest of his life. So he summoned up his courage and stepped through the door.

He found himself in a large barn-like room, with pitch-pine walls, a bare floor and high windows through which the sunlight trickled feebly. There was no furniture in the room except two grand pianos and a number of wooden benches.

At one of these pianos sat a pale young man who looked like a theological student in distress. He was playing Mr. Cole Porter's *Night and Day* very loudly indeed. To the strains of this admirable but hackneyed composition a dozen chorus girls were dancing. Some wore shorts and jumpers, others wore trousers and blouses, two were in bathing suits. All of them looked hideous.

He could not see Fay anywhere.

The din was indescribable.

In front of these girls Sally was jigging about in bright pink shorts, yelling, clapping her hands, and striking attitudes which the girls tried to follow.

Robin wondered if he had come to the wrong room. He turned to a little man by his side, who was leaning against the wall, chewing gum.

'Can you tell me what they're doing?'

'Routine, I guess.'

'Oh.' Robin was no wiser. 'Practising?' he suggested.

'No. It's a routine. Looks pretty good, don't it?'

Robin ventured no comment. It didn't look at all

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good. And even if it had looked magnificent, he would have still wanted to know what it was.

'One, two, three, four, *shake* it,' yelled Sally. 'One, two, three, four, *shake* it.' She jiggled up to a rather thin girl in the front row. Still jiggling, she yelled in rhythm . . . 'Miss-Wilkes — I — said — *shake* it.'

Miss Wilkes shook it. With *hauteur*.

'And shake it as though you liked it,' yelled Sally.

Miss Wilkes shook it as though she liked it. But not very much.

Robin stared about him. By no stretch of the imagination could he connect this scene with anything that he had ever written or desired to write. If only Thelma were here. Or even Mr. Harris. But there was nobody to enlighten him.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a familiar head bent over the keyboard of the piano in the far corner. Lilian! At least *she* would tell him what it all meant.

He hurried over to her.

'I say, what's going on?'

Lilian looked up, glanced at Sally's girls, and observed, 'It's a routine, ducky.' She returned to her manuscript. 'I'm transposing this verse in the opening chorus. If he tries to sing higher than low C he sounds like a sissy.'

'But. . . what is a routine?'

Lilian sighed. 'A dance routine, ducky.'

Robin tried again.

'But why are they doing it to *Night and Day*?⁹

'I suppose it fits.'

'But they're not going to play *Night and Bay* in **the**

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show? I mean, I'm supposed to have composed all the music, and I don't see why ...'

'Of course they won't play it, ducky. It's just for the routine.'

Robin gulped, 'But what is a routine?'

Lilian rubbed out a flat and made it a sharp. 'I told you ducky, it's a dance arrangement.'

'Yes, but doesn't it have some meaning?'

'Oh yes, ducky. Sally's routines always have a meaning.'

'Then what's the meaning of this one?'

'I don't know, ducky. I should think it's Modern, wouldn't you?'

'Modern what?'

'Just modern. Look at the way they're sticking themselves out.'

'I don't see why that makes it modern.'

'P'raps you're right.'

For a moment Robin felt that he would like to take Lilian by the shoulders and shake her. However, it wasn't her fault, after all.

'I shall go and ask Sally, myself,' he said, with sudden resolution.

'Yes, ducky. I think that would be a good idea.'

III

Robin waited till the music had stopped, and Sally had ordered a few minutes' break. Then he went up to her, and asked as tactfully as possible what it was all about,

ROUTINE

'Well, you see, it's a rou .. .'

Robin interrupted her, 'Yes, I know it's a routine, I just wanted to know its significance.'

Sally looked pleased. She liked that word. She clasped her hands behind her neck and rolled her eyes, as though seeking for some object to inspire her. Apparently she found it, for she swivelled round to Robin, clapped her hands and cried:

'It's Creation.¹ She clapped her hands again. 'Yes Sir. That's what it is. It's Goddam Creation.'

'Oh,' said Robin. He looked again at the twelve girls in shorts and jumpers who were still sliding about the floor, practising steps, stamping with the right foot and bending the left elbow. He observed Miss Wilkes, who was still shaking it. He did not see the immediate connection between these manoeuvres and Creation. Perhaps he had misunderstood Sally.

'Creation of what?' he inquired hopefully.

'Why, just Creation,' repeated Sally. And added, for the sake of further clarity, 'Goddam Creation,'

'I see,' said Robin.

But he did not see at all. He did not see how Creation, with or without the adjective, was represented by twelve girls in shorts sticking out their left elbows to the tune of Mr. Cole Porter's *Night and Day*. And he felt that as he was the author and composer ('I suppose I really *am*?' he was beginning to ask himself) he ought to understand.

'Will you want me to write any music for it?'

'Sure, sure,' said Sally impatiently. She had once again observed the unfortunate Miss Wilkes, who was shaking it with less and less conviction.

REVUE

'And words?'

'Why, I guess so.' She was obviously about to spring upon Miss Wilkes. 'Words, yes. You'd best write some words.'

'What about?'

Sally stamped her foot. 'Jeese!' she said. 'How the hell do I know? I'm not the ruddy author, **am I?**'

'No, I am!' Robin was astonished at the force with which his voice rang out. He was even more astonished at the effect which his sudden outburst had upon Sally. Her face fell. Her spine curved.

'Say, Mr. Frost . . . you don't understand.'

'I certainly don't. But I intend to.'

He took Sally by the arm. He led her across to Lilian. He firmly removed the manuscript on which she was working. And he said:

'Lilian, we want your help.'

'Yes, ducky?'

'It's the routine . . .' began Sally.

'Anybody who says "routine" again in the next ten minutes will be hit,' said Robin.

'*Tou* explain, Lilian,' said Sally, tremulously. 'It's Creation.'

'What's Creation, ducky?'

'The rou . . . ' She flinched. 'Say, I *got* to say it.'

'Oh!' said Lilian. 'Adam and Eve?'

'I refuse to have anything about Adam and Eve in my revue,' said Robin.

Sally nodded. 'No sir. Neither would I. I guess I wouldn't have Adamaneve either. No sir. I don't think I'd have Adamaneve. What you think, Lilian?'

ROUTINE

'They've been done before,' observed Lilian, with tact.

'They certainly have,' agreed Sally. 'No sir. I think Adamaneve's lousy. What about H. G. Wells?'

'In person?' inquired Robin.

'Hell, no.' Then she wrinkled her forehead. 'I don't know though. It'd be a stunt.' She turned to Lilian. 'D'you think we could get him?'

Robin stared at the wall in front of him. 'I must keep calm,' he said to himself. 'I must keep calm.'

'I thought you said it was supposed to be Creation,' he said.

'Well, he's a creator, isn't he? *Shape of Things to Come* and all that?'

'He'd be terribly expensive, ducky,' said Lilian, with a wink at Robin. 'And I don't suppose he'd draw.'

'Hell, no. I don't suppose he'd draw. These society people never do.'

'H. G. Wells? Society?' observed Robin.

'Well, Literature. Same thing. They don't draw a nickel. No, we'd best stick to my original idea.'

Robin took out a pencil and a piece of paper. 'I'll take it down,' he said,

Sally scratched her head. She looked first at Robin, then at Lilian, then at the ceiling. She obtained no help from any of these quarters. So she scratched her head again, took a deep breath, and spoke as follows:

'You see ... you start off with Chaos. That's the first routine. Then you *get* the Coming of Man. **That's** where Freddy comes on and does his **taps**. **See?**

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I got a swell new tap routine. Listen ...' She began to beat a tattoo with her left toe.

'Just a minute.' Robin wrote ... *Coming of Man. Freddy taps.* 'What's taps got to do with the Coming of Man?'

'Why, hell, it's obvious,' said Sally in an aggrieved voice. 'Dawn of Civilization, and all that.'

'I see.' Robin wrote down .. . *Taps. Dawn of Civ.* 'Go on.'

Sally began to get enthusiastic. 'That's where H. G. Wells comes in. At least that's where he *would* come in if we decided to have him. 'Cos that's where we switch to the Future, see?'

'How?'

'Why, it's easy,' cried Sally. 'Just a matter of lighting. And a bit of cellophane.'

'Isn't there anything in between?' asked Robin.

'In between what?'

'The Dawn of Civilization and the Future.'

'Hell, no. You don't want no costume parades, do you?'

'Not at all.'

'I should say not. They stink. What you say, Lilian?'

Lilian looked up from her manuscript, to which she had quietly but firmly returned. 'What stinks, ducky?'

'Costume parades.'

'You ought to know,' she observed.

'Sure, I *do* know.' She turned to Robin. '**So there** you are!'

'Yes, there we are.'

'It's a cinch.'

ROUTINE

'Yes.'

'A goddam cinch,' she repeated, with slightly less conviction.

'Yes.'

'Oh hell!' muttered Sally. And before Robin could call her back, she was jiggling her way across the floor, to take it out on the unfortunate Miss Wilkes.

i v

Robin folded his paper in his pocket, and sighed. One glance at Lilian was enough to assure him that she had no intention of being drawn any further into this discussion. So he decided to go outside and have a cup of coffee at Lyons'.

The coffee was so good, and the slab of chocolate cake which accompanied it was so delicious, that he began to revive. So he took the paper from his pocket, smoothed it out, and read:

Chaos. Miss Wilkes. {Shake it.}

Coming of Man. Freddy Taps.

Dawn of Civ.

Future. Cellophane.

It seemed that he was committed to writing a Miltonian epic in jazz form, which would illustrate, briefly but poignantly, the birth of the world, the dawn of civilization, and the vistas of the future.

This epic, which had to be set to music at least as good, if not better, than *Night and Day*, must provide opportunities for the posterior activities of Miss Wilkes, and for Freddy's taps.

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It must, presumably, be played in a setting which combined the rugged grandeur of Stonehenge with the sophistication of a cocktail bar.

The audience must never be in a moment's doubt about the story behind it.

Through it all there must shine the luminous spirit of H. G. Wells.

It must be snappy, inexpensive, dramatic and sensational.

And, of course, it must only last four minutes and must end in a 'belly-laugh'¹, which would keep the audience in fits of hysterical laughter until Freddy had had time to change from his cellophane (or his bear-skin, as the case might be) into the costume for his chimney-sweep number.

The writing of this number, Robin felt, would require all his concentration.

It did.

It kept him awake for nights.

It caused him to cover pages of foolscap.

It gave Sally many fits of hysterics.

It cost, in rehearsal fees, dresses and orchestrations, several hundred pounds.

And it was scrapped long before the first-night.

Such is the story of revue.

CHAPTER IX

<A TOUCH OF THE SUN'

i

A FEW days later, to make life still pleasanter, all the buses went on strike.

This fact would seem of small interest to our chronicle. But it led to an incident of considerable importance in the Kves of three people.

Thelma, of course, was not inconvenienced by the strike, though she constantly asserted that it was the beginning of a world-revolution, and put her pearls in the bank. Even if she had been compelled to crawl to rehearsals on her knees, her energy would have been equal to the task. She had returned from Paris the day after Robin's encounter with Sally, and had come straight from the station to the rehearsal room. She had swept in upon them like a highly-scented typhoon, and had immediately quickened the pace, and the temper, of all concerned. Instead of getting home at six o'clock, nobody had left before midnight, by which time a dangerous light was beginning to gleam in Humbert's eyes.

'Who's producing this show?' he muttered to Robin. 'That's what I'd like to know.'

'For the Lord's sake don't upset her yet.'

'That's all very well, but I'm supposed to be producing the damned thing, and as far as I can see ...'

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A sweet voice came from the corner. 'Humbert dear, we can't hear a word you say. *Do* come and help us, darling. I can't do *everything*, dear.'

If only the silver-haired Mr. Winterton had been here to check her! But Mr. Winterton was still in bed. So all the burdens of management, as well as of production, fell on Humbert's slender shoulders.

Lou Lancaster was another who was unconcerned by the strike, for she had just bought a little Fiat, which looked like an angry beetle. She had arrived in this car only a few minutes before Thelma. And indeed, there was something ominous in the journey of these two ladies towards their first rehearsal. For they had both been held up in the same traffic block, Thelma in her Packard and Lou in her Fiat. They had recognized each other, though each appeared to be sublimely unconscious of the other's existence. Thelma's immediate action was to order her chauffeur, through the speaking-tube, to step on it, hard. But Lou stepped on it harder. And since the beetle was capable of twisting in and out of narrow spaces, in the most aggravating manner, the beetle won.

As soon as she arrived, she leapt out of the car, rushed into the vestibule, sat down, and yawned widely, as though she had been there for hours. When Thelma came in a few seconds later she stifled the yawn, jumped to her feet, and greeted her effusively.

'Darling, I *thought* I saw your car.'

Thelma smiled, very sweetly indeed. 'But darling, why didn't you stop me? I could have given you a lift.'

Starr was also unaffected by the strike. He kept himself strictly closeted at the Savoy, learning to

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speaking him like the Oxford, And most of the other principals owned various forms of transport.

However, it was rough luck for the chorus girls. Most of them could get as far as Waterloo by the tube, but after they had reached this beauty spot, they either had to scramble on to a tram or trudge the remaining mile on foot. The struggle for the trams was so fierce that most of the girls preferred to walk.

On the second day of the strike, Robin, in the Ford, was just rounding the corner when he saw a small figure, clutching a bag, making a hopeless struggle to get into the tram. He looked again, saw it was Fay Pearl, stopped the car, and ran over to her.

He tugged her arm. 'Come out of that. I'll give you a lift.'

She struggled out, adjusted her hat, and said, 'Well, this is nice.'

He thought he had never seen anybody who smiled as she did. Her lips smiled, her cheeks smiled, her eyes smiled. She seemed to smile all over.

'It really is nice,' she repeated, and the smile seemed to fill the car. 'Almost worth the bus strike.'

'What, to drive a mile in a Ford?'

'Yes, because now I can thank you for all you did at the audition. I never should have had the courage.'

'I didn't do anything.'

'Oh yes you did. I saw.'

'You see most things, don't you?'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'Because I see most things too.' He would **have** liked **to** say that he saw she was far too pretty to be

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true, but that seemed to be working rather fast. So instead, he turned up a side-street.

'Wherever are you going?' she asked.

'There's a traffic block ahead.' he lied.

'I didn't see it.'

'That's one of the things you *didn't* see, then.'

Delightful conversation I He felt he could go on for ever, with variations on the verb 'to see'.

She smiled again. Really she shouldn't smile like that. 'I've never talked to an author before,' she said.

'I'm not an author.'

'Oh *no*. Nor a composer, I suppose. I think the music's beautiful.'

'Do you really?'

For answer, she sang. She did not hum. She sang. Full voice, in the old rickety Ford, looking straight ahead of her, without the slightest self-consciousness. It sounds embarrassing, not to say alarming. Actually, it was pretty good.

Who's lost?

Who's won?

Give me the sun

To burn this passion away!

Then she put both her hands over her face. 'I shouldn't have done that!'

'But it was grand.'

She shook her head.

'In fact,' insisted Robin, 'it was rather thrilling.'

'No. You *must* be angry.'

'You gave me an absolutely different idea of that song.'

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'Oh, but Thelma's *terrific*.⁹ And there was awe in her voice. She really meant it.

'Of course she is. But she makes it sinister.'

'It ought to be.'

'I know. But I like to think it can be happy too. '

He looked at her over his shoulder. 'I think you'd make anything happy.' And added hastily, 'Any song, I mean.'

They drew up at the door. There were no other cars in the side-street.

'We're the first,' said Fay.

'Let's go and try that song on the piano, before the others come.'

'Oh, *could* we?'

They ran in. He felt he had known her for years. They went to Bert's room, which contained an old Bechstein, rather tinny, but still very sweet.

He played the opening bars.

'Can I sing it as I really feel it?'

He nodded.

She sang.

The whole room seemed to fill with sunshine. The lyric which Thelma had made so distracted and so decadent (as indeed was the author's intention) was suddenly turned into a laughing, simple rhyme. 'Who's lost?' What did it matter? There was no such thing as a loss that is irrevocable when one was young, when the sun was shining. 'Who's won?' Everybody had won ... a grand time had been Had by all. 'Give me the sun!' The agonized appeal of Thelma was absent... there was none of that strange sense, which she always imparted, of a frozen soul crying for **the**

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warmth which would bring forgetfulness, none of the feeling that the singer was craving for a drug. Instead, Fay sang it like a child who runs into the sunlight, blinks for a moment, and then stretches out her hands and smiles.

The voice died away. Robin switched round on the piano stool.

'Well,' he said. 'You ought to be slaughtered.'

She stared at him.

'You take my best song and turn it upside down. You ought to be strangled.'

He was smiling, and she smiled back, a little timidly. (It was strange, he thought, how she became timid as soon as she stepped, as it were, off the stage.)

'You're not angry?'

'You seem to think I live in a permanent state of wrath. Of course I'm not. How could I be?' He began to play the chorus again. 'You've just taught me that my song was a good deal better than I thought it was.'

'But Thelma's *marvellous*' Again the note of awe.

'I know. I *know*.' He played less softly. 'But don't you see that a thing *must* be better if it's got so many angles? I only saw the obvious angle. The tragic angle. So did Thelma. But you've given the whole thing a new interpretation.' He tried to look malicious, and didn't succeed very well. 'I'm not thinking of *you*, he said. 'Only the song.'

'Well,' she said, 'I feel all head-over-heels.'

'So do I. Let's play it again.'

They began. And then the voice came.

II

But this time it was Thelma's voice.

Robin had forgotten about Thelma. He had forgotten, indeed, about everything.

He had forgotten that it was still early in the morning. That he was sitting at a tinny piano, playing a tune to a girl who was, to all intents and purposes, just a girl. He only knew that he had recaptured some of the feeling of inspiration which even the most mediocre spirits attain when there is music in the air.

And that he was indeed a mediocre spirit, at least in his conduct of life, will be immediately apparent.

'Robin!'

He stopped abruptly. It was Her voice, outside the door.

'Oh heavens!' Fay retreated to the corner.

'Ro ... bin!' The first syllable low, the second syllable high, the whole very sweet and cooing.

'Ah ... *there* you are!' She stood with her hand on the door, holding it half open. She did not appear to notice Fay. 'I've been looking for you everywhere. Do come along to my room, darling.' She flashed him a smile, and turned, leaving the door open for him to follow.

He followed. The spell was broken. It was now, most certainly, early, *very* early, in the morning. He wished ... oh how bitterly he wished ... that he did not always do what women told him. That he had the courage to be rude. His whole instinct had told him to remain seated at the piano and to say, 'Go to hell.' Or

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if he hadn't gone quite as far as that, to glance at his watch and say, coolly, 'I may be able to give you a few minutes in half an hour, if you'll wait in your room.' Instead of which, here he was, drooping down the corridor towards Thelma's room. For what? To be cursed about something. That was quite certain. He could not imagine what it could be, this time, but he was sure that it would be unpleasant. Nobody ever asked to see him nowadays unless they had something unpleasant to say.

He was right, Thelma had every intention of being unpleasant. She was in a towering rage, though she concealed it fairly well at first.

'Sit down, darling, and shut the door,' she said, as he entered. 'Oh no! . . .' she cried, 'not on that!' And she snatched a large wooden bracelet off the seat on which he was preparing to dispose himself.

'Is it sharp?' said Robin feebly.

'I don't know, dear, if it's sharp, but it happens to have been blessed by the Pope, thousands of years ago.' She spoke a little breathlessly as she laid this singular relic on her dressing-table.

She put her hand over her eyes. 'And do you mind not smoking for a minute, dear?' Her voice was quite faint.

Robin hastily put out his cigarette. He was not prepared for this saintly atmosphere. He wished he could think of something appropriate to say,

'This strike' ... she still kept her hands over her eyes ... 'it's killing me. It took me nearly three-quarters of an hour from Park Lane,' (Three-quarters of an hour in a large and comfortable Packard, thought

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Robin.) 'The traffic blocks! The smells! They ought to be shot!' She did not say whether she referred to the strikers or to the public. She only sighed, reached for a handkerchief, saturated it with Floris's 'Rose Geranium' and dabbed it on her forehead.

'I look like death,' she said, staring into the glass. Robin felt the old signs of the jitters coming over him. He could *not* think of anything to say to her. He rapidly went through the things he might say, in his head. They were as follows:

'Oh no you don't.'

'You *do* look a little tired.'

'Poor Thelma!'

'I wish the strike would stop.'

Lunatic remarks! Worthy of a half-witted school-child! But what else *did* one say to her? She paralysed speech at its source.

Fortunately she was speaking again. She turned from the mirror, and pulled herself together.

'However, don't let's think about *me*,' she said. 'I don't count. It's the Show we must all think about.'

Robin's heart sank. When people talked about the Show it was the worst sign.

'And that's why,' she continued, 'I frankly don't understand your behaviour just now. I may be wrong, but I just . . . do . . . not . . . understand it' She emphasized the words with a rat-tat-tat of her fingernails on the glass top of the dressing-table.

'Understand what?' said Robin, like a yokel.

'Oh my dear,' a shrill laugh, 'don't please let's play with one another. Do . •. *not*... letusdothat.' (Rat-tat-tat.) 'I get up at crack of dawn to come down to

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rehearsal. I stay for hours stifling in traffic-blocks. And then, what do I find as a reward? *Tou* . . . playing my song to Fay what's-her-name.'

'Fay Pearl,' said Robin.

⁴ 'I don't care if it's Fay Ruby or Fay Moonstone. I don't understand it.'

'Nor do I,' said Robin. And this time there was a little more vigour in his voice. 'I mean, I don't see what all the fuss is about.'

'Robin!' She was so agitated that she swept to the floor the bracelet which had received papal recognition. Robin supposed he ought to pick it up. But he was quite determined not to do so. 'I will *not* pick it up,' he said to himself. 'Not if the Pope entered the room at this moment. Not if I were threatened with excommunication. I . . . will . . . not . . . pick . . . it . . . up.'

She flicked her fingers impatiently towards the bracelet. Robin, with a look of fixed innocence, stared at the ceiling. He refused to meet her eyes. Still the fingers went on flicking. Then they stopped. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her bend down and pick it up.

'Round number one to Frost,' he thought. But hardly had he congratulated himself than he began to wonder if he *had* won it. For she immediately changed her tactics.

'Robin dear,' she said, in a different voice, 'you're upset.'

He groaned inwardly. When raging prime *donne* inform you that you are upset, the worst is to be feared.

'I'm not in the least upset,' he said without conviction.

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'Oh yes, you are. You're too highly-strung. You ought to take care. You might do something foolish.'

⁴ 'What sort of thing?'

'Well, darling, the very fact of your behaviour this morning. Can't you see? Dragging chorus girls off into corners and letting them scream out horrible parodies of *my* song.'

'It wasn't a horrible parody.'

'Perhaps you want *her* to sing it?'

'Thelma, don't be ridiculous.'

'Or Lou?' she demanded sweetly. 'I'm sure Lou would sing it beautifully, with a red nose and a pair of knickers.'

'I don't want anybody to sing it but you. Nobody else *could* sing it.' He summoned up all his slender resources of flattery. 'It would be blasphemy,' he proclaimed.

'Thank you, Robin.' Thelma was, for the first time, appeased. Blasphemy, in this connection, was the word she had been waiting for. It was very much *le mot juste*. She was accustomed to incense. She fitted, quite naturally, on to pedestals. It was therefore only right that when she was affronted, blasphemy should be confessed.

Robin had confessed. She could afford to be gracious.

'Well dear,' she said, '*that's* settled, then. And now, let's go and rehearse it.'

'Of course.'

'I'll get Lilian to play it. Then you can sit back and listen.'

She paused in the doorway, and added **over her**

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shoulder . . . 'unless you feel you couldn't bear it, after little Miss Pearl?'

Robin looked at her sharply. He noted that archness was now the mood of the moment.

'I think I'll be able to bear it,' he said.

III

She was thrilling.

'You've got to hand it to her,' he thought as he sat back in his corner. 'That's the way it should be sung.'

It will be remembered that this song was written in celebration of the passions which are born on the sun-drenched rocks of the Riviera. A girl singing of an unhappy affaire. A girl so crazed by sunlight, by long hours prostrated in its worship, that she didn't know what life was all about. That was the obvious idea. Expressed in an obvious way, and ending with the obvious words . . .

Who's lost?

Who's won?

Give me the sun

To burn this passion away!

Fay had sung it as a girl who is in love with life, Thelma as a woman who is in love with death. She sang in a sort of dazed ecstasy, and when she reached the words 'Give me the sun!'... Ah! She was superb!

She had certainly never heard of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, but no Oswald Alving ever put more lunatic conviction into those words 'Give me the sun', than Thelma, in

'A TOUCH OP THE SUN'

this trivial lyric. Her head was thrown back, her arms were rigid, her eyes were glazed. Her whole posture suggested an almost indecent surrender to the sun-god. There were echoes in her voice that, one felt, should never have been awakened.

It was a great performance.

i v

It was also an utterly meaningless performance.

For instead of singing the words that Robin had written, Thelma sang

Who's lost?

It's fun

Give me the sun, etc... .

When he first heard this strange version of his song, Robin was so entranced by the general nature of the performance that the words 'It's fun', if he heard them at all, made no impression upon him.

But when she sang it for a second time, he sat up abruptly. 'Who's lost? It's fun!' What had happened? Had some absurd error crept into Thelma's copy of the script? But even if there had been a misprint, why did she sing such nonsense? Oh obviously ... it must have been a slip of the tongue. He sat back again.

But it wasn't a slip of the tongue. For she sang it again a third time, and a fourth.

By now Robin felt desperate. He saw Humbert hurrying to his corner. He went up to him.

'I know exactly what you're going to say,' said Humbert. 'I've told her twice already.'

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'But was there a mistake in her script?'

'Not at all. She just likes saying "it's fun".' He gave his death's head smile. 'She's a whoopee girl, you see.'

'But the whole point of the song is that it is *not* fun.'

Humbert smiled again. 'Quite.'

'She's making it idiotic. Don't words mean *anything* to her?'

'Nothing at all,' replied Humbert blandly. 'That is the precise difficulty. If you asked her to sing

Who's lost?

Who's won?

The cat's come home

To burn my passion away,

she'd sing it. And she'd make it just as exciting.'

'It's incredible.'

'No, it's not. She's a slut. A very common, very-garden slut. I imagine that she can sign her name, though it'd be more natural for her to write an X. Presumably she can read . . . her own press-cuttings. But ask her to give an *intelligent* rendering of Humpty Dumpty and . . . well, it'd be like asking an Australian aboriginal to lecture on Einstein. She's got terrific qualities, but they're all animal qualities. It's all body and instinct and flair, with Thelma. And a complete absence of brain.'

'What's going to happen, then?'

'I'll speak to her again. But it won't make the least difference, now that she's learnt those words and likes them. Very primitive creatures like that are incapable of forgetting. They can remember, but they can never forget.'

<A TOUCH OF THE SUN'

'Like elephants.' muttered Robin.

'She is an elephant. A great red-haired elephant. She drives me mad.'

He went away again. A few minutes later he returned.

'No use,' he said, shrugging his shoulders.

Robin got up. 'I'm going to try myself.'

Humbert nodded. Then he bent over 'his script, proceeded to make notes, and apparently forgot all about the matter.

Robin found Thelma in her dressing-room. He had intended to be very brusque and business-like. He had no intention of being brow-beaten again. Once in a morning was enough.

'Darling!'

She welcomed him with her left hand. In the right, she held up a photograph.

'Now, what do you think of *that*?

Robin, taken aback, scrutinized the photograph. It showed a mass of hair, apparently lit by a spot-light, a woman's neck, and the tip of a woman's nose.

He did a rapid calculation in his head. To this effect:

A. The photograph must be one of Thelma. She would never brandish another woman's photograph over her head . . . certainly not at eleven o'clock in the morning.

B. The 'darling' and the underlined '*that*' implied that she approved of the photograph. If she had stressed the sentence otherwise, if she had

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said '*What* do you think of that? ', disapproval would be called for. In the circumstances, however ...

'Oh, my *dear*V (He employed the breathless tone.)

'Isn't it *marvellous*V

He sighed with relief.

'A Jew, *bf course*.'

A momentary pause. The object of the photograph? But no. He looked again. The nose turned up. She was evidently referring to the photographer.

'All the best photographers are Jews.' he said, leaping into the dark.

'My dear, how *right* you are!'

He blinked. Where were they? What was it all about? He had come into her room to talk about a line in a song. And here he was, in a sort of daze, staring at a photograph of Thelma (which looked, in his humble opinion, like a Spanish atrocity) and discussing the talents of the chosen race.

He pulled himself together.

'A *Touch of the Sun* was superb.'

'Better than Fay?' she inquired sweetly.

'I don't think we need go into that.'

She smiled, and began to hum the tune.

'I never knew what that song *could* be.'

Still smiling, still humming, she turned away, and began to spray herself with something that smelt as if it ought to be reserved for cinemas.

'There's just one thing. ...'

She turned. Her eyebrows arched. 'Yes?'

Robin gulped. 'That line' he said ...

'A TOUCH OF THE SUN'

Who's lost?

Who's won?

Give me the sun , •.

But she was before him. She threw out her arms. She filled the tiny room with her strange, husky voice.

Who's lost?

It's fun!

Give me the sun . . .

She finished it with a sort of moan.

'That's just it,' said Robin. His voice was dry and hoarse. He felt (and probably was) a bore. But what was he to do? 'There must have been some mistake.'

She gave him a radiant smile. She was not listening.

'In the script,' he persisted. 'The words are . . .

Who's lost?

Who's won?

She still smiled. She still turned slowly and deliciously round the room, squirting her abominable essences.

'But Thelma, darling . . . don't think me tiresome.'

The smiles, the squirts, the croonings . . . they all continued.

A last effort.

'But I *must* explain.'

He felt that he was talking into space.

'It isn't frightfully important, I know, but the whole idea of the lyric is spoiled if you don't say "Who's lost? Who's won?" I mean . . . "Who's lost? It's fun!" just doesn't make sense.'

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'But darling.' she said ... and she came up to him so slowly, so sweetly... 'it is fun, isn't it?'

And then, her arms came over his shoulders, and her mouth sought his.

She had a very large mouth. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. And so, there seemed nothing more to be discussed.

She continued to sing those lunatic lines.

Who's lost?

It's fun!

Give me the sun . ..

But you know the rest.

After a little while, Robin got used to it. At first, he flinched. Cursed her. Trembled, in his simple way, to think what the critics might write of a lyric so obviously futile ... (as if any critic, in his senses, had ever paused to consider the subtler meanings of a lyric in a revue). But in the end he surrendered. Her spell was so potent that his words were overshadowed.

CHAPTER X

REHEARSAL

I

'^.'OU'VE got a thing about her,' said Humbert.

'I have not.'

'A terrific thing.'

'Don't be an ass.'

Robin glowered at Humbert.

Humbert smiled back. Then he rose, went to the mantelpiece, broke a Benzedrine tablet in half, and swallowed it. 'Anyway,' he said. 'I'm glad *somebody's* normal in this company.'

Robin refused to be put off. 'It's not a question of normality. It's a question of who'll be best in the part. And Fay's simply made for it.'

'All right, all *right* ,' replied Humbert. 'As a matter of fact, if you really want to know, I cast her for it yesterday.'

'What? And you didn't tell me?'

'I wanted to see the eager flush on your boyish features.'

'I say, can I telephone and tell her?'

'Certainly not. That's my job. Damn it all, you must allow me *some* authority. I've none over Thelma. Precious little over Lou. I've no idea how I'm going to manage Starr, when he starts to function. And if you interfere between me and the chorus .. .'

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'Fay's a cut above the chorus now.'

'She isn't in salary. And she won't be in spirit either, as long as I have any say in the matter.'

With which they parted, amiably enough.

It was indeed true that Fay had risen, in the past week, with surprising swiftness. Robin, needless to say, had not raised any obstacles in her path. But he was not responsible for the speed with which she was coming forward. Everybody was responsible. When there was a question of casting a girl for the part of a lily in a little parody called *Flowers of England* even Mr. Llewellyn had snorted 'Better give it to that Pearl girl. She looks like all the foolish virgins rolled into one.'

She still appeared in the chorus routines. But apart from those she already had . . .

A. The lily.

B. A tiny duet with a juvenile called *Two Sorts of Tea*. She made this so gay and pleasant that Robin had written an extra chorus.

c. Two front-cloth speeches of introduction, which she was making almost as important as the sketches that followed them.

D. The part of 'the other girl' in *A Touch of the Sun*, which was the cause of the argument we have just heard.

And Robin had an idea up his sleeve which would give her something a good deal more important than any of these. But for the moment, he kept that to himself.

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'There's nothing to be scared about.'

'Oh no. Nothing at all. I'm sure. Thank you very much.'

She pursed her mouth, and twisted her gloves, and bent once more over her manuscript.

It was the first time he had ever seen her show signs of anything but 'niceness'. But no, that wasn't quite true. When she had chosen to recite Wordsworth at the audition, she hadn't been 'nice '. Superb, yes. But from all conventional standpoints, monstrous.

'But Fay, it's only a tiny part. And we're all with you.'

'You can make more of a fool of yourself in a tiny part than in a big one,' she said sharply. 'And sympathy dries me up.'

Perhaps if we only knew, she had reason to speak sharply. If we could peer into the private lives of those whom we encounter, if we were aware of the dragons they had been obliged to slay before they met us at a cocktail-party, or in the board-room, or on the stage, we might be more sympathetic to their eccentricities. Maybe we shall meet Fay's dragons on a later page. It is sufficient to say that they had been sufficiently formidable of late.

No sooner had she spoken than she was seized with regret. She put out her hand, which was trembling, and a little damp.

'Please ... Mr. Frost.'

'Robin to you.'

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She gulped. An adorable gulp, that showed itself in a faint shadow, flying down her neck.

'I didn't mean to be rude.'

'You weren't.'

'I was horrible. It's just ... you see, well, I didn't sleep very well last night.'

'Why not?' It seemed terribly important that he should know.

'I ... I had toothache,' she lied.

'Male or female?'

She smiled, in spite of herself. 'Female.'

'Sure?'

'Quite sure. A relation.'

'Would you like me to kill her? Or anything?'

She shook her head. And this time she did not smile. She bent over her manuscript. She said: 'I must learn my part.'

There was no chance to get any more out of her, for there were voices outside, and the others began to troop in.

First came Bert, then Lilian. Then Humbert and Mr. Llewellyn. Everybody was a little on edge. For this was the morning on which Dushan Starr was to make his first appearance as an English actor. Would he rise to the occasion? Would he justify the risk they had taken? Above all, would he have learned to 'speak him like the Oxford'? They were soon to know.

The clock struck eleven. Thelma entered. She was more than on edge. She was a bundle of nerves. She had been very foolish last night, having drunk far too much champagne. It was four o'clock before she went to bed, and even then she had gone for no good reason.

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The first person she saw was Fay. From Fay, she glanced to Robin, who was striding against the opposite wall. She thrust a cadhou into her mouth, (one never knew) ' and swooped upon him.

'What is that girl doing here?' she demanded, in a hoarse whisper.

'Fay? I believe she's playing the little part of the girl in *A Touch of the Sun*?

'I see. Why?'¹

'I don't know, I'm sure. Humbert cast her. What's wrong with her?'

She bit hard on her cachou, and endeavoured to appear unconcerned. 'Nothing,' she replied airily. 'Nothing at all. I think she's excellent. I only thought that if she's in every sketch, and every number, and every song, the audience might get a little tired of her. However . . .' she shrugged her shoulders, and did not finish the sentence, for at this moment Starr entered the room.

There was a scraping of chairs as the assembled company rose to meet him. If Dushan Starr had been a British actor, it is doubtful whether he would have received such deference. Even if he had been French or German, he would not have seemed to loom so large. But he came from Yugoslavia, and Thelma (who had looked it out on the map) was not alone in thinking that there must be something very remarkable about anybody who could live in such a country at all, let alone act in it.

'Good morninks,' said Starr, removing a coat that was heavily lined with an unknown form of fur. He scowled round the room, and turned to Humbert.

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'Those?' he said, pointing to everybody except Thelma and Fay. They rest?

Humbert assumed his death-mask smile. He was not quite certain what Starr implied.

'Those persons rest?' repeated Starr. 'In this chamber?'

'Oh yes.' assented Humbert, getting it. He bowed to Starr and then indicated the others. 'I think you know our author, and our stage manager, and Mr. Llewellyn. ...'

'I know them, I know them,' he interrupted, as though he would very much prefer that he did not. 'We 'ave been introduced.'

And he proceeded to fumble for his manuscript in the dubious fur coat.

'What is it lined with?' whispered Robin to Humbert.

'Yugoslavian mink,' Humbert whispered back.

The atmosphere was tense. Nobody could think of anything to say. Starr was breathing very heavily through his large, horsey nostrils and staring ahead of him, while he fumbled in the coat. One had a feeling that he was groping in the bowels of some strange animal. At last he discovered the manuscript, dragged it out with a triumphant 'Ach! and put it right up to his eyes.

Humbert took this as a signal to begin.

'Supposing we just read the lines through first,' he began, 'and then we can see....'

'No!' Starr shook his head violently. He pointed to the script. 'It say in the book we lean against the bar. So! We will lean.' He looked round for some-

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thing to lean against, and chose a high desk in the corner. He went over to it and beckoned to Thelma, 'Comer

Thelma was not at all used to being spoken to like this. If any other actor had stalked round the room, crooking his fingers at her and ordering her to 'come', she would have told him, quite briefly, to go to hell. But there was something about Starr which seemed to command obedience. Perhaps it was his immense size. Perhaps it was because you felt he had a consuming passion for his art. Or perhaps it was just the fact that he came from Yugoslavia. Whatever it was, the general effect was overwhelming.

So Thelma, after a startled glance at Humbert (who seemed to be equally intimidated), meekly went over to the desk.

As a hardened old trooper she realized that she was up against it. Starr seemed to dominate everything within sight. It might be rather exciting to play with him, she thought, providing that she wasn't swamped. But then, she had no intention whatever of being swamped. She had enough technique to cope with him. She would need it.

'Let me look at you!'

She let him look. She could hardly have prevented him, even if she had wanted to.

He looked and looked, and his eyes seemed to b\irn her up. It was most embarrassing, particularly in view of last night, and the champagne, and all the rest of it. She wished Humbert would do something. What was the use of a producer if he did not produce?

She was about to relieve the tension by an alluring

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smile when suddenly Starr leaned forward, pointed his finger in her face and hissed:

'You drink!'

Thelma jumped. 'I , .. *what* did you say?'

'You dr-r-rink!' he cried.

She stared at him with her mouth open. Could she believe her ears? She . . . Thelma .. . *drank*? Was he **mad**?

Without pausing to think, she got up, and slapped him very hard indeed on the cheek.

Immediately there was an uproar. Lilian screamed. Mr. Llewellyn said, 'Please, please! Gentlemen, *please*Y rather like a bar-tender at closing time. Humbert darted round saying, 'Darling, *dotftj* to nobody in particular . Fay twittered nervously into Robin's ear. And Thelma burst into tears.

The only person who appeared to be completely unmoved was Starr. The slap, which was powerful and well-directed, had apparently affected him no more than a butterfly alighting on the snout of a rhinoceros. He did not even look annoyed.

'She is mod,' he said placidly.

'Yes ... of course ... I mean ... darling, *don't*,' murmured the distracted Humbert.

'Me? Mad? As well as drunk?' Thelma put her hands on her hips. Her brief tears had quickly dried up. She was now just a very angry woman. 'Then let me tell you, Mr. Yugo-Slavia . . .'

He crashed his fist on the table. He lifted up his manuscript. He roared at her. 'On this papier it is written you take up the glass and you dr-r-rink! Why you not do it? Why you not *act*?

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He turned, shook the manuscript in their faces, and stalked to the door. He pointed his finger to his head, 'All of you . . . mod!' he proclaimed. And swept out.

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Ten minutes later, calm was restored. As much calm, that is to say, as was compatible with the tempest which had just preceded it. Starr had been retrieved from the back-yard, where he was sulking and muttering to himself. Thelma having been reluctantly convinced that Starr really was referring to the script, and not to her personal habits, had also been lured back to the scene of action. Lilian was nervously crouching near the piano. Mr. Llewellyn crossed and uncrossed his legs. Fay and Robin glanced at each other from opposite corners. And Humbert fluttered about, wondering what on earth he could do that would give the impression that he was producing', without calling down all the wrath of Yugoslavia upon his head.

The dialogue began. It made no pretensions to brilliance, but it might have been effective if it had been spoken quickly and tensely, and if the scene had been well lit. (These qualifications, after all, apply to most modern dialogue.) It was a quarrel scene on the Riviera . . . the sort of scene which is played, at midnight, in a hundred bars on that enchanted coast. It went like this:

{She drinks}

HE *{trying to take away her glass}* Darling . . . don't.

SHE I don't see that it's got anything to do with you.

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HE I wasn't thinking of myself, for once.

SHE Really? *{Sweetly}* Aren't you feeling well?

HE *(pulling himself together)* Grand. I'll join you.

(HE drinks too)

SHE *(defiantly)* It's good brandy, isn't it?

HE Excellent.

SHE This is my third.

HE Really? I must catch up. *(To barman)* Give me a double Martell.

(SHE stares at him for a moment. Then SHE puts her hand over her eyes)

SHE My head aches like mad.

HE I don't wonder.

SHE It isn't the brandy. It's the sun. Couldn't we get away somewhere?

HE We'd be just the same.

SHE Not if we could escape.

HE We can't escape from ourselves.

SHE No. But we can escape from the sun. *(Hysterically)* It's burning me up. *(She switches round on her stool and points with a shaking hand. She points to the moon)* Look at it . . . the sun!

And so on. Going quickly through a confession of mutual infidelity, a defiant 'well and what of it?' attitude, more drinks, and a final hammer and tongs. Ending, of course, on Starr's exit, to the first bars of Thelma's song (played on muted 'cellos).

In other words, the sort of thing which is worth fifteen shillings a seat if Miss Gertrude Lawrence is on the stage, and nothing at all if she isn't,

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I v

Miss Gertrude Lawrence, however, was not on the stage. And even Miss Lawrence might have had difficulty in coping with the astonishing variations on the English language which Dushan Starr now proceeded to play. For this is how he began.

{She drinks}

[The reader, when at a loss, is recommended to turn back to the original text.]

STARR Darlinks (*snarl*) Dawn't!

(Hand on THELMA'S wrist)

THELMA (*struggling between a ladylike aversion to such manhandling, and a subtle thrill at the contact*) I don't see that it's got anything to do with you.

STARR Pshaw! (*spraying the surrounding air with his vehemence*) I do not sink out of myself, no!

THELMA (*taken aback at this singular variation of the script*) Oh!

STARR No. No.

(Pointing his finger at the manuscript)

THELMA (*quickly returning to script*) Really? Aren't you feeling well?

STARR (*a tremendous snarl*) Grant! (*Beats chest*) I will join.

' (Sweeps up imaginary glass and guzzles contents)

THELMA (*fascinated*) It's good brandy, isn't it?

STARR Ha! Ha! Exzellent!

THELMA (*in a daze*) This is my third.

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STARR So? Ha! I must ketchup. *{Roars at the wall}*
Give me a doppel Marr-r-r-tell 1

And thus, and thus. After an hour of these verbal and physical pyrotechnics, Starr expressed himself satisfied. And without asking leave from the producer, or saying a word to the leading lady, or indicating his knowledge that the author existed, he swept up his fur coat, jammed on his hat, opened the door, slammed it, and was gone.

v

To Robin's surprise and relief, Thelma, at this crisis, nobly sacrificed the chance of being temperamental.

She sent Mr. Llewellyn away with an assurance that Starr would be a 'sensation'. She patted everybody else on the back (a little vaguely, it is true) and murmured, 'How thrilling he is.' And she winked at Robin and Humbert, and beckoned them through the corridors, on to the centre of the stage, where they could be sure that nobody was listening.

Her face was set in hard lines. Her chin was out.

'This is serious,' she said.

'It's the *end!*' wailed Humbert.

'I've played with Negroes in cabaret. I've played with Chinks in a pantomime. I once did an act with six performing seals. And they *all* spoke better English than that.'

Robin sat down disconsolately on a packing-case. 'We were mad to engage him,' he said.

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'On the contrary, he's a genius,' said Thelma surprisingly. 'But can he be taught in time?'

'If I had six months. It's such an *extraordinary* noise,'

'You're telling me. Did you hear him tell me I had a "touch of the sonny"?"

'He's mixing it up with German,' said Robin. '*Sonne* is the German for sun.'

'I don't care what it's the German for. It puts me *off*. Touch of the sonny, indeed. It puts me *off*. We'd get the bird. Oh hell!' She folded her arms and tapped her foot impatiently on the boards. Then she suddenly looked at Robin.

'Do you speak German well?'

'Pretty well.'

She clapped her hands. 'There we are then!'

'Where? What?'

'You'll have to take him in hand.'

Robin retreated in alarm. 'Not in a hundred years.'

'Well, who else is there? Humbert's not got a second. Neither have I.'

'And what about me?' he demanded hotly. 'I suppose writing about forty lyrics a day is nothing?'

'*Please*, Robin.' Thelma put her hand on his shoulder.

'It's blackmail,' he said.

'Robin, you must.'

'You honestly *must*.'

'It's torture,' he said. 'It's cruelty to animals. It's rape.'

Nevertheless, so amenable was his disposition, **that**

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on **the** following day he found himself giving lunch to Dushan Starr at the Savoy Grill. And giving an English lesson as well.

v I

'Wards!' snorted Starr. 'What *are* wards? Nothing but wards!' Whereupon he bent over his sauerkraut, as though the subject were closed.

Robin blinked. Wards. . . words . . . no, better stick to wards. Were they really so unimportant? Under the compelling gaze of Dushan Starr, one might think so. But would an audience have the same opinion?

Besides, they were *his* wards. And he wanted people to hear them. He had a dim hope that they might even laugh at them.

He couldn't let Starr get away with it quite so easily as that.

'I do see what you mean,' he said. 'You have marvellous command of gesture.' He searched for words, and helped himself to mustard. 'Your personality is outstanding.'

'So?' Starr . . . misinterpreting this remark . . . glanced sharply at his waistcoat.

'Nobody could wish for more.'

'No?' Starr frowned, and readjusted his napkin.

'At the same time, English people are difficult.' Starr nodded fiercely.

'Stupid,' continued Robin.

'Dumm,' confirmed Starr.

'Dumm. That's it. They *like* words.'

'Well . . . 'ave they not enoff wards?'

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Robin felt that they had more than enough, Starr's accent was so tough that it would probably take about a week to teach him the simplest sentence. All the same, he must have a shot at it. So he drew from his pocket the manuscript of *A Touch of the Sun*, and turned to the lead-up between Thelma and Starr. His eye lit upon a line that had given a great deal of trouble . . . 'Did you stay to breakfast?' It was spoken by the man to the woman, in reference to her affaire the night before. It had to be said lightly . . . with an undertone of bitterness. Starr said it like a Prussian sergeant-major asking a private soldier why he was late on parade.

'Now,' said Robin, feeling very damp .; . 'this line here ...'

Starr seized the manuscript and put it close to his eyes.

'Well?' he said. 'Deed you stay to br-r-rakefawst?'

'Yes.' said Robin. 'That really is much better. But, of course, it's a difficult word. Perhaps . . . a little more like this. Breakfast. You see? *Breakfast*'

'Br-r-rakefawst,' repeated Starr, defiantly.

'Yes. That's splendid. But in English we ...'

'Br-r-rakefawst.' He stared sullenly ahead of him. 'It is a nugly ward.'

'Oh yes it is.' Robin could not have agreed more fervently. 'A very nugly ward, word, indeed.'

'It would be much better . . . petit dejeuner.'

'Yes, of course it might. But yoti see, English people . . .'

'Petit dejeuner,' repeated Starr, ignoring him. 'Ca se comprend.' He turned his head. 'Deed you stay

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to petit déjeuner?' he demanded, in very menacing tones, of a waiter.

Tardon, sir?' said the waiter, in alarm.

Starr waved him away. 'Deed you stay to petit déjeuner? I say again, ca se comprend. But ... deed you stay to br-r-rakefawst ... ?a ne se comprend pas.'

Which, Robin reflected, could not be more true.

'Well, ' he said in despair, 'I suppose we had better alter it.' (He trembled to think how Thelma would pronounce petit déjeuner when *she* had to say it, but that was a bridge which he must not attempt to cross until he came to it.)

So he altered this.

And he altered that.

And he altered the other.

And he went on altering all the afternoon, in Starr's flat. And drumming in the alterations all the evening in *his* flat. And going over them with Starr and Humbert, in Humbert's studio, late at night.

It would be far too exhausting to trace Starr's gradual progress in the next ten days. It is enough to say that the progress was made . . . little by little, and at the expense of a great deal of nervous strain.

'To-morrow,' Robin kept saying to himself, 'I shall be able to see a little of Fay. Maybe I'll even be able to drive her home.'

But to-morrow never came. For by the time that Starr had mastered the elementary vowel sounds of the English language, a new menace was looming on the horizon.

CHAPTER XI

STARS IN THEIR COURSES

I

THE new menace was Lou.

No ... it is not quite fair to say that. The menace really consisted in Thelma's bitter hostility to that lady. It grew day by day, becoming more and more of an obsession, until a large part of Humbert's time at rehearsals was wasted in devising ways and means to keep them apart.

For these two ladies, like rival frigates in a choppy sea, were so busily occupied in endeavouring to take the wind out of each other's sails, that the danger of a collision became hourly more acute.

We have not heard much about Lou since the first chapter. Humbert had deliberately kept her away as much as possible from the first two weeks' rehearsals, in order to avoid upsetting Thelma. He was quite justified, as a producer, in making this arrangement, because most of Lou's numbers were solos, which she could easily rehearse with Lilian in her spare time. Needless to say, she never appeared on the stage at the same time as Thelma, except in the openings and **the** finales.

This plan had also been very welcome to Robin, who had dreaded a resumption of the amorous attacks

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to which he had been subjected on the night of Humbert's party. To his relief, he found that they were not resumed, partly because Lou had given him up as a bad job, but principally because she was a really conscientious artist, who didn't mix pleasure with business.

All she desired was to concentrate on the job in hand, to get the utmost out of her numbers. But it was becoming more and more difficult.

At first Thelma merely intensified the tactics she had employed before, dripping poison, in the most honeyed tones, wherever she went.

Thus, when she was lunching at the Ivy with a gossip-writer, and when the gossip-writer pointed to a girl in the corner and said, 'That girl's going to be another Lou Lancaster one day' . . . she replied, pensively, 'Do we *want* another Lou Lancaster, d'you think?' Just like that. As if she wondered.

And when, on the first day that rehearsals were moved to the Burlington Theatre, a chorus-girl cut her finger, and was running about the stage looking for some peroxide to put on it, Thelma, most thoughtfully, had cried out from the back of the stalls, 'Go to Miss Lancaster's dressing-room, darling, I'm sure *she'll* have some!' (For Lou, you see, had just dyed her hair, and was foolishly denying that she had done so.)

And when they were all reminiscing, one night, over supper at the Savoy Grill, and somebody had asked what sort of part Lou had played during her last appearance in New York, Thelma, who had been at Southampton at the time, and had witnessed Lou's departure on the steamer, replied, 'I don't think the

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poor dear can have had a very large *party* because it wasn't a very large *boat*'

Such methods, however, were not achieving the results which Thelma desired. Lou showed no signs of being crushed. Indeed, she even began to retaliate. And so Thelma, like the brilliant general that she was, changed her tactics.

She suddenly became Moral.

That, in itself, was hard enough to bear. But she had the heaven-sent idea of pretending to assume that Lou was Moral too. (The capital letter is inevitable, so formidable was Thelma's Morality.)

Without any warning she decided that Lou should be (for the purposes of this campaign) a poor innocent creature who simply did not understand that her actions might be misinterpreted. If, for example, she made a line sound *risque*, it must be Pointed Out. Lou must be told that though she herself might have absolutely no idea that there was anything wrong with the line, there were certain Facts of Life (with which she was evidently unacquainted) which might be conceived, by nasty minded persons, to have some connection with that line. And that therefore she would naturally not *wish* to be associated with such a line.

It would be the same with her gestures. Thelma would assume, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that they were the happy, carefree gestures of a child. But just as a child, playing on the beach, may occasionally assume positions which are embarrassing to its parents, so Lou, playing on the stage, would occasionally (out of sheer innocence, of course) display more than such a sweet-minded girl would *wish* to display.

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Thelma knew, very well, that when anybody tells us that we do not *wish* to do certain things, it is difficult to protest that, actually, we wish to do them very much indeed.

And so the campaign began.

11

The first skirmish came during the rehearsal of a sketch called *At Sea*. This was played, slickly and brilliantly, by Starr and Lou, with nobody else on the stage. It had developed into one of the strongest comedy scenes in the revue, it seemed assured of success, and as such, was evidently a suitable field on which battle could be engaged.

A word of explanation concerning this sketch is necessary.

The idea for it had occurred to Robin in the gymnasium of an Atlantic liner on the one and only occasion that he had crossed to New York. For the benefit of those who have wisely refrained from crossing the Atlantic (in either direction), it should be explained that these gymnasiums are full of elaborate electrical devices for giving the passengers various forms of artificial exercise. There is, for example, a steel horse, mounted with a leather saddle. When a button is pressed in the horse's stomach, it jogs up and down, gently or ferociously, according to the degree of current it is given. There is also an artificial camel, which rolls to and fro and a couch that bounces up and down, massaging its victims in the small of the

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back. There are machines that look like railway buffers which percuss the passenger in the stomach. There are stationary bicycles, with wall-charts attached, showing the mileage pedalled. A great deal of quiet fun can be had in a ship's gymnasium.

Into this scene enter Lou and Starr, in gym kit. In a few lines it is explained that they are two famous stars, who have been stage lovers in a number of successful plays, and (as is usual in such circumstances) detest each other in private life. They are going over to New York to appear in a new drama. They have very little time in which to learn their parts, and so they choose every opportunity of rehearsing.

They then proceed to rehearse a violent love-scene, at the same time that they are taking exercise. Lou rolls about on the camel, wailing, 'Darling, if it could only be like this ... for ever!' Starr, manuscript in hand, is percussed in the stomach, and cries, 'There is a magic in your touch V Or words to that effect.

The situation, obviously, had comic possibilities, especially in view of Lou's enormous bulk. Often Lou and Starr lost control of themselves and dissolved into helpless laughter. This worried Humbert very much, for one of the few theatrical rules which is nearly always reliable is the rule that whenever the actors think a comedy scene is funny, the audience will take an opposite point of view. However he hoped for the best.

On the morning when Thelma decided to open hostilities, the sketch had gone particularly well. Starr, who was daily becoming more comprehensible (not that that was saying very much), had shown a

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fertility of comic invention worthy of the great Grock. And Lou had discovered a number of new and grotesque positions into which she could twist her substantial body.

It was upon these positions that Thelma concentrated her attention. As she sat in the front row of the stalls, pale and grave, when all around her were laughing, her face assumed an expression that might have been worn by a strict but kindly schoolmistress on discovering her favourite pupil reading a novel by the late Paul de Koch. Obviously the sweet girl was not doing it intentionally. She just did not understand, that was all. She must be told.

So when the sketch was over, Thelma (who by now had almost convinced herself that she was acting from a high sense of duty, rather than with any desire to be annoying) hurried to the back of the stage, and greeted Lou with surprising affection.

'Darling' she exclaimed. 'It's brilliant 1 '

'I'm so glad you liked it,' grunted Lou, who was somewhat out of breath.

'It gets better every time. So witty.' She paused.

Lou glowered down at her. 'You didn't *seem* awfully amused, dear.'

Thelma sighed, and looked on the floor. 'Well dear, actually there was one thing which worried me a little. I do hope you won't think me tiresome, but it's ...'

'It's for the *Show*, isn't it, dear?' Lou took the words out of her mouth.

Thelma glanced at Lou somewhat sharply. She did not quite like the way in which she had adopted her favourite expression. However there was nothing in

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Lou's expression to indicate **that** she had spoken **with any** ironical intention. So she just nodded, and **sighed, and** went on:

'It's when you're on that camel, darling. **There's** one position you get into . . . well . . . really . . .' **she** shook her head.

'Which one do you mean?' demanded Lou.

'After you press the button to make it go more quickly.'

'I don't remember.' Needless to say, Lou remembered perfectly well. 'You'd better get on the camel and then you can show me.'

Thelma held out her hand in dissent and closed her eyes for just a second, like a duchess confronted with a very unpleasant drain.

'No dear,' she said. 'I don't think I would like to **do** that. In fact I don't think I *could* get into such a position, even if I tried.' She smiled affectionately. 'Not so supple as you, dear.'

'Well, what's *wrong* with it?'

Thelma sighed. She glanced behind her to make sure that no innocents could be corrupted by her revelation. And then she leant forward, and whispered something in Lou's ear.

'But that's the whole point,' protested the shameless Lou. She was beginning to get rattled, in spite of herself.

Thelma evidently did not hear her retort. 'You **see**, dear, I thought I had to warn you. Ntfbody else might have felt up to it.'

'It's the whole *point*,' repeated Lou, louder **than ever**.

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But Thelma, strange to say, still seemed unable to hear her-'

And that sort of thing never pays, does it, dear?'

Lou took a deep breath. As calmly as possible she said: 'The line becomes completely pointless if you cut out that action.'

'Then I should cut out the line, dear,' said Thelma. 'I'm sure Robin would be delighted. It probably crept in, didn't it?' (That was a particularly nasty one. There had been more than one public reference, by Humbert, to Lou's habit of making lines 'creep in'.)

'I can't possibly cut it out,' retorted Lou. (And even as she said it she marvelled at her own docility. Why wasn't she telling Thelma to get to hell out of it? Why wasn't she ordering her to mind her own something business? What was there about this frightful woman that seemed to paralyse speech at its source?)

'Well, dear, if you feel you can't cut out the line, that makes me all the more glad that I was able to tell you about the . . . the other thing.'

She put her arm affectionately round Lou's shoulder. 'I only hope you'll do the same for me. I really *mean* it, dear.'

And with a final squeeze, she drifted away, leaving Lou in a state of dangerously high blood pressure.

Round Number One was certainly in Thelma's favour.

On the following day, when the sketch was in rehearsal, Thelma was in her usual place in the front row

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of the stalls. How she managed to get so much time off from her own rehearsing, in order to watch Lou, was something of a mystery to the rest of the company. But even if she had been forced to remain up half the night doing her own work, she would not have lost this opportunity to interfere with Lou's.

On this occasion, Lou's behaviour on the camel was, if possible, more shameless than ever. However, Thelma did not appear to notice this at all. She showed every manifestation of delight. She laughed, and clapped, and laughed again ... so loudly, indeed, that she put Lou off, with the result that she fell from the camel and bruised one of the parts complained of.

And then there came a moment when Thelma ceased to laugh, when she became pensive, not to say grave.

The cause for this sudden change was a single word.

The word *occupe*.

This word, which is to be observed, apparently permanently fixed, on the doors of all French *toilettes*, had of course been inserted by Lou herself. At first Robin had objected, because he thought that some members of the audience might be old-fashioned enough to object to it. However Lou, having thought of it, became fanatically attached to it.,

'If you take it out,' she said, 'I shall die, and you'll find "*occupe*" written on my heart, like Calais on Bloody Mary's.'

So it stayed in.

It was, needless to say, a godsend to Thelma.

When the sketch was over, she slipped across to Lou, and guided her into a corner.

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'My dear . . . *brilliant!*' she exclaimed. 'And the way you fell off that camel!'

'That's not going to happen again, thank you.' replied the injured Lou.

'Don't tell me you didn't do it on purpose,' laughed Thelma, as though she knew much better. 'It's the best bit of acting you've ever done.'

The two ladies smiled at each other, like two hungry jaguars politely declining a leg of lamb.

Then the smile faded from Thelma's face. She appeared to recollect something. She frowned and put her finger to her forehead. 'There's just one thing. It's only a detail, in fact . . . a single word.'

'Yes?' breathed Lou, knowing quite well what was coming.

'That word . . . *occupe*. I don't suppose you know what it means.'

Lou almost burst. The insolence of the woman! Assuming that she was a poor old provincial who had never travelled out of England!

'Oh yes I do, dear.' Her voice was very hoarse. 'It means you're out of luck.'

Deafness had again stricken Thelma, although she winced slightly.

'A West End audience, dear,' she said, 'is different from audiences like . . .' and though she did not finish the sentence, the wave of her hand indicated the words, 'like those to which *you* are accustomed.'

'Anyway,' said Lou, 'they're all human, I hope.'

Thelma was far, far above hearing such a remark. In the most spiritual tones she observed, 'To a West End audience, the sort of audience which' . . . and

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again, a wave of the hand indicated the words, 'which comes to see *me*, ... 'a word like that would have associations.'

'Pleasant ones, I hope,' barked Lou.

The strain of being at once deaf, spiritual, and actively malevolent was beginning to tell on Thelma. She felt that if she were really to look at Lou, instead of gazing over her head, and if she were to attempt to reply to her in her own language, a most unladylike brawl would certainly ensue. And so, with a smile that suggested the very sourest of lemons, and a sigh that approached a hiss, and an embrace that came perilously near a scratch, she murmured, 'Just think it over, darling', and drifted away once more.

Round Number Two, it would seem, was definitely in favour of Lou.

i v

Round Number Three was awaited, by all concerned, with breathless interest.

For some time it seemed as though nothing was going to happen after all. Outwardly, the two ladies were as devoted sisters. They scrambled to put their arms round one another's waists. The air was thick with 'darlings' and 'precious's' whenever they were together. Thelma even asked Lou into her dressing-room ... once. 'Do come and have a drink after rehearsal, darling,' she said, 'you know my dressing-room — Number I, just opposite the stage-door.'

Lou said she would be charmed, adding 'And **after**

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that, darling, come and have one in mine. It's Number 82 **and it's** somewhere in the cellar.' The insolence of **the woman**, waving her wretched star-dressing-room in **her** face!

It was only the day after this little passage-at-arms **that** the large golden star, which Thelma always had hung on the door of her dressing-room, vanished, to reappear on the door of the w.c. Such pleasantries, Humbert felt, did not add to the joy of a producer's life. He accused Lou, point-blank, of the outrage, which had sent Thelma into hysterics. But Lou only opened her eyes very wide, and said that Thelma had probably carried it to the w.c. herself, and hung it on the door, in order to ensure tranquillity.

'After all,' she said lazily, 'darling Thelma's *always* a star, isn't she? Wherever she may be . . . don't you think?'

But it was on the stage that hostilities were most manifest. It was absolutely necessary, for the sake of the running order, that Thelma should sing a sentimental song called *Second Love* immediately after Lou's comic Britannia number. Thelma had protested bitterly against this juxtaposition, but Humbert had at last overruled her. Not because he was particularly forceful, but because he was right, and because Thelma secretly knew that he was right. By one of those strange paradoxes of the theatre it happens to be far easier **to** persuade an audience to accept a serious song after **a** comic one, than to accept a comic song after a **serious one**. If you send on a red-nosed comedian, who **puts the** audience in **a** thoroughly vulgar and **up-roarious mood**, **you** can safely follow him by something

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as delicate, as wistful, as pianissimo, as you please. Perhaps the audience feel, 'Poor little girl, she's got a hard job, coming on to sing about moonbeams when we're still chuckling about beer and pickles.' Who knows? The mind of an audience is dark and unfathomable.

So Thelma sang sweetly about second love immediately after Lou had sung raucously about Britannia. Which was just as it should be. But what was *not* as it should be was that Lou, at every rehearsal, managed to drop one of her 'props' in the centre of the stage, in a position artfully calculated to make it impossible for any stage-hand to remove it. At first, she only dropped her red, white and blue handkerchief. That did not matter very much, although it served, throughout Thelma's song, as a tactless reminder of what had gone before. It was not so easy when she dropped her red, white and blue gloves. Thelma managed to sweep her voluminous white skirt over one of the gloves, but the other was out of her reach. Try as she would, she could not forget it, with the result that she sang very badly on that occasion.

With a smile that stretched from ear to ear, and a voice that was almost strangled with rage, she accosted Lou afterwards.

'Quite falling to pieces, aren't you, darling?'

To which Lou, in honeyed tones replied, 'Aren't we all?'

The culminating point came when Lou, after a particularly brilliant interpretation of her number, knocked off her helmet as she swaggered to the wings, and failed to pick it up. There it lay, glistening,

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malevolent. All the lights in the theatre seemed to be concentrated on that absurd, rococo object. A stage hand made a tentative movement from behind the false pros, but it was too late. The curtain had already-drifted back, the lights were dimmed, and here was Thelma, drifting down to the footlights like a snow-flake.

She saw the helmet. She stiffened. By a tremendous effort of will, she carried on.

Mechanically, she sang her lines. ('Shall I rise above it? Shall I pretend I don't notice it? Damn her, damn her. Or shall I make a scene? Shall I take it up and throw it at her? She ought to be drowned. She ought to have been strangled at birth.')

And all the time, she carried on.

Then, suddenly, she made up her mind what to do. She was so pleased at her idea, that the words seemed to be charged with a new significance, a hidden beauty that Robin had never suspected.

The last notes drifted away, softly and sweetly. Lilian played the final chord.

Thelma did not hesitate for a second.

She stepped forward quickly, so that her long skirt hid the helmet.

'Humbert! Humbert!' she cried.

'What is it?' he demanded from the darkened stalls.

'Look .. • quickly!' She pointed to the gallery. 'I believe something's on fire!'

Everybody in the theatre switched round in alarm, and stared to where Thelma was pointing. Bert and a stage hand darted through the pass-door and began to race up the stairs. For a minute there **was** confusion

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and a mild panic. And when, finally, Bert shouted that it was a false alarm, Thelma, whose momentary absence had not been noticed, was back on the stage. But the helmet had disappeared.

It was, at that moment, being packed into the bottom of a cabin trunk in Thelma's dressing-room by the faithful Sitters, into whose trembling hands she had thrust it a moment before.

'No sign of anything,' yelled Bert.

'False alarm,' shouted Humbert.

Everybody relaxed. Thelma sighed with well-assumed relief, apologized, and went to her dressing-room.

She had hardly entered it, and had only just told Sitters to throw a cloth over the cabin-trunk, when there was a knock at the door.

'Come in.'

Lou appeared. She looked as though she had been running, for she was a little breathless and red in the face. However, this condition was really due to a guilty conscience.

'Ah, Lou ... how nice of you! A cup of tea?' Thelma could not have spoken more graciously.

'No thank you, dear. I . . . I came about my helmet.'

'Your helmet, dear? Which helmet?'

'The one I wear in the Britannia number.'

Thelma clapped her hands, and laughed delightedly. She turned to Sitters. 'My dear,' she said, 'Lou wears a helmet in her Britannia number. *What* fun. I must make a note to see it. Remind me, dear.'

'But haven't you got it?'

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'I, dear?' Thelma's eyes opened wide. 'What makes you think that I should have it?'

'I thought you might have picked it up.'

'But Lou dear, I've never even seen it.'

Lou gulped. It was impossible to swallow such an outrageous statement.

'It was lying right in front of you,' she said.

'Was it, dear?' Thelma sighed, and smiled, and shook her head. 'I shouldn't be at all surprised. There may have been fifty helmets. I should never see them. Silly of me, I know ... to get so carried away.'

And before Lou could comment upon this statement, she began to pour out a cup of tea, singing sotto **voce** as she did so ...

Second - love

I never reckoned, love

Our lives would run together

In storm and sunny weather . .

'Such a divine song,' she said. 'It carries me *quite* away. Sugar, dear?'

'No thank you,' snapped Lou. 'It can't have carried the helmet away, though.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Thelma, as though she had forgotten all about the object of the discussion. 'The helmet! Of course. Where did you leave it, dear?'

'I told you. On the stage.'

'Why ever did you do that, dear?' Thelma, as she asked this question, looked Lou very straight in the **eye**.

Lou was beginning to feel slightly hysterical. **It infuriated her to be treated** like a schoolgirl. But what

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could she do? 'I ... I dropped it,' she said. 'By mistake.'

'Oh, I see.' Thelma turned to Sitters. 'She dropped it by mistake.' Then she turned back to Lou. 'I should have some elastic put on, dear. It wouldn't show.'

Lou swallowed some tea, in order to prevent herself from screaming. It was very hot, and scalded her.

'More milk, dear?' asked Thelma.

Lou shook her head. She was on the verge of tears — partly through pain, partly through anger, but mostly through simple bewilderment. She *knew* Thelma had seen the helmet. She *knew* she was lying. But if she had it, where was it? And how had she taken it without being observed?

In a voice that was almost pathetic, she said, 'It was a very expensive one. I bought it myself. You haven't *any* idea?'

Thelma shook her head. 'None, dear.' Then, she seemed to recollect something. She clasped her hands together, and frowned. 'Wait a minute,' she cried. Then she spoke eagerly. 'But Lou, of course I'

'Yes, dear?'

'That old woman in the stalls!'

Lou took a step back. A very strange expression appeared on her face. Thelma did not seem to notice it.

'Most suspicious,' continued Thelma, quickly. She turned to Sitters. 'My dear, didn't you notice? Like a gipsy, in an old black cape. Sitting all alone in the front row. I meant to ask Humbert how she got in. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if ...'

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She was interrupted by the slamming of a door. She looked round. Lou had disappeared.

Sitters stared at the door. 'What on earth made her tear out like that? '

Thelma also stared. Then, a light of understanding seemed to dawn on her face. 'Oh! my dear . . .' she cried, 'What *have* I said?'

'What do you mean?'

'That old woman in the front row. I've just remembered . . . only *just* remembered . . . it was dear Lou's mother!'

CHAPTER XII
KEEPING IT CLEAN

i

ON the following day, Thelma enjoyed a further triumph over her hated rival.

For this was the day on which the script arrived back from the Censor.

Humbert and Robin tore open the letter which accompanied it. They read:

Lord Chamberlain's Office,
St. James's Palace,
S.W.I.

Sir,

With reference to the enclosed script of a revue entitled *Something To Sing About*, I am desired by the Lord Chamberlain to ask you for an undertaking that the following omissions will be made . . .

There then followed a list of about twenty items. The letter ended:

Until the receipt of your undertaking to the above effect, a licence to perform the aforesaid revue cannot be granted.

'Is it very bad? It looks as though an awful lot had to come out.'

Humbert shook his head. 'Not really. Most of them are "My Gods" and "Good Lords".'

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'Did I really write all those "My Gods"?'

'Yes.' said Humbert tersely. 'You never stop.'

'Well, you never mentioned it, anyway.'

'No, because one's allowed a certain ration. About a dozen in a strong domestic drama. About eight in a revue. Look ... he's left in quite a number.'

'Anyway, you think it doesn't matter?'

'No. But look at *this*'

'Good Lord.'

'There you go again.'

'What are we going to do about it?'

'It' was Lou Lancaster's favourite line. It occurred in the sun-bathing sketch. We shall not offend the innocent by writing the line in full, but it is necessary to observe that it contained the word 'sit-upon', used as a noun. A harmless word, one would think ... a nice, playful little word, which, when Robin had originally written it, was intended to be spoken lightly, over the shoulder, in a friendly and inoffensive manner.

But Lou, during rehearsals, had fastened upon this word with an unholy relish. She had magnified it out of all recognition. Nothing that Humbert said would stop her. He had taken her into the wings and been tactful, he had shouted at her from the stalls and been rude, he had even written her imploring letters. Of no avail.

'It's my favourite line,' said Lou. 'If I can't do what I like with it, I shan't play in the sketch at all.'

And she meant it.

So they had to continue to suffer. It was terrible to hear, and even more terrible to watch, what this depraved creature did to that poor little word. How

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if

she writhed, and twisted, and made more monstrous suggestions with each rehearsal. Had the performance been intended for a smoking concert at the O.U.D.S., nobody would have cared very much. But in a revue which was intended for family consumption, it was impossible.

'You'll have to go and talk to the Censor about it,' said Humbert.

'He'll never agree to leave it in.'

'He's *got* to agree. If he doesn't, Lou won't play the sketch at all.'

'We could get somebody else for it.'

'It wouldn't mean a thing.'

Robin knew Humbert was right. Oh Lord!

'Why must these things always happen in *this* revue?' he said to himself, as he put on his coat, and walked towards St. James's Palace, where the Lord Chamberlain's office is situated.

The sun came out as he approached the Palace, and he felt better. St. James's Street is of all thoroughfares the most British and the most uncompromisingly male. Young men with scarlet faces and Guardee moustaches were glaring out of the windows of White's Club, as though they were expecting a revolution, and would be very well fitted to deal with it if it came. Old men with very high white collars and lemon-coloured gloves were slowly coming out of the Devonshire Club, as though on their way to the stake. The window of Lock's hat-shop contained, as usual, an assortment of the headgear of bygone days, so antique, so dusty and so crumbling that Americans, astonished by such a sight in the centre of masculine

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fashion, were lured into the shop to see what was going on. And they discovered that hats were going on . . . the most elegant hats, on to the most distinguished heads. A hat, they felt, from such a shop, was hardly a hat at all. It was a halo.

He crossed the street and skirted the walls of the ancient palace. Two Guardsmen, in scarlet tunics and bearskins, looked at him as though wondering if they ought to salute, but thought better of it. He entered the little courtyard, rang the bell at the Lord Chamberlain's office, and was admitted into a hall that looked as though it belonged to the residence of an old-fashioned rural dean.

11

The British method of dramatic censorship is illogical, haphazard, and unprofessional. But like many other things British, it happens to work extremely well.

It may seem strange that we should choose a nobleman of mature years (who is already burdened with the intricate problems of Court etiquette) to decide upon the earthy dramas of the middle-west and the more *louche* comedies of Central Europe. It may be contended that though the Lord Chamberlain is doubtless competent to decide what women may put on at Court, he is *not* competent to decide what they may take off in less exalted places.

The curious fact remains that he fulfils these functions quite admirably (if we are to judge from the last few holders of this historic office). He may be a

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nobleman, but he is, as far as the theatre is concerned, a man of the people. He may be mature (in culture as well as years), but he is also a man of the world.

Doubtless it is eccentric of him to think that incest, for the sake of incest, is not a theme which is likely to add any permanent lustre to the British theatre. But it is an eccentricity which he happens to share with the great majority of the British public, sunk, as they are, in a soulless and unimaginative domesticity. He is equally insular in his view that nudity, for the sake of nudity, is not absolutely essential for the health, either of the theatre or of the women who perform in it. And here again, the British public — poor, prudish creatures — are inclined to agree with him.

Robin was shown into a quiet, charmingly furnished room that looked on to the courtyard. Big arm-chairs. Shiny furniture. Sporting prints *on* the walls. Doves cooing outside the window.

As he entered, a woman rose to her feet, looked at him, registered disappointment, and sank down into her chair again with an impatient sigh.

'The Comptroller won't be long now, Madam,' said the porter.

(Nearly all dramatists, by the way, see one of the Comptrollers. The Lord Chamberlain is reserved for very difficult decisions or very exalted persons.)

'I should hope not,' she snapped.

The porter shut the door. There was a moment's silence.

'Worse than the dentist's,' she said suddenly, looking at the ceiling.

'Quite,' said Robin. He was not attracted by this

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woman. She was about forty-five. **She looked as if she** had bought a quantity of 'art ' scarves at Liberty's and tied them round her person till they formed a dress. She wore a turban. A moonstone necklace hung round her neck. Bracelets made of dozens of gold and silver charms rattled round her wrists. She washed, one imagined, with irregularity.

'Been here before?' demanded the woman.

'No.'

'I've been here eight times.'

'Really?'

'They're mad,' she said, touching her forehead. 'They ought to be certified. Look at this.'

She dragged out a slip of paper which was lying on top of the manuscript by her side.

'Read it!'

Robin read it. The paper was very torn and dirty, and smelt of stale lavender water. It was inscribed as follows:

THE DICTATRESSES

A Drama of Modern Europe

in

5 Acts and an Epilogue

by

ZOE MOORE

Cast

Gretchen Mistress to Herr Gritler, Dictator
of Aryana

Undina Mistress to Signor Tussolini,
Dictator of Romia

Sadie Mistress to President Goosefeldt,
Dictator of the Free States

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Olga Mistress to Marshal Stamin,
 Dictator of Bolshivia

Mary Mistress to Sir Noel Chaster-
 lain, Dictator of Anglia

Time: The Future

The entire action takes place on a rocky mountain peak, overlooking the Lake of Geneva

'Most interesting,' said Robin as he handed the paper back.

'I know that.' snapped the woman. 'But does it *suggest* anything to you? The names of the characters, I mean?'

'Of course.'

'Why?'

'Well, it's obvious, isn't it?'

'Really!' She rattled more than ever. 'I don't see it's in the least obvious. Is there such a place as Aryana?'

'No, but . . .'

'Or Romia? Or the Free States? Or Bolshivia? Or Anglia?'

'No, but . . .'

'Have you ever heard of Gretchen, or Undina, or Sadie, or Olga, or Mary?'

'No, but . . .'

'Then why do you say it's obvious?'

'I suppose it's association.'

'Association! That's what the Lord Chamberlain says. You're a friend of his?'

'Not at all'

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She stared at him with eyes that had more than a hint of madness.

'That's what *you* say!'

Robin shrugged his shoulders. He thought it better not to say anything at all.

'I know perfectly well that unless you're a friend of the Lord Chamberlain, it's hopeless to try to get anything put on.'

She looked at him as though she would like to bite him.

'I've altered those names eight times,' she went on, 'because the Lord Chamberlain has some lunatic idea that if it's put on as it is we may offend some of the dictators. Why *shouldn't* we offend them? They offend *me*. They offend all decent people. Then he says it's libellous, to say that they have mistresses. How can it be libellous, if it's true? And it must be true. Everybody knows all the dictators have forty mistresses apiece. It's common *knowledge*. However, I felt I had to humour him. So I altered the names. Eight times! I'm not going to alter them any more. If he doesn't like it now, the play will not be put on. *.' will not be put on.*' She rattled with exceptional violence. 'It will be the public's loss, not mine.' A high laugh. *.' don't care.* But I do care about the art of the theatre, and I intend

What she intended will be never known, for at this point the porter opened the door and announced that the Comptroller was ready to see her. She grabbed her manuscript, and swept out in a whirl of tulle and indignation.

Robin had not long to wait. After a few moments he heard a shrill female voice, raised in anger, and the

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sound of footsteps, descending the staircase with considerable violence. And the porter came in to take him to the Comptroller.

Thewl' said the latter, as he entered. 'Sit down and have a cigarette.' To the porter, 'Has she really gone?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, let's hope that's the last of her.' He turned to Robin. 'Will you forgive me a moment?'

He bent over a manuscript with a blue pencil. He had a keen, intelligent face which at the moment wore an expression of marked distaste. He crossed out line after line. Finally, with a sigh, he drew his pencil through the whole thing.

'No,' he said, 'it won't do.'

Robin had a sudden terrible suspicion.

'That's not one of mine, is it?'

'Good Lord, no.' He put the manuscript away in a drawer. 'It's somebody we always have trouble with. Mind like a sink. I can't understand why some people still write that sort of muck for the theatre. It isn't even as if there was any money in it. There isn't. All the big successes of the theatre are things that you could take a schoolgirl to. Of course there are exceptions, now and again . . . however, I'm wasting your time. Got your script?'

Robin handed it to him. He went through it with extraordinary speed and efficiency. There were one or two minor comments . . . (e.g. 'all right, we'll pass that, providing you don't make the man a sissy' . . . and 'if you don't stress that line there's no objection, otherwise I don't think it's anything to be proud of, do you?')

REVUE

Then he came to the sit-upon.

Robin leant forward. 'The trouble about that line ... I mean the reason we want it in ... is because it's rather a favourite with the woman who's going to say it.'

'I see.' The Comptroller puffed at his cigarette. Robin felt somewhat inglorious. He would much prefer to have the line out himself, but if it came out, Lou came out too, and then the sketch would be nothing. He shifted uneasily in his chair. Why, oh why, did these things have to happen to *this* revue . . . but we went into all that before.

'It doesn't seem to me a particularly improper line,' said the Comptroller. 'At the same time, it doesn't seem to me a very important one.'

'It isn't. It's just that she thinks it is.'

'**She?**'

'The woman who says it.'

'And who is that?'

Robin gulped. 'Lou Lancaster.'

The Comptroller took another puff at his cigarette. 'Ah. Lou Lancaster.' He turned to Robin. He spoke very innocently. 'And, I take it, the purity of Miss Lancaster's diction will rob it of any possible offence?'

'Well . . . she hasn't put so very much into it yet.'

The Comptroller grinned. Robin grinned back.

'I give in,' he said.

'Need we say any more?' said the Comptroller.

'No, we needn't.'

'And the line comes out?'

'It comes out.'

So that was that.

As Robin walked back to the theatre, he pondered

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upon the admirable workings of the British Constitution.

To be able to walk into a palace, and talk about a 'Sit-upon'! With what hideous punishments would such conduct be visited, in the Kremlin! What anti-Semitic frenzies would be aroused by the very mention of the word in the office of the Reichschancellor! Yet here, in London, it seemed perfectly natural. In spite of the scarlet sentries, the ancient palace walls, and all the pomp and ceremony which were inherent in his high office, an interview with the Lord Chamberlain (which, to the layman, would suggest the blowing of trumpets, the bowing of heralds and the rattle of parchments) only amounted to smoking a cigarette with a pleasant young man and discussing the human sit-upon in the most natural manner, as it might be discussed over a pint of bitter.

111

An hour later, the news had reached Thelma. She hurried at once to offer her consolations to Lou. She found her on the stage, angrily smoking a small cigar.

'My dear,' she crooned, 'Humbert has just told me.'

'Told you what?'

'About your line.'

'Which line?'

'Oh dear! Were there more than one?' Thelma shook her head. 'I'm terribly sorry.'

Lou did not answer.

'I am *not* in the habit of saying, "I told you so".'
said Thelma, with a tender little smile, 'but...'

REVUE

'Then don't get into the habit now,' snapped Lou. 'A habit's very difficult to get out of, when you form it late in life.'

Thelma looked fixedly at Lou's cigar. 'Yes, dear,' she said. 'I'm sure.' And she coughed, in a very marked manner, still looking at the cigar. 'I'm sure it is.' Another cough. 'All the same,' she pursued, dabbing her handkerchief to her nose, 'I *did* want to say how sorry I was, and to tell you I really think it is for the best. After all .. .' another cough, 'it's the *Show* we've all got to think of, and that line might . . .' The fumes of Lou's cigar at last reached her, and this time her cough was genuine.

'You needn't worry,' snapped Lou. 'I shall think of another one.'

Thelma beamed. 'I'm sure you will, dear,' she said. She spoke like a very aggravating school-mistress, expressing the conviction that an errant pupil was about to forsake the paths of evil. 'Something splendid, I'm sure. And just as funny.' She nodded.

'In fact,' Lou said, 'I've thought of it already.'

'No, dear?' Thelma's eyes were wide and eager. 'What?'

Whereupon Lou said something which no lady, in any conceivable circumstances, would have said to another. Something so outrageous that it cannot possibly be printed. Something so pointed that it caused Thelma to pale, to turn on her heel, to hurry away and to *keep* away. And by doing so, to allow us to resume our story.

CHAPTER XIII

SPRING SONG

i

FOR a fortnight April had been weeping her girlish tears with a profusion that would have satisfied even the late Sir William Watson. But if she had been laughing her golden laughter, it must have been very late at night, when most of London was fast asleep.

Then, suddenly, the rain stopped; the sun came out, and stayed out. The glistening roofs dried up, and a million umbrellas fluttered out of sight, like bats retreating before the coming of the day. In the parks the puddles vanished, and where they had stood for so long, one saw that everywhere the daffodils were lifted to the wind. It had been far too wet for anybody to notice them before.

But under the roof of the Burlington Theatre, Robin could take no account of the seasons. The middle of April, to him, and to all the rest of them, only meant that barely three weeks were left before the opening. Even these three weeks were bitterly grudged by Mr. Winterton and his backers, who considered — and with reason — that the show should have been ready in a fortnight.

But how could it have been ready, with so many things going wrong? How could it be ready, even now? Every comedy sketch had to be rewritten, on

REVUE

account of Starr's accent. A ballet, for which the dresses and scenery were all ready, had to be scrapped because Thelma said it was 'meaningless'... by which she implied that there was nearly a whole minute in which she was off the stage. And that meant that the whole running order had to be changed. (Oh, yes, these things do happen in revues!) Lou was revenging herself on Thelma by playing each of her scenes in slow motion. A parody of a film 'travel talk', which had taken six nights to produce, and promised to be one of the big comedy hits of the revue, was destroyed in a fire at the studios. There had been five days wasted when Humbert had 'flu, and just as the orchestra was beginning to practise, all the performers had been called out on strike.

In other words, everything was quite normal, for the revue world.

11

But one morning Robin decided that he had had enough. He told himself that if he had to spend another day sitting in the stalls, with a rhyming dictionary in one hand and a pad of manuscript music in the other, with Humbert waving a design for a back-cloth before him, Thelma breathing down his neck, and a reporter asking his views on the White Australian policy, he would go mad.

That is what he told himself. But the truth was different. The truth was that he had seen the daffodils in the Park, and that he suddenly had an overwhelming desire to show them to Fay.

SPRING SONG

They had seen so little of each other. More, admittedly, than he had hoped, but only for brief fleeting moments. Sitting on crates behind scenery—or in a dark corner of the stalls during an interval — and for one or two entrancing little suppers.

As Robin thought of those suppers, he frowned to himself.

Why wouldn't she ever let him drive her home?

'It'd look so funny with the rest of the company,' she always said.

'Who's to find out?'

'Thelma would be bound to know.'

But he was sure that was not the real reason.

'Do you think I should drive you up a dark alley and leap on you?' he asked once.

'No. Would you?'

'Damn it all, you might try to sound as if you really *wanted* to know.'

'Well, I said ... Would you?'

'Of course I would.'

She smiled ... almost to herself. 'As long as we know,' she said.

There was, it will be observed, a very small devil in Fay. So small that he very seldom dared to peep out of her eyes, and so well disciplined that even then he popped quickly back again. But at least he was there, and Robin was glad to know him. He might be a useful ally, one day. Not because he was thinking of any serious leaping activities at the moment. But because ... oh, well, it made things easier.

And yet, she would never let him see her home.

'I believe you're married,' he said, another time.

REVUE

'Of course I am. He plays the cornet.'

'But his moustaches get tangled up in it, I suppose?'

' Yes. It makes him play sharp.'

'And then you love him all the more?'

And the little devil smiled again from her eyes.

11 1

It was to the accompaniment of some such ridiculous dialogue that Robin drove Fay away from the Burlington Theatre at five minutes to eleven on the morning of April 14th.

On the way to the theatre, in order that all boats might be thoroughly burnt, he had sent a telegram in Fay's name, announcing that she had a slight cold and would be unable to attend rehearsals that day. He had then waited at the corner of the street, informed her of this outrage, and bundled her into the Ford before she had time to protest. After which he had driven at a good deal more than thirty miles an hour to a telephone box, where he had warned the theatre not to expect him till they saw him. Whereupon he jumped into the car, pressed the accelerator, and refused to listen to anything she said.

'I shall get the sack,' she moaned.

'And I shall be had up for abduction, I suppose.'

'Where are we going?'

'Daffodils.'

'Robin, you're mad. What's the matter?'

'Daffodils.'

'Robin . . . turn back.'

SPRING SONG

'No. Daffodils.'

And suddenly, she caught his mood, and began to laugh, and didn't care any longer. After all ... it was his responsibility. And it was absurdly delightful, and delightfully absurd, to be speeded off like this, on an April morning, just because the daffodils were out.

'Where are we going?'

'Kew. It's only half an hour.'

'Kew! I've only seen it on the posters.'

'So have I. It's probably Hell.'

'Hyacinths in triangles. And waste-paper baskets.'

'Yes. And gentlemen's cloakrooms simply dripping with wistaria.'

'Robin . . . I'm not sure I like you when you say that sort of thing.'

'Oh, yes, you do. I'm clean as a whistle really. But natural.'

'Well, don't be too natural.'

'I'll try not to, Fay. But it's difficult, with you in that hat.'

At which, he burst into song. And those two mad creatures went their way, in the rattling Ford, bouncing over tram-lines, skimming through lines of buses, in the April sunlight.

i v

They parked the car outside a little Queen Anne house, whose garden was bright with hyacinths. They walked to the gates, paid their sixpences, and wandered out on to the great lawns.

REVUE

'We're almost the only people here,' whispered **Robin.**

Fay nodded. '*Look* at that cherry.' And she too whispered. 'It's better than the posters.'

She's like me, thought Robin. She suddenly feels as if she were in church. That's why she whispered. Just for that first moment, when you feel the grass under your feet, and you see that piled-up mass of blossom against the sky ... after all the streets and smoke you *ought* to whisper.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. She had pulled off her hat. Her head was thrown back, her eyes were closed, and the little nose was wrinkled up. She sniffed the air like a puppy. Suddenly he wanted to laugh, from sheer happiness.

He took her arm, breaking the spell. In his ordinary voice he said, 'You've got a spaniel's nose.'

She opened her eyes and made a little face at him. Then they began to walk.

'You're right,' said Robin. 'It *is* better than the posters.'

And indeed it was. The mild winter had played havoc with the seasons, and everywhere the white cherries danced against the blue sky. They walked up to one, and stood under its branches. The boughs were so heavily laden that a single touch, one felt, would shiver the blossom to the ground, where it would fall at one's feet, a mass of fragrant snow. And then, after staring up and up, towards the sky that showed like fragments of stained glass in an enchanted frame, they gently pushed aside the branches, and went out again into the world. But always there was another

SPRING SONG

cherry to visit, dancing in the distance, beckoning against the dark curtain of the trees.

They wandered at will. He did not need to guide her. Like a dancer whose step was in perfect harmony with his, she seemed to anticipate every twist and turn. And there were many to be made, for under the bare plane trees the scillas still lingered — pools of blue that had been left by the retreating tides of March, and would soon vanish before the warmer winds of spring. And the pink foam of the almonds was still lifted high, though already its petals were scattering over the grass, as if ghostly fingers had tossed it in the wake of some bride whom no man would ever see.

Here and there they wandered, farther and farther into the heart of these enchanted gardens, and at every turn there was some new delight. Over the lake hung a weeping willow, whose boughs were shaped like a harp — a harp that was miraculously breaking into bud, and was only waiting for the wind to tune it into song. And then there were still a few flowering currants, of pink and red, with tiny leaves that smelt bitter-sweet when you pressed them. At the edge of the beech woods there were great clusters of forsythia, of so vivid a yellow, so perfect a form, that you would say some celestial jeweller had hung the boughs with golden chains.

And then, there were the daffodils.

V

It was when they were in the beech woods that they first saw the daffodils.

REVUE

They were walking very carefully, with their eyes down, for it is here that the bluebells grow. And though, as yet, only the ground-work of the magic carpet had been laid, only the shining green on which May would weave its tapestry of blue, they were both thinking of that tapestry, and the day when perhaps they might come to see it. But soon the bluebells ended, and they walked again on leaves and moss. And as they looked up, they saw the daffodils.

Robin caught Fay's arm. They both stood very still. A secret wind sighed in the branches. Birds piped and scurried in the undergrowth. But they hardly heard these sounds, for it seemed that the daffodils were singing to them.

Like the bare columns in a stately church, the trunks of the beech trees rose before them, joined, and interlaced. And through these columns, as though one were looking to a distant altar, heaped in golden profusion, were the daffodils. Seeing them from this dim light, gazing from the gloom to the sunshine, it seemed that they must be lit by torches, by sacred lamps and many candles.

And then the mood changed, for the wind swept down, blowing away the sense of awe, the ghostly echo of the organ, the faint far fumes of incense. And as they walked forward, the woods seemed filled with Pagan laughter, and the daffodils caught the ripple of that laughter and echoed it. No longer did they sway in solemn devotion ... they fluttered, pirouetted, twisted, turned. They gave themselves unashamedly to the wind, and flaunted their naked beauty to the adoring sky.

SPRING SONG

v i

At the edge of the wood, they sat down, leaning their heads against an ancient beech tree. If they had been a little older, they would have remembered that the ground was damp. If they had been a little more sophisticated, they would have bothered about the green stains on their backs. If they had been a little less in harmony they would have spoken. She would have said, 'Aren't they adorable?' And he would have found some other adjective to eclipse hers.

But they were very young and simple, and incredibly at one. So they only knew that the moss was soft and cool, and the tree trunk was kindly and solid. And why on earth should they speak when they could only both say just the same thing?

His hand closed over hers. As it rested there, he thought to himself, 'I believe I could say anything I wanted to say to her, just with my hands.' Gently he twined his little finger round hers. Then the second, and so on. It was extraordinary, the things he seemed to be saying, and the things she seemed to be answering. For a few seconds he would release one finger. Then hers would come back again, as though it were inquiring why it had been dismissed. Then he would close three fingers tightly round hers, release them,, close them more tightly. One day, he reflected, I shall hurt those little fingers . . . only a very little . . . but just enough to give me an excuse for kissing them.

Almost imperceptibly, as though at a common signal, their fingers parted, with a final caress. He folded his arms, and stared out at the daffodils

REVUE

' You're . . . you're rather nice,' he whispered.

A sigh, so small that it seemed **only** an echo of **the** distant breeze in the branches, was her only answer.

His eyes filled with tears of happiness.

'It's a pity you've got such enormous hands,' **he went on.**

She nodded. She seemed to be dreaming.

'And such enormous feet,' he added.

'I know.'

'It's a deformity, I expect,' he said.

She frowned and shook her head. 'Yes. It's awful.'

'It's a pity about your hair, too,' he said.

'It's tragic.'

'And that frightful nose. That must be agony for you.'

'It keeps me awake at nights, thinking of it.'

'But I suppose it's your mouth that worries you most?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I suppose that's the worst.'

'Fay, look at me.'

She turned towards him. And as she did so, a shaft of sunlight fell across her face, lighting the gold in her hair, giving a fresh radiance to her eyes.

'One day I'm going to say a lot of things to you.'

'I know, Robin.'

'Will you be glad to hear them?'

She slipped her hand into his.

'And will it be all right?'

She looked away.

Suddenly the sunshine seemed to be blotted out. Suddenly the wood seemed cold.

'Fay . . . Fay, didn't you hear me?'

SPRING SONG

She inclined her head,
'Then why didn't you answer? I said, Will it be all right?'

There was a long pause. The wind was very cold.

'You don't know me, Robin.'

'I know all I want.'

'Supposing?'

'Supposing what?'

'Oh . . . I don't know.'

'There's nobody else?'

'No. There never will be.'

He pressed her hand very tightly. 'Then . . . then that's all right?'

She paused. 'Yes.'

'Phew!' He drew a deep breath. 'You gave me a shock.'

'It was because that cloud came over the sun.'

'Well . . . the sun's back now. And it's come to stay.'

Suddenly they both laughed. She jumped to her feet, and dusted the leaves from her skirt. She threw out her hands and greeted the sun.

'Do I look nice?'

'Divine. Like an advertisement for Eno's.'

She threw a handful of leaves at him, and danced away.

VII

And she continued to dance. At the end of the wood she swept a low curtsey. And then, she was out in the sunlight, with the flowers about her, twisting in and out of them, like a figure in a ballet.

REVUE

Robin sat and watched her, and **wondered** if anybody had ever been so happy before.

It did not seem to him at all ridiculous that Fay should wish to dance. It did not occur to him that the sight of a little chorus girl, prancing about among the flowers of a public park, was one which might offer an easy target for the darts of the hard-boiled school. He did not realize that it is unfashionable to be greatly moved by flowers, that it is *demode* to suggest that chorus girls are other than tough, and that the idea of dancing, just because one's body craved to dance, of stretching out one's hands to the flowers, just because one wanted to greet them, to welcome them, to make them a part of one's life, for ever . . . why, that was the sort of thing which might have been permissible in the 'nineties, but was really grotesque in these enlightened times.

But Fay had never been taught the importance of stifling her emotions. She did not know how unpardonable it was to get excited about flowers. To treat them with reverence. To greet them with joy. To savour them with unashamed intoxication. The bitter little critics of the late 'thirties had not taught her that the only thing to be said about flowers is to ask the price of them.

And so, she danced.

A tiny sun-lit figure, golden-haired, on a golden dancing floor. Now stepping delicately round the glistening fringe . . . now leaning forward and caressing them with her fingers . . . now kneeling, with a swift gesture, and holding out her arms, as though she were calling them to her.

SPRING SONG

As she danced, Robin, leaning against the trunk of the great tree, felt filled with an absurd happiness. He began to sing softly to himself. At first he paid no attention to what he was singing. Then suddenly, he realized that there was a lilt to his song, and he took out a piece of paper. He rapidly drew five lines across the paper and put down the outline of a tune. For a moment he shut his eyes. Then underneath the music he scribbled:

Dancing with the daffodils
Who cares what comes after?
We shall have danced to April's laughter,
And danced away from April's tears.

He scored another set of lines, and wrote eight more bars. Hardly had he finished them than he scribbled more words to fit. And now he was excited, for in his head he heard a charm'ng melodic change to the middle section. 'I must get *that* right.' he muttered, and filled in the chord, and four more bars, writing at the same time:

In December
Remember
Each golden hour

'Now up a semi-tone, with B natural in the bass, and something like this:

When we're lonely ,
It's only
An April shower.

'No ... I *don't* like that, but what else rhymes with hour? Bower, dower, cower, flower ... it'd better be

REVUE

flower, **1 '11** fix that later, but how do I get back to **the** original key? Ah ... *that's* got it.' He wrote **the** essential chord with fingers that trembled slightly, for he felt that he had a pretty tune. And catching a pretty **tune** is as delicate a business as catching a pretty butterfly. Even more delicate perhaps, for the wings of the butterfly have real substance, however fragile, whereas the wings of song glitter only in a man's head, and may easily be lost in the dark caverns of the imagination.

'Robin!'

He looked up over his shoulder, blinking in a shaft of sunliglit that streamed through the branches. Fay was by his side.

'Why did you stop?' he asked.

She laughed, breathlessly. 'There was a Park keeper. I expect he thought I was mad.'

'You are. Thank God.'

'What are you writing?'

'Just a tune.'

'Let me see.'

He showed her the envelope. 'You won't be able to read it.'

'No. But I can read the words.'

'All right. Goon.'

He leaned back and shut his eyes.

She spoke the words very softly to herself.

'Oh, Robin . . . it's *beautifulY*

'It isn't. It's a mixture of William Wordsworth, Sir William Watson, and Robin Frost. And it doesn't scan. **But** then, it can't, because **of** the tune.'

'**What is the tune?**'

SPRING SONG

'Fay *darling*\ I can't bellow things at you under beech trees. We'd be arrested.'

'Anyway, I know it's beautiful.'

'Would you like to sing it, in the show?'

'Robin! Do you mean it?'

He sighed. 'I don't suppose it makes much difference if I do. Nobody ever listens to *me*. All the same it'd be rather exciting.'

'I ... I think I'd die happy if I could sing it once. It's me.'

'Yes, it's you all right.'

'Do you think there's any chance?'

He shrugged his shoulders and stuffed the paper into his pocket.

'We'll see,' he said. 'But you've got to forget about it for a bit. I want to race you to that cherry tree.'

So they raced and rested, and raced again. They ate buns and drank ginger beer. For a whole day they adored life, and each other.

It was nearly six when they left, and already the shadows were lengthening across the lawns.

As they reached the gates they turned, to take a last look at the cherry tree. Already, in the gathering dusk, it seemed luminous. It would glisten like the snow when the stars came out.

They turned. Suddenly Fay noticed, to the left, a drift of withered flowers, rising from a cluster of coarse green leaves.

'Look!' she said. 'Daffodils! But why are they all over?'

'I don't know. I suppose it's getting late for them.'

'I hate to think of them dying.'

REVUE

'Why talk about it, then?' He spoke sharply. Somehow, her words seemed ominous.

She looked at him in surprise. Then she drew her arm through his.

'Well, anyway . . . the others waited for us. Didn't *they*?⁹

He nodded.

'And they always will.'

He pressed her arm. 'I hope so, Fay.'

V I I I

Humbert slid across the floor, and seized his sketch book.

'We'll get every yellow under the sun,' he exclaimed.

It was four hours later. Robin had finished the song. He didn't know whether it was good, bad or indifferent. He only knew that if Fay sang it, something beautiful would happen.

And here was Humbert, not only agreeing with him, but sliding about the floor with excitement. A great change from his attitude only a few minutes before! Why—he'd almost refused to listen to it—had growled that there were too many songs already, that Fay couldn't possibly be given another, and that the sooner he stopped kidnapping her for the day, the better.

'Every yellow under the sun,' he repeated. 'And the girls in heavenly Winterhalter dresses. From pale ivory, through all the daffodil shades, down to a greeny bronze. Absolutely no scenery. But I can flood the

SPRING SONG

floor with yellow light, and start the back-cloth with a delicious watery green.'

'And Fay?'

Tale gold, of course. There's a stuff that old Turbulenoff showed me that's sprayed with real gold-dust. It costs about a hundred pounds a yard.'

'I know.'

Humbert threw down his pencil and ran his hands through his hair.

'Curse you,' he said softly. 'May you rot.'

'Thanks.'

'Here I was, sitting placidly down, with an aspirin and a glass of Amer Picon, and you come in with a song that's *got* to be done.'

'You ought to be damned grateful. It's a ravishing song.'

'It isn't. It's madly sentimental. It's so reminiscent that we shall all be had up for violation of copyright. But with Fay saying it . . . well, it's a wow.'

'That's what I said. • So what are you worrying about?'

Humbert bared his teeth in a mirthless grin. 'Nothing at all, Robin. The most trivial details. I'm worrying because it upsets the running order, for the fortieth time. Because it'll cost a few more hundreds when we're already almost broke. And .. .' he paused. 'Because it's going to give Thelma epilepsy, hysterics, and delirium tremens all at once.'

'But she couldn't possibly sing it herself.'

'Quite. With your deep knowledge of womanhood you will realize how very consoling that fact will be to her.'

'Oh, well,' said Robin cheerfully, 'You're the producer. So you must expect these little troubles.'

REVUE

And he dodged a cushion as he went out.

Back in his own rooms, he rang up Fay.

'It's all fixed,' he said.

'Robin !

'Don't you think I'm unique?'

'Oh, my dear ... if you knew what I thought!'

'Goon.'

'I can't.'

He began to sing into the telephone.

'I say, Fay . . . you've never heard the tune. Hold on a minute.'

He got up, put the receiver on the piano, and played a few chords.

'Can you hear that?'

'Yes, darling. Beautifully.'

'All right, then. Here goes.'

And to show you how excited people get in revue (and in love), and how they see poetry in doggerel and hear divine harmonies in the simplest little tunes, we will print the song he sang her, so that you may try it over on your piano.

As you play it, remember the muted strings which were to usher it into the world, and the golden lights and the ivory girls, and Fay, dancing through it all. And then it may not sound quite as silly as it undoubtedly is.

DANCING WITH THE DAFFODILS

Written and composed

by

ROBIN FROST

CHAPPELL

A full size copy of this song is available

Price one shilling

STARTING WITH THE DAFFODILS

Andante moderato

DATE: 11/11/11

Voices

Findings

4 I know a secret garden.

[illegible]

no-bo-dy ev-er sees Each spring it fills with daf-fo-dils that flat-ter in the

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brease. Now I've met you my secrets aren't secrets an-y more. So now our chance, we can

11. The following table shows the number of persons in the United States who were employed in the various occupations in 1900 and 1910.

go and dance, On a gold-en dancing floor, — on a golden danc-ing floor. —

REFRAIN (*In a smooth and flowing style*)

$$\|m\|_{L^2(\Gamma)} \leq \|m\|_{L^2(\Gamma)} + \|r\|_{L^2(\Gamma)} + \|f\|_{L^2(\Gamma)} + \|g\|_{L^2(\Gamma)}$$

Danc-ing with the daf-fo-dils, Who cares what comes af-ter. We shall have danc'd to A-pril's

DANCING WITH THE DAFFODILS

Andante moderato

Voice *Don't* I know a secret meadow,

Piano *rit.*

no-body ev-er sees Each spring it fills with daf-fod-ils that flut-ter in the

breeze. Now I've met you my secrets are 'n't secrets an-y more. So now our chance we can

go and dance, On a gold-en dancing floor, on a golden danc-ing floor.

REFRAIN (*In a smooth and flowing style*)

Danc-ing with the daf-fod-ils, Who cares what comes af-ter. We shall have danc'd to A-pril's

laugh-ter And danced away from A-pril's tears — Dancing with the daf-fo-dils You and I, And

af-ter we danced a-way — We'll keep this day dream in December

poco cresc.

Re-mem-ber each golden hour — When we're close-ly, It's on-ly an April

show-er Dancing with the daf-fo-dils who cares what comes af-ter — We shall have

poco rall. *allegro* *p.* *allegro*

danced to A-pril's laugh-ter, not her tears. tears.

laugh-ter And dance away from April's tears... Dancing with the daf-fod-ils You and I, An

af-ter we danco- a-way- We'll keep- this day dream in Decem-ber

poco cresc.

Remember each golden hour- When we're lonely, it's only an April

show-er Dancing with the daf-fod-ils who cares what comes af-ter- We shall have

poco rall. a tempo

dan-ced to A-pril's laugh-ter, not her tears... tears.



CHAPTER XIV

INTRIGUE

i

THE blow had not yet fallen.
Thelma had not yet been told.

It was Humbert's idea to keep it from her. 'If we present her with a *fait accompli*, he said, 'she won't be able to do anything about it.'

Robin looked him straight in the eye. 'Do you really think that? Or are you just finking?'

'Both,' replied Humbert. 'I do think it. And I'm scared stiff. When I have to tell her I shall put on bullet-proof pants.'

Meanwhile, the news that there was a new production number, with 'hit possibilities', to be sung by Fay, had spread round the theatre. And the fact that this news had to be kept from Thelma was the cause of a number of piquant situations.

Lou, needless to say, rose to the occasion.

'Darling,' she said, one morning, sidling up to Thelma with an innocent smile, 'what is your favourite flower?'

Thelma glared at her. She was in none too amiable a mood.

'My favourite what, dear?'

'Flower, darling, I'm writing for the papers nowadays.'

Thelma's eyes opened very wide. If this were true,

INTRIGUE

it added a new horror to life. Lou, writing for the papers¹ Thelma had a wholesome respect for the press, and the thought that she might have to be polite to Lou, on that account, was peculiarly galling. All the same, she felt she must be discreet.

'Which papers, dear?' she inquired sharply.

'Provincial.' replied Lou, with an airy gesture.

'Oh!' Was the girl lying, or wasn't she? One never could tell. If she really wrote for the provincial papers, she would have to be conciliated. The provinces loom ahead in the life of every actress. A very long way ahead, Thelma hoped. But she was sensible enough to know that the day would come when she would stand on some draughty platform, holding up a precarious chin, clutching a bunch of dusty carnations, and exclaiming, 'Liverpool has always seemed to me a *Mecca*!'

So she forced a smile and said, 'Well, darling, I adore gardenias.'

'In the provinces, dear? Do you think?'

'I don't see what you mean, dear? Why shouldn't I adore gardenias in the provinces?'

'Don't you think something more simple, dear? Something like . . . daffodils?'

And as she said the word Lou turned round and winked to a little group of chorus boys who were sitting in the wings. The chorus boys, very rudely, smirked.

It was maddening, but what could Thelma do?

'Very well, dear,' she snapped. 'Let it be daffodils. Do you want anything else . . . my favourite hobby, perhaps?'

'I think we all know *that*, dear,' replied the odious Lou. And with a sweet smile she departed.

REVUE

11

Lilian was really the first to arouse her suspicions. She was constantly pushing scraps of manuscript away under piles of music whenever Thelma approached. One morning Thelma was too quick for her. She seized the sheet which she had just secreted, and waved it before her.

'Hiding things, dear?' she demanded, with dreadful gaiety.

Lilian went scarlet. 'It's . . . it's just something of my own.'

Thelma raised her eyebrows. 'Naughty!' she exclaimed, archly. 'In school hours, too! What is it, dear?'

'Just a number.'

Thelma glanced at it. There was only a melodic line. There were no words. At the top, Lilian had scribbled, 'Dancing with the D's'.

' "Dancing with the D's," dear? That sounds very intriguing. And who are the D's?'

Lilian shrugged her shoulders.

'You're sure you don't mean the D.T.'s, dear?'

Lilian smiled feebly.

Thelma could have slapped her for being so secretive. However, once more she forced a smile, and handed back the music, with the hope that 'Dancing with the D's' would be a great hit, and make Lilian a lot of money.

Hardly had she left Lilian, before she encountered Princess Turbulenoff. Another mystery. For no

INTRIGUE

sooner did that lady see her, than she hastily pushed back into her bag a sample of brilliant yellow material, which she endeavoured to conceal with a newspaper.

Again, Thelma was too quick for her.

'My dear,' she cried. 'Divine! Let me look.'

Reluctantly, Princess Turbulenoff dragged the material out of her bag.

'But it's exquisite!' Thelma stared at it greedily. 'Sprayed with gold dust! What is it for?'

'I 'ave no ideas.'

'A lovely new dress for Lou, perhaps?'

'No. Not for Lou.'

'How do you know, dear, if you have no ideas?'

The Princess shifted uneasily. This cross-examination was not at all to her taste. It reminded her of a disagreeable episode at the Polish frontier, in her extreme youth, which she had endeavoured to banish from her memory.

'I might be able to use it myself,' said Thelma.

'So?' She rose abruptly. 'I 'ave a neadache,' she snapped, and walked away.

The insolence of the woman. This was really becoming unbearable. Everybody seemed to be in a conspiracy. Thelma had a good mind to follow Madame Turbulenoff and force her to surrender that lovely piece of stuff. However, that would hardly be dignified. So she changed her mind, and wandered off to the dance rehearsal room, from which she had heard the distant strains of music.

REVUE

III

As she opened the door, an astonishing sight met her eyes.

There, in front of a row of dancing girls, was Fay, twisting and turning with an assurance that would have done credit to a leading lady, to a tune that Thelma did not recognize ... a tune that was certainly not in the revue. At the side, Sally was jiggling up and down, in her pink hat, roaring injunctions at her favourite target, Miss Wilkes. 'Say, Miss Wilkes, what d'you think you are, a goddam hollyhock? Haven'tyoueverseenadaff.. .'.

The word froze on Sally's lips. Fay stood stock still. All the girls looked round, and stared at Thelma with a startled expression. The music died away. There was silence.

'Sally darling,' said Thelma, in a voice usually reserved for schoolmistresses at the moment when they have discovered who put the itching-powder on their pillow-slips, 'might I speak to you a moment?'

Sally looked round miserably, as though seeking assistance, found none, raised the whites of her eyes, and slunk to the door.

Thelma drew her into the passage.

'A new number, dear?' she inquired, gently.

'Why, no, Miss Ganges, just a . . .'

'Just a what, Sally dear?'

'You better ask Humbert, Miss Ganges.'

'Oh, no, dear. I wouldn't dream of bothering Humbert. Nor Mr. Frost.' And, indeed, she had no intention of doing so. If Humbert and Robin were doing

INTRIGUE

something behind her back, she preferred to find it out by herself. Then she could lay her plans accordingly.

'Well, Sally dear?'

Thelma beat her foot on the floor, and stared at Sally with eyes that seemed to burn her up.

'I tell you, Miss Ganges, it's a . . . it's just a little dance.'

Tor Fay?'

Tor all the girls.'

'And a little song, perhaps?'

'I wouldn't know that, Miss Ganges. I wouldn't have any idea about that.'

Perhaps you wouldn't, Sally. But you *have*. Haven't you, dear?'

'I ain't heard no singing, Miss Ganges. I don't know nothing about that.'

'I see,' Thelma smiled, and nodded to herself. 'I see. Well, I'm sure it'll do you credit, dear. *What fun!*'

And with a bright nod, she departed. When Sally had gone back to the room, and closed the door, she had a good mind to stay and listen. But no . . . dignity again. If only, just for a few minutes, one could forget that one was a lady!

i v

Something, very definitely, was up. I 'ou, asking that strange question about her favourite flower. Lilian, trying to hide that song. Princess Turbulenoff, secret-ing that divine piece of material. Sally, rehearsing Fay in a mysterious dance.

REVUE

A stray phrase which Sally had shouted to the unfortunate Miss Wilkes flashed through her mind. 'Say, Miss Wilkes, what d'you think you are, a goddam hollyhock? Haven't you ever *seen* a daff ...'

Suddenly it all became plain. Daffodils! It was something to do with daffodils. That was why Lou had asked that question. That must be the real title of Lilian's song ... 'Dancing with the D's.' That was why the Princess hid that material ... it was going to be used in a daffodil number, which Fay was going to sing. And that was why Sally had attacked Miss Wilkes with the line about the hollyhocks.

It was as clear as daylight. And as cruel.

And at all costs it must be stopped.

Thelma's first impulse, as she stood there in the draughty corridor, clenching her teeth with rage, was to send for Humbert and Robin, and to challenge them with the truth.

She thought better of this.' If she acted hastily, she might achieve nothing. It would be wiser to prepare the ground. To feign complete ignorance of the new number, and at the same time to express misgiving as to the amount that Fay *already* had in the show. If she did this, they would surely never dare to tell her that Fay was actually being given more. She had powerful allies ... Mr. Llewellyn, to her knowledge, was very anti-Fay at the moment, having been snubbed by her on more than one occasion when he had roared too loudly. All the other small-part girls would naturally rally to her side. And anyway, even if they were all against her, was she not a match for the whole company? The show had been written for her.

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They could not possibly do without **her**. She **not only** held the trump card. She was it.

So it was in a calmer mood that she eventually drew her furs round her and walked up the stairs. A mood of almost pleasurable anticipation. For she decided that she would spend the evening at home, making plans.

She left a message with the stage-door keeper that she had a slight chill. .. nothing serious, of course ... but enough to compel her to take care.

'I mustn't let you down, must I?' she whispered to that official, as he handed her into her car. And she gave him a smile which was usually reserved for more exalted persons.

One never knew, in a campaign like this, when one might need even the humblest allies.



CHAPTER XV

SOLILOQUY

i

THE little clock over the mantelpiece struck ten. Thelma had just finished dinner — if you could *call* it dinner, for she had hardly touched the spinach soufflé, and Sitters had taken the larger sole, which meant that there was really nothing solid left except the poussin, because a dish of asparagus didn't count (although, in view of Sitters' conduct with the sole, she had been rather absent-minded while serving herself with this vegetable, and had only left Sitters five or six stalks, of a grass-like consistency).

'You should eat more vegetables, dear,' she said severely, as she dipped her nails in the finger-bowl, which was scented with rose-geranium. 'They cleanse the blood.'

Sitters, in all humility, agreed.

'And not so much fish, darling. It's heating.'

She rose from the table. 'Tell them they can clear away. And bring the Grand Marnier with you when you come.'

Then she rang up Robin. She hardly expected to find him in, but he answered immediately.

'Mr. Frost?' she demanded, in an assumed voice, of great haughtiness. 'One moment please. Moddom wishes to speak to you.'

SOLILOQUY

She held the receiver to her ear, and listened very carefully for a few moments, in case she heard any suspicious sounds, such as whispers from Fay, or echoes of secret orgies. However, all she heard was a sneeze from Robin. So she tiptoed away from the telephone, and then returned to it again, stamping heavily on the carpet as she approached.

'Robin?'

'Thelma? I wondered who it was.'

'Listen, darling, it's Vivian Ellis's first night to-morrow at the Vaudeville, and I've got two seats. Would you like to come?'

'I'd adore to,'

'You're sure you're free? No lovely ladies?'

'No.'

Robin's 'No' sounded very curt indeed. Hardly polite.

'I always think,' she crooned, 'that Vivian is a real musician, don't you? The only composer we've really got in England.' (That was a nasty one!) 'I think you ought to study him, dear.'

'Thanks.' Still more curtly. 'What time shall I call for you?'

'I'll let you know in the morning, dear. Good-night.'

'Good-night.'

She hung up. It was certainly time that somebody was put in his place. And to-morrow would offer a very good occasion. Robin would see her in all her glamour, surrounded by her fans, the target of all the flashlights. He would hear the roar of applause as she entered the theatre. And when it was all over, at supper,

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she would make it quite clear . •. but *crystalline* . . . that this nonsense about Fay must stop. There must be no new song. And a good deal of her present material must be cut.

Which reminded her that she must now get to business, and decide exactly how much Fay was to be allowed,

'Sitters!'

Sitters appeared from the next room.

'Darling ... if you drink so much port, you'll get cirrhosis of the liver.'

'There isn't any port,' he replied indignantly. 'And if there were, I wouldn't drink the beastly stuff.'

Thelma assumed the expression assumed by provincial Saint Joans when 'Voices' are in the air. 'I'm sorry, dear. I apologize. I do indeed.' She shook her head. 'First, it seems, I stint my guests of wine . . .'

'Thelma, don't be idiotic ...'

'Of wine,' she continued, and no doubt I *am* idiotic, dear, but you must try to make allowances. And then ...' she paused for breath, 'even if I did not stint them, the wine would be undrinkable.'

Sitters felt that this was one of those sentences which might, on analysis, be difficult to resolve into its component parts. However, he made no comment. Better to let her have it out.

'I'm very sorry, Sitters dear. I suppose it's just that I haven't time to attend to everything as I should. So shall we forget it? I'll order a case of the best port to-morrow.'

'But I tell you, Thelma ...'

She waved him side. 'Please! I'll get up early, to

SOLILOQUY

make sure,' she added. 'And now, Sitters dear, might I have the Grand Marnier?'

'It's by your side,' he growled.

So it was. A large bottle, glimmering in the firelight.

'And a glass, too.'

'Sitters,' she breathed, 'you think of everything. And now, if you don't mind, I've got to be alone.'

'Is anybody coming?' He cursed himself as soon as he had asked this question. Why, oh why, did he have to parade his jealousy before her?

His words, coupled with her first sip of Grand Marnier, sent a warm glow through Thelma.

'No dear,' she said. 'Nobody ever comes to see *me*. This is work.'

And then, to the miserable wretch before her, she extended her hand.

'Dear Sitters,' she purred.

He trailed to the door.

'And darling, you might hand me the running order. And the list of the cast. And the script. And all my correspondence with Winterton. And my contract . . . oh, dear, *not* in that drawer! I suppose I'd better get up myself.'

11

At last Sitters was gone, and Thelma was surrounded by all the necessary papers.

The clock struck half-past ten.

She began her task in a mood of the utmost amiability. She had nothing against Fay, absolutely nothing. She was, she told herself, really quite 'a'; 'of the girl. After

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all, she had been one of the first to recognize her talents. Had she not pointed her out to Bert, at rehearsals, on the few occasions when Fay had made a mistake, and said, 'I'm sure that girl tries, Bert. I think she *really* tries.' It was not many leading ladies who would go to such trouble as that! Not, of course, that she would get any thanks for it. However, she was not thinking of herself but of the Show.

Now the problem which she had to solve was how to give Fay the most opportunities, without in any way endangering the Show. How to act really for the girl's *goody* to show her off to the best advantage, without showing her off so much that the balance of the entertainment should be upset.

Thelma reached for a gold 'pencil, took a sip of Grand Marnier, and sighed deeply. 'Really,' she thought, 'if people *knew*. If they were told I was sitting up till the small hours of the morning, racking my head to see how I could help a funny little chorus girl, they simply wouldn't believe it.'

She ran the pencil down the running order. It stopped abruptly opposite Fay's only solo. A little front-cloth song called *Trees*.

Ah yes! *Trees*. Now, what about *Trees*? Of course, Fay must certainly sing it. Everybody liked it so much. And it would break the poor thing's heart if it were to come out. All the same, wasn't it perhaps somewhat risky, in such a very prominent place? She was not for a moment grudging Fay her success . . . she would give her any place in the programme. It was just a question of . . . well, suitability. Besides, such an inexperienced little thing would be bound to suffer agonies

SOLILOQUY

of nerves all through the evening, if her principal song was to come only twenty minutes before the fall of the final curtain. (There I go again.' sighed Thelma, 'always suffering for other people !)

Would it not be better if *Trees* came very early, instead of very late? Of course, it was a delicate song that demanded very careful handling, and undoubtedly some of its point would be lost if it were accompanied by the sound of late-comers banging their seats. All the same, Fay might be *glad* of this distraction ... indeed, if she were a sensible girl, she would pray that people *would* come late, so that not too much attention would be paid to her. It would be a great relief to the poor little thing's mind, and Thelma was very happy that she had thought of this.

She was about to switch *Trees* to Number 2 on the programme, immediately after the opening chorus, when she hesitated. After all, she was bound to admit, it was a very prominent position. Not that she grudged it to Fay ... the more prominent the better. After all, the only reason why Thelma was sitting up at all, at this unearthly hour (the clock had just struck eleven), was to see what she could do for the girl's good. And *would* it be for her good? West End audiences had been getting more and more punctual lately. The overture lasted six minutes, and the opening chorus eight. That meant that Fay would not have to sing *Trees* till a quarter to nine, by which time the house would certainly be almost full. And it was really terrible to think of that poor little inexperienced thing, coming out to a packed and silent house, with no welcome banging of stalls to cover up her nervousness, and then having

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to sing a song which might set the whole tone of the Show.

No, she said to herself, it really would not do at all. It would not be fair to Fay, and it would not be fair to the Show. How difficult it all was! Where *could* they put it? There seemed to be nowhere in the first half, except just before the finale, and obviously she could not do it there, because she had such an important part to play in *A Touch of the Sun*, immediately afterwards, and one couldn't feed the audience on an *exclusive* diet of Fay. Nor did the second half offer any suggestions. She might come on just before the *Penny-in-the-slot* ballet (which Thelma had now decided to dance, after all) but that would be two 'pretty' things together, which would never do. She was not thinking of her own part in the ballet. Far from it. She was thinking only of the Show.

And really, from the point of view of the Show, it did seem that *Trees* would have to come out altogether. In fact, she was quite certain it would. Of course, Fay would be disappointed . . . these girls never realized where their true interests lay. But she would make it up to her in some other way. She might even ask her to one of her parties, and let her sing it there. And at this thought, Thelma positively glowed with the warmth of her own kindness. 'No.' she said to herself, 'people just wouldn't believe it, if they knew that I was sitting up till the small hours, planning expensive entertainments, just to give a chorus girl a chance to sing a song I'

SOLILOQUY

III

Now let us see. *A Touch of the Sun*. Fay had a very important part there. True, she only had to say two lines, but it was not the lines that mattered, was it? It was the way you said them. And certainly, she said them very well indeed. She had to run on to the stage, and find Thelma and Starr at the end of their quarrel, staring at each other, hating each other. And she had to say, 'Jack, I'm still waiting.' To which he replied, 'Coming, darling.' And as they went off, she had to say, 'The moon's never been so lovely as it is to-night.'

Of course, on paper, it did not look a very exhausting role. But when one thought of all that one could *put* into those lines! And she did, she certainly did, put a great deal. She gave one quite a shock coming on like that. Of course, if Thelma had been a less generous woman, less warm-hearted, she would not have allowed her to come on at all. She would have just flicked her fingers and told Starr to make his exit alone. However, when she had suggested this (and she *had* suggested it, for the good of the Show) he had selfishly complained that he had to have a proper exit, and that he wanted Fay to help him off. The way some actors always thought about themselves was positively shocking. Thelma never thought about herself. She only thought about the Show.

And it was for this reason that she was just a little worried about Fay's entrance in *A Touch of the Sun*. It seemed to **her** ... how should **she** put it? ... **to strike a jarring note. After all, the girl had** a very **penetrating**

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voice. It seemed to *ring* through the theatre. Of course, that was all to the good in the chorus (had she not gone up, most graciously, to Fay at rehearsal, and said to her, 'My dear, I don't know what we should *do* if you were ever to leave the chorus'?) but it was not so good by itself.

She wondered how it would be if Fay were just to run on, whisper, and then run off again, followed by Starr? That really, would give her just as much opportunity as if she were to say the lines. The audience would all wonder who she was. They might even look in their programmes to see. And Thelma would insist that Fay's name was in the programme . . . she would see to it *personally*. (She shook her head in bewilderment at her own generosity. 'I ought to be locked up,' she said to herself, whimsically. 'I'd work myself to the bone for *anybody*.')

And it did seem, at first, as though it would really be much better for Fay to run on and do her whisper, and her gesture. 'After all,' reflected Thelma, 'it will be such a wonderful *test* for the darling. All the eyes of the theatre upon her. Everybody expecting her to speak. But she will not speak. A slow, mysterious smile . . . a movement of the head . . . and then off.'

But just as she was about to note this change down on the programme, she wondered if, perhaps, it might not be putting a little *too* much responsibility on such young shoulders. After all, she had no experience at all (though heaven knows, I'm racking my brains to see how I can *push* her forward!) And as she had no experience, would it be quite *fair* to her to ask her to play such a very difficult part — though admittedly it

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was not a very *large* part — at such a crucial **moment** in **the** Show? Thelma, as she thought more deeply on the subject, began to feel more and more strongly that it was not at all fair. The girl might make some terrible mistake. She might ruin her whole career. Thelma positively trembled at the thought of it.

No, really, for the sake of Fay and for the sake of the Show, it would be much better if she were not to come on at all, but if she were to call from the wings. She could call twice. 'Jack! Jack!' She might even call *three* times . . . there was no limit to the sacrifices Thelma was prepared to make in order to give her a chance. And even though she did not come on, even though she would really be doing hardly anything at all to deserve it ('Hardly earning her salary even,' thought Thelma with justifiable resentment), she would still appear on the programme. Thelma would see to that, personally. She would see that they put 'Voice . . . Fay Pearl '. It would look splendid — intriguing, as it were. A great advertisement for her. 'And really,' Thelma said to herself, 'if she were my own sister, I could hardly do'more.'

i v

She laid down her pencil and glanced at the clock. Half-past eleven. She poured herself out another glass of Grand Marnier, for she was beginning to feel quite tired out with all the effort involved in trying to help Fay.

Even this glass was, in its way, a sacrifice, for **she**

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had been told she must not drink liqueurs. But she had to have some sort of stimulant, or she felt that she would not be able to do the poor girl justice. 'I even *poison* myself for others,' she thought, shaking her head, and fearing that one day she would go too far. However, the Grand Marnier, whatever it might do to her afterwards, was making her feel particularly gay and warm-hearted at this moment, so she continued her work with a good will.

Now, let us see, what else could we do for dear little Fay? Her eye lit on *Flowers of England*. Ah yes! She had meant to speak to Robin about that. She frowned slightly. She was afraid that *this* time, instead of enhancing her part (as she had done in *A Touch of the Sun*, if you really looked at it in the right way), it might be necessary to diminish it. She hoped that she would think of some way to avoid it, but at the moment she did not see that this would be possible. For Fay, as you may remember, took the part of the Lily. 'And I should be the very last to deny that she does it *beautifully*,' reflected Thelma. 'I am not, I hope, an ungenerous woman.' But her very generosity made her feel that this was *not* the song for Fay. It was far, far too sophisticated. In fact, it was not really quite nice. It might offend people. And if it did, Fay obviously would suffer. She would get an unpleasant reputation. ('If I were her own mother I couldn't be more anxious about her.') After all, that line about massage and innocence ... it was really too much to ask an inexperienced girl like Fay to sing. ('I suppose she *is* as inexperienced as she looks?') Anyway, whether she was inexperienced or not, she certainly gave the

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appearance of innocence, and Thelma, like the kind-hearted creature that she was, felt determined to safeguard this asset. 'Even,' she said, 'even if my motives are misunderstood, as they almost certainly will be.'

But what could they give her instead? They must give her *something* . . . she was determined that Fay should really shine in this revue, that she should make a hit. And then, a happy idea occurred to her. Of course! She could be the girl who carried on the placard! Now *that* was a part into which, if she had real talent ('and I have never denied that she has'), she could put a great deal. True, she had nothing to say, but then she couldn't *always* be talking (after all, there were going to be *no* limits to the number of times she could call out 'Jack' all by herself, in *A Touch of the Sun*). And again, she would not be on very long — in fact, all she would have to do would be to walk swiftly across the stage, bearing a placard inscribed with the word 'Lily', make a curtsy, and exit. It did not perhaps look very important on paper, but then one could never judge a part by the script. Thelma would *make* it important (though naturally, she would not allow her to speak, or to pause, in her rapid passage across the stage. One must think of the Show *first*, mustn't one, however anxious one was to give a helping hand to individuals?) Nevertheless, she would make it important, even if in doing so it might be necessary to hurry the girl up a little, to make her *dart* across the stage. If she did it gracefully, it would be most pleasing, and it would make the little curtsy at the end all the more effective.

Well, *that* was settled very happily, and she only

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hoped that Fay would appreciate it, though she very much doubted it.

Her eyes fixed themselves on Fay's duet with **Freddy** (which, apart from the aforesaid dartings on and callings off, was now all that Thelma, in her tireless efforts to help, had allowed her). Of course, it was madness to allow that duet. Madness. It ruined *My Heart is Out of Work*. It slowed up the whole Show. It would make it difficult — almost impossible — for Thelma to get the audience into a good humour again. But still, what was one to do? When Thelma had told Freddy what she thought of it, he had looked, well really, she would hate to have to say how he looked. And when, at rehearsal, after the duet was over, she had very innocently asked Humbert when it was going to begin, he had only pulled that terrible face that he called a smile, and said, 'Never mind, dear, never mind.' What sort of help was *that*, she would like to know, from one's producer? Mind what, indeed? Mind the fact that the few people who had been in the stalls had applauded with quite unnecessary enthusiasm? She was *delighted* . . . she always thought that sort of thing was a help to unknown artists . . . even if the applause came, as she shrewdly suspected, from relations. (She *must* speak to Bert about letting these odd strangers in. So .bad for everybody's morale.) Never mind, indeed! When all one was trying to do was to help the Show.

Oh, well, she supposed she would have to put up with it. They would see, when they opened. The duet would be out on the second night. Then they'd all come flocking to her for ideas. And what could she **suggest?** The only thing she could think of was **that**

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she herself should sing an extra chorus of *A Touch of the Sun*. It would be a great strain, it would wear her out, but then, she supposed, she must get used to that.

Only one thing remained to be considered. Fay's position in the chorus. Well, she had no intention of interfering with *that*. In fact she would insist that Fay, on all possible occasions, should be in the very centre of the front row, so that everybody should see her. Such a position would give her so much *sympathy*. People would whisper to each other. 'Look at that pretty girl ... perhaps she will be a star one day.'

And perhaps, thought Thelma, with a final glow of 'self-righteousness, she would. 'Thanks to *me*.' Though she had little hope that Fay would ever show herself grateful for all that had been done for her.

Well, that was that. She carefully folded up the list, with all the alterations, and put it in her bag. She would take it to supper to-morrow night. And if Robin, after learning her feelings, had the effrontery to suggest that yet *another* number was being prepared for Fay . . . well, she would know how to act.

The clock struck twelve. A very few minutes later Thelma was in bed, and fast asleep, dreaming that she was chasing Fay through fields of daffodils, and occasionally pulling them up to throw at her, bulb and all.

CHAPTER XVI
TEMPERAMENT

i

'S HE'LL *have* to be told,' said Robin.

'Well, you're taking her out to supper to-night. You can tell her then.'

'It's not my job.'

Humbert grinned. 'On the contrary. All it needs is great muscular strength. Combined with fleetness of foot. And a capacity to endure acute physical pain for long periods on end. It's obviously your job.'

Robin scowled and said nothing.

'Besides,' continued Humbert, 'I'm hideously busy. We open in ten days, and from now on I've got to work like a fiend. Your job's over. You've got nothing else to do. So be a good chap, will you?'

With which, he fled.

Robin sat down, sighed, and lit a cigarette. What Humbert had just said was only too true. There was nothing else for him to do.

The revue, it seemed, had passed out of his hands. For better or for worse, his part was played. There was no more music to write — in fact, little Sol the conductor, who was orchestrating everything, was sitting up late every night, scoring incessantly, and wondering how he was going to get half of it done in time for the opening. There were no more sketches to be thought about. Humbert was now spending his whole time

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cutting. Cutting so ruthlessly that Robin could hardly recognize half that he had written, and thought it better to keep out of the way, as tempers were beginning to run high.

It seemed, even, as though there were hardly any more suggestions that he could make. He was always overruled. When Princess Turbulenoff designed a bright blue crinoline for Fay to wear as the lily, and when he gently observed that this was not quite his idea of that flower, he was told that he did not know what he was talking about, that he was Australian, and that the dress would be 'tres tres chic et tr-r-r-res extraordinaire!' So he let it go at that. And when Starr suddenly decided to come out in front of the curtain and recite a poem in Yugoslavian, Humbert had refused to listen to his objections. 'My dear Robin,' he had said, 'it only lasts forty-five seconds and it'll be wildly exciting. The young people will be sure it's very indecent, and the old people will think it's very sad. And even if it isn't either, it'll flatter the critics. They'll all say it's very "significant", and at least four of them will compare him to Sacha Guitry.' (Which proved, eventually, to be the case.) So he let *that* go, too.

He wandered upstairs, through the stage door, into the street outside. It was a golden day, more like summer than spring. The first day that people had emerged without their overcoats.

Two men on a little scaffolding were sticking up the bills. He watched them, fascinated. SOMETHING ... that must be nearly five feet long. TO SING ... they were putting it on crooked ... no, they'd got it right again ... ABOUT. A single strip, much

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narrower, was then pasted below, bearing the words, A NEW REVUE. Finally, the smallest strip of all informed those members of the public whose eyesight was exceptional that it was 'written and composed by Robin Frost'.

Robin laughed to himself, A little bitterly. But he consoled himself with the thought that, for all he knew, when the time came, he might wish that his name had never appeared at all, in even the smallest letters. He might pray for a merciful anonymity, to hide his shame.

Just as he was about to turn away, the men began to unroll some capital letters that were at least three times the size of any that they had yet put up. The first sheet, when unrolled, displayed the word THE. The what? He waited to see. And then they unrolled the second sheet, which carried the letters LMA. He might have known. He hoped she was satisfied. At a moderate estimate, her name was fifty-five times the size of his own. And doubtless, it was a hundred and fifty-five times as important.

'Robin!'

He looked round and saw Fay.

'Hullo, dear. Come to see my glory?' He pointed to the poster.

'Oh, it's a shame!' she exclaimed. 'Your name ought to be six feet high.'

'So ought yours. But it doesn't matter. How's Daffodils?'

'It's . . . it's too lovely to talk about. Does she know, yet?'

'No. I've got to tell her to-night.'

'Oh, Robin, what *will* she say?'

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He shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know. I don't care either.'

But he spoke with a carelessness that he was far from feeling.

11

The clock over the mantelpiece struck eight. And at exactly the eighth stroke Robin rang the bell.

Thelma beamed. That was as it should be. She had warned Sitters to tell Robin that when she said eight, she meant eight and not one minute past.

'Darling,' she said, extending her hand. 'So punctual. Cocktail? No? Then we'll wait just a minute and a half, before we go.'

She stayed by the clock in silence, watching the minute hand, as though she were waiting for the pistol-shot that was to announce some vital race. She looked spectacularly beautiful, in a very close-fitting white dress, that was plastered with opalescent paillettes. A spray of white orchids clustered on her shoulder. A magnificent white fox fur hung over the chair by her side.

Robin as he watched her, following the minute hand so eagerly, wondered why such importance was attached to those ninety seconds. His curiosity was not unnatural. It was the first time that he had been to a first night with Thelma, and he had never heard of the famous Thelma First Night Technique. This technique was so brilliant and so complicated, that a few words are necessary to explain it.

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Not the smallest detail was overlooked. She had determined to arrive exactly three minutes before the curtain went up. Three minutes, no more and no less. These three minutes would give her time to wave to her fans on the pavement, to be photographed in the lounge, to sweep down to her stall in the third row, to turn round slowly before she sat down, to be recognized, to be applauded, to kiss her hand to the gallery, and then to sink into her seat, exactly as the lights went down.

All these things she did, as though by clockwork. But let no man imagine that there was any element of luck in the proceedings.. It was all thought out as elaborately as an assault upon an enemy trench.

The first information to be obtained, of course, was zero hour. The play was advertised to begin at 8. That meant, in nine cases out of ten, 8.15 on the first night. But Thelma took no chances. There had been occasions, in the past, when she had arrived aftrpr the advertised hour, only to find that a punctilious producer had rung up on time, so that she had been forced to make her entrance in the dark. And what was the use of going to a play if nobody saw you go to it?

So on every premiere which Miss Ganges intended to grace with her presence the wretched Sittingbourne had to spend a series of mauvais quarts d'heure on the telephone, harrying stage-managers who were far too distracted to worry about Miss Ganges' entrance into the stalls.

'Damn it all, can't she read the advertisements?' they would yell.

'Yes, but •., the *exact* time?'

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'How the hell do I know? Tell her between 8.15 and 8.20. Good Lord, d'you think I've got nothing better to do than . . .'

Whereupon Sitters, with a trembling hand, gently replaced the receiver and stroked it. He had a ' curious idea that if he put down the receiver very softly, and gave it a little pat, the person at the other end (who was nearly always angry about something) would be in some way mollified.

Thelma, on receiving the news, would lay her plans accordingly.

'8.15 to 8.20? Then we'd better arrive at 8.15 sharp. No, 8.14. And remind Crosby that when I say 14 I mean 14 and not 14½. D6n't go . . . really . . . I've hardly *begun*\ We're dining at the Berkeley. We've got to get to the Strand. If we go down St. James's Street into Pall Mall we shall need between 12 and 14 minutes. He must be at the Berkeley at exactly 8. Not before, because they won't let him stay outside the Berkeley Street entrance for more than 2 minutes. That'll do for the moment.'

It might be thought that Thelma, having made such elaborate schemes, would permit herself to relax as soon as she was safely in the car on the way to the theatre. Not at all. She kept an eagle eye on the state of the traffic. If there were any sign of a traffic block she whistled violently through the tube, hurling a fusillade of directions, imprecations and lamentations into Crosby's ear.

'Why can't you get in *front* of that lorry, you fool? Oh God — the way he puts on the brakes. There, at last! Now take the first on the right . . . no, for heaven's

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sake, that's a one-way street. Look out, there's that lorry again. He's doing it *deliberately*. Let him pass, let him *pass*! Now *don't* go too fast.' Hanging up the tube. 'I wonder I'm alive, I honestly do.'

The agitated nature of this outburst would doubtless have been accompanied, in any woman less highly disciplined, by a considerable display of facial emotion. Not so with Thelma. She might have been reciting the multiplication table. Her chin remained in place. Her forehead was smooth as marble. Her eyes stared straight ahead. She had long learnt that the appropriate emotions may be a means of laying up treasure in heaven but they are an equally certain means of laying up wrinkles on earth. So she did not indulge in the appropriate emotions, as far as her face was concerned, unless there was an audience capable of appreciating them.

Thelma was in excellent form to-night.

But they were five minutes too early,

Thelma noticed it just in time. They had almost arrived at the Vaudeville Theatre, and Crosby was about to join the queue of cars which were discharging their occupants on to the pavements, when Thelma saw the time. Only nine minutes past eight!

She grabbed the speaking-tube and blew into it so violently that even the hardened Crosby jumped.

'Straight on! Straight on!' she shrieked.

Crosby swerved out again, nearly knocking over a policeman.

'First left,' bawled Thelma.

He just managed to turn.

'Stop!'

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The car stopped, in the side-street. Crosby turned off the engine. Thelma stared straight ahead of her in the darkness. She was breathing rapidly. But the mask was unchanged.

'One day,' she said, 'that man will kill me. Or I shall kill him.'

All this had happened so quickly that Robin had not had a chance to speak. But now, as tactfully as possible, he asked what was wrong.

'Wrong? My dear, look at the time! You can't expect me to arrive at an *entirely* empty theatre.'

In view of the congestion on the pavements, the long queue of cars, and the flares of the flashlights in the vestibule, which Robin had observed as they dashed by, this statement seemed to be slightly exaggerated.

She gripped the tube again, and spoke with one eye on the clock, in accents which were strangely at variance with the mask-like face.

'I'm not completely unknown, darling,' she said, 'and one of the reasons I'm not is because I take trouble with my entrances. I'm not going to go and sit in the stalls for ten minutes and have people clamber over my knees. I'm not going to stand in a vestibule and have to push through a lot of out-of-work old actresses. I'm not going to be photographed with some critic's stomach taking up half the picture. I'm not...'

She did not finish the sentence, for she saw that time was up. She blew the whistle again, and they shot forward. First to the left, past the stage-door, left and left again. And here they were once more. The **queue** of cars had miraculously melted away.

It was like the arrival of royalty. Robin jumped out,

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She took his arm. A whisper ran through the crowd ... 'Thelma Ganges, Thelma, Thelma... there she is!'¹ Scores of eager fans surged forward. It was with difficulty that the police held them back.

And now the mask was thrown *off*. She wore a smile of enchanting sweetness. The head was thrown back (you never got a double chin if you threw your head back when you smiled) the lips were parted, the eyes, curiously, remained quite rounded (you never got crows' feet if you kept your eyes properly rounded).

The bells for late-comers were ringing frenziedly as they entered the vestibule. ('Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen, *please*.') But there was plenty of time for photographs, one with her hand on Robin's arm, giving him a delicate smile, and another one by herself, in case he photographed badly, and a close-up, looking over her shoulder. Robin, standing there with the lights flashing on Thelma, as she turned this way and that, finding the right pose, apparently undeterred by the ringing of those alarming bells, admired her as he had never admired her before. The cool effrontery of it all!

And even now she would not hurry, for she saw a rival actress, only a few yards ahead of her, and she was not going to enter the auditorium on the tail of *that* woman's applause ... not that she was likely to get very much, poor dear. Nor did she ... only a few polite claps from the stalls. But when Thelma entered, her technique was so brilliant that even if she had been a nonentity one would have been tempted to clap. She walked swiftly, with her head turned towards the

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stage, until she reached the centre gangway. And then, a quick turn, a flick to her cloak to show its brilliant silver lining, and she dominated the house.

The gallery rose to her. Applause broke out all through the theatre. She glanced over her shoulder as though she was saying, 'Who *can* they be cheering?' Seeing nobody but an embarrassed Robin, she gratefully acknowledged these salutes. Not for one second did she overdo it ... a single miraculous smile, and a kiss of the hand, to the gallery. And as she sank into her seat, with the eyes of all the stalls upon her, a single gracious bow to an Archduke. Who, by the way, was astonished by this attention, for he had only that moment been asking who she was.

After which, the lights went out, and the curtain rose.

111

'I must tell her now .. . before we go to supper. In all the glare of publicity, so that she hasn't a chance to make a scene.'

So Robin kept saying to himself, all through the evening. But there wasn't a chance. In the entr'acte, she was the centre of a crowd of admirers ... the flash-lights flickering round her, the fans gathering in serried ranks behind a little bodyguard of friends. One would have thought that in such an atmosphere she would have small opportunity of carrying on the good work of damning the night's play, but she managed to deliver herself of a number of shrewd blows.

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To those who were connected with the book, she said how she adored the music, to those connected with the music she proclaimed that the book was *divine*. To the relations of Miss A. she praised Miss B. To the financial backers she was particularly sweet. 'What courage!' she breathed, with a most sinister intonation.

And afterwards, back-stage, in the crowded dressing-rooms of the principals, her brief passage was like an icy wind. ' *Of course* it will run,' she proclaimed. 'You *cant* judge by to-night's audience .. .' thereby sowing two deadly seeds of doubt, where previously there had been optimism. 'X. adored it!' she announced bravely, naming the oldest, most despised, most decrepit critic in Fleet Street. 'Don't *listen* to people, dear, it's jealousy!' That line came in very useful on several occasions. It immediately conjured up a picture of disgruntled critics, hovering in the background, and was guaranteed to take the savour out of any compliments that might be around.

On the whole, she was very satisfied with her first nigfit. She had managed, in the space of a few minutes, to start a dozen battles. And her progress from the stage-door to her car was so triumphant that the subsequent appearance of the night's principals was felt, by all, to be an anti-climax.

IV

Andante cantabile ... alla marcia ... molto vivace. .. allegretto tempestuoso. These would be the musical equivalents of the various stiges of Thelma's argument

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with Robin at the Savoy Grill (though it was more of a monologue than an argument).

She began as soon as they ordered their food. In a quiet, almost dreamy voice.

'What is this, dear, that I heard about a new number for Fay? Something about primroses, I believe.'

Robin took a big gulp of champagne. The moment had arrived at last. 'Daffodils,' he stammered.

'Yes? And what is it?'

'Just a song.'

'I see.' She sighed, and put her hand on his. 'Poor Robin!'

Robin stared at her. This was an unexpected line of attack.

'Why?' he asked uneasily.

'Making you work like this. Making you turn out things which can't possibly be used. You know, dear, if I weren't so fond of you I should say it was weak. Yes, dear ... weak. You shouldn't let yourself be persuaded into these things.'

'I wasn't persuaded,' he protested. 'It was entirely my own idea.'

She smiled, and shook her head. 'It's very sweet of you to say that, dear, and I'm sure it does you credit. But I think I know better. They have been getting round you.'

'They have done nothing of the sort ...' he began.

'And if I'd seen what had been going on,' she interrupted, 'I'd have stopped it. Because, of course, the idea of another number for Fay is quite impossible.'

'It's a little late to say that.'

'Quite impossible,' she repeated, calmly.

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Robin tried to appear equally calm. 'Hadn't you better hear the number, before saying that?'

'Oh no, -dear. It's nothing to do with the number. I'm sure it's delicious.'

'You mean, it's just the fact that Fay is singing it?'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Need you shout, dear? The Aga Khan *happens* to be behind that pillar.'

'I can't help it if he slides down it. The number's going to be done.'

'I think not, Robin dear.'

They stared at each other. The gloves were off.

V

The *alla mania* motif began. A note of urgency crept into her voice.

'And now that we're on this subject, Robin dear, I think I'd better warn you that this tendency to give everything to Fay has got to stop.'

'Everything. What on earth . . .'

She made a fluttering gesture of putting her hands over her ears. Staring fixedly at the table-cloth, she observed, in a flat voice, 'The French Ambassador, my dear, is not deaf.'

'I'm delighted to hear it, but. . .'

'Yes, dear. At the next table. With several friends of mine.'

She sighed, looked up again, and bowed regally to nobody in particular. There Was a pause. 'Let me see . . . what was I going to say? Oh yes ... Fay. That reminds me ...'

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She reached for her bag.

'I made a few notes last night, dear.' she said, drawing out a sheaf of papers, 'About Fay. I want to help the little girl if I can.'

'Splendid.'

'And I thought it was just as well that you should know what I propose.'

She cleared her throat, and was about to begin, when she looked up, and added, 'Though the word "propose" is perhaps hardly enough. This . . .' she tapped the paper, 'is my wish.'⁹

The word 'wish', reflected Robin, was perhaps hardly enough, either.

She began to inform him of the decisions she had taken the night before.

Robin listened, with growing amazement. He had been prepared for *Daffodils*. If the worst had come to the worst, he might have given way there, in the hope that the song might be tried out after they had been running for a few weeks ... if they ever *did* run. But now, it seemed that *Trees* was to go as well. It was incredible.

And now she was cutting out *The Lily*. He tried to interrupt. She waved him aside. She was explaining the generous role she had allotted to Fay in *A Touch of the Sun*. Three calls. Off.

It was more than he could bear.

'You needn't go on.' he said.

'Just a minute, dear.'

'I said, you needn't go on,' he cried. Something very strange seemed to be happening to him. Something that made him throw all caution to the winds.

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Robin spoke. His throat was dry. He wanted to hit somebody, very hard indeed. All he could say was:

'And once I thought you were an artist !

She rose to her feet. Waiters hurried forward. She motioned them aside.

Robin, trembling with anger, remained seated.

She stared at him, with supreme contempt.

Robin stared back.

He knew that no two people who had looked at each other like that could ever be friends again.

The thing was over.

Finished.

He poured himself out a drink. 'She can stand there.' he said to himself, 'for half an hour. I shan't get up.'

But even at that moment, she turned and went. A lovely figure, white and sparkling, kissing her hand to her adorers.

CHAPTER XVII

BLACKOUT

I

HE stared at the river.
He was young enough to contemplate throwing himself into it.

Young enough to say to himself... 'Well, she'd be sorry, when she read about it in the papers. If only for an hour or so, she'd feel uneasy. She'd realize what it was to muck up people's lives like this.'

But he was also poor enough to remember that if he threw himself in, it would cost a couple of guineas to clean his only dress suit. - For in spite of his desolation, he couldn't imagine getting into water without swimming in it. If, at the age of sixteen, you have been given large nickel-plated challenge cups for surf-riding in Manley Bay, it is somewhat difficult to be deterred by the Thames, at the age of twenty-three.

And so Robin could not really get into the right suicide mood. He could not moisten his lips with the terrifying pleasure that comes to those who tiptoe to the brink of death . •, to those whose fingers hover over the gas cyp, to those who sway on the edge of lonely cliffs, to those who creep up the stairs, laughing softly to themselves, clutching a little bottle in their hands.

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11

All the same, it was bloody.

He did not like swearing, even to himself. It seemed to him a form of weakness. A nervous twitch. But there were occasions in life when this red, violent adjective was quite essential. And this was one of them.

Look what life did to you!

Your head was ringing with melody. You wanted to catch that melody on the printed stave, as you might shut a songbird in its cage ... And what did life arrange? Life arranged a vulgar brawl with an overfed actress at an expensive restaurant. Your brain was glowing with pictures, brilliant little cameos of life. The woman in the blue hat on the bus, in the rain ... the aesthete feeding the pigeons in Trafalgar Square ... the newspaper boy muttering lewd comments on the news he called ... the fanatical face of the parson in Hyde Park, prophesying hell-fire under the rustling, lamplit elms. And what did life say to that? Life ordered you to write, for the hundredth time, a variation of a bedroom farce. Why? Because somebody had to be 'given a part'. Because 'we want a comedy spot here'. Because the scenery in the previous number was too heavy, or too light. Because ... anything.

You found yourself in love. Dreaming of high mountains, and a room that was lit with the light of dawn. You heard the song of the first birds, and like a ghost against a window-pane, you saw the shadow of a form you loved, and the glint of her hair. A ghost

BLACK OUT

yourself, you moved across the room, through the silver veils of the morning, while the breeze stirred the curtains, ever so faintly. Then, half-waking, half-sleeping, your lips met, you were as one with the ghost of the dawn. And in that kiss there was all the sweetness, all the tragic sweetness, of first love.

But life had no use for such dreams. Life preferred that you should find yourself in a traffic block, clutching hands. Or on a park bench, saying idiotic things. Or, perhaps, in bed ... hating everything, wondering why the curtains were pink when they should have been grey.

That was life, thought Robin.

He stared at the Thames. He whispered to himself those immortal lines of Shelley, which still keep their music and their magic, though they are droned in a thousand anthologies and blurred in a thousand calendars.

Life like a dome of many-coloured glass
Stains the white radiance of eternity,

'But that's too kind,' he muttered. 'Too pretty altogether. "Stains" is wrong. It should be "muddies" It should be "blackens". And it shouldn't; be "many-coloured". It should be every shade of grey . .. every kind of dirt and beastliness. When Shelley thought of that he saw mankind dancing, in an immense arena, under coloured lights. Twisting and turning in a hundred exquisite hues. While the One and Only, in white satin, sat on a pickled throne, and-fiddled about with the spotlight. That's not right. It isn't like that. It's just a smudge over the glass. An awful fog that

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we're all in. There may be light somewhere, but we can't get at it. We can't see it. We're like a lot of shabby moths.'

He leant over and buried his face in his hands. Through the slits made by his fingers he stared at the Thames. It glittered and glimmered, in red and green and orange, from the lights of the whisky advertisements.

It will be observed that he was slightly tight.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN END AND A BEGINNING

i

'SHE can't do it. I'll sue her. I'll call in Equity ' I'll make her name stink in every theatre in London.'

Mr. Harris sighed. 'But my dear Mr. Winterton,' he said, 'she *can* do it. This clause in her contract. ..'

'Who dared to put that clause in?' He seized the offending document. ' "At liberty to retire if cast does not meet with her approval." I've never heard anything like it in my life.'

'You signed it, Mr. Winterton.'

Mr. Winterton was speechless. He wished he were back in his nursing home. Thelma was worse than appendicitis. She not only gave him a pain in the stomach but a pain in the neck.

'She can't do it. It's blackmail.'

Humbert sank wearily into a chair. 'It's all that, Mr. dear. But either we give in, or the Show's off.'

'You *can't* give in.'

'If we did, I'd have to resign. It isn't only the Show ... we could get on without Fay. It's the principle of the thing. I'd have no authority left. I shouldn't be able to say boo to a stage hand.'

Lou ground her teeth. 'D'you haye to get a licence when you buy vitriol?'

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'In *my* country, she would be spittled upon.'

'Yes, Mr. Starr.' Bert scratched his head. 'If she were my missus, I'd give her a clip under the jaw.'

'No, I would spittle upon her,' snarled Starr.

'It's a bleeding shame, sir, that's what it is. Throwing us all out of work. And me with only four weeks' pantomime work this year, and the season half over. I've got references that'd make Max Reinhardt green with envy, but shall I get another job for six months?' He spat angrily into a corner.

Starr nodded. 'So!' he observed. 'She is to spittle upon.'

'Don't be a damned little fool,' he muttered.

Fay blinked. She was very near to tears. It was the first row they had ever had.

'I'm sorry. But that's just what I'm going to do.'

She turned to go.

'Fay! Come here!'

She shook her head.

'If you walk out, I'll walk out too. And then Thelma will be able to turn round and say it's all my fault. For God's sake don't put me in the wrong. That's all you'll be doing, if you leave us now.'

She shook her head again. 'It won't be like that, you'll see. As soon as I'm gone, everything will be all right.' She choked back a sob. The effort of trying not to cry made her look very fierce and determined.

'Of all the obstinate little brutes . . .'

She flew up the stairs. Robin, in misery, watched her go. Was it possible that he had spoken like that?

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Was it conceivable that he had thrown her sacrifice in her face?

But she was obstinate. Even if she gave way, *they* couldn't give way. Even if he were willing, nobody else was. All she was doing was to mese up the whole damned thing.

He supposed he ought to follow her, but he didn't trust himself. His nerves were shot to pieces. All that drink last night. No sleep. People screaming at him, for hours on end. The finish of all his dreams, all his hopes.

And Fay, crying to herself, on some filthy bus.

So the day passed, in anger and recrimination. People stood about in little groups, whispering. All thought of work had vanished. Sol, the conductor, sat staring moodily at a pile of manuscript which he ought to have been orchestrating. Bert leant wearily against a piece of scenery that should have been in the carpenter's shop being painted. Humbert ran backwards and forwards to the telephone, telling reporters that nothing had happened.

So the day passed. Outside, the normal world went about its business. The great battalions of the sane (as opposed to the insane, who are connected with the theatre) careered around the city, charging, retreating, and deploying in the customary manoeuvres of money-making and money-losing. None of them was aware that the world had suddenly come to an end. To this great majority who passed outside the theatre, the world was still spinning merrily along. It would have greatly surprised them to learn that all was over, for even

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Yet that was the feeling throughout the Burlington Theatre. And it was particularly strong in those who had been summoned to the Council of War, at six o'clock, which was finally to decide the fate of all concerned.

11

Robin was ten minutes late.

He entered a room in which there was no sound except that made by a large number of people breathing very fast and very angrily.

Mr. Winterton was breathing in the manner of a horse that has just climbed a steep hill on a hot day. Lou was breathing like an angry puppy from whom somebody has just taken a bone. Bert was breathing like an all-in wrestler, waiting to spring. Starr was breathing as though he were struggling against a powerful anaesthetic. Humbert and Mr ' Harris were also breathing, not so eccentrically, but with marked discomfort.

But the greatest breather was Thelma herself. She looked like all the heroines of the late lamented Charles Garvice, at the moment when their virtue is being called in question. She was doing all the Charles Garvice things. Her nostrils were 'dilated '. Her bosom 'heaved '. And her eyes 'flashed'.

' In spite of everything, he could not stifle a sneaking feeling of admiration for her at this moment. There was something superhuman about her. To appear so outraged, when one is so outrageous! To assume all

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the airs of avenging justice, when actually one should be in the dock!

'At last!' cried Thelma, on Robin's entrance, 'Now, Mr. Winterton, perhaps you will sum up/

Winterton looked miserable. This situation was none of his making. And in his present state of weakness, it baffled him.

'It seems as though you'd summed up everything yourself/ he murmured, shifting from side to side in his chair.

Thelma interrupted: 'Mr. Winterton, unless you can sit still, I shall go mad. That creaking !' She put her hands to her ears. 'Some of us have nerves, you know!'

'Has anybody got a Benzedrine?' demanded Lou, in a flat voice. Nobody answered.

'Mr. Winterton ... we're waiting.'

Winterton cleared his throat. 'Well,' he said, 'it's very simple. If Miss Pearl is not dismissed, you walk out. If she is dismissed, everybody else walks out. In either case, the Show will be finished. And you'll have finished it.'

He paused, astonished at his own boldness.

'What?' cried Thelma. 'Is *that* the story you propose to plaster all over England? Is it?'

'Well, dear ...'

'If it is,' she snapped, 'there will be a writ for libel. Let us make no mistake about *that*' She folded her arms, and aimed a really terrifying smile at the unfortunate Winterton.

'I do *not* object to Miss Pearl,' she averred. 'On the contrary. But I do object to her being made the star of this show.'

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'Since when?' asked Robin quietly,

Thelma looked over Robin's head. 'I have already informed Mr. Frost that I have no intention of speaking to him, or listening to him, unless he apologizes for his insulting behaviour last night. Until that time, I should prefer that any communication between us should be by correspondence.'

'Write her a note, dear!' hissed Lou to Robin. 'I'll tell you what to say.'

Mr. Harris flapped his hands. 'Ladies, *p'easel* Couldn't we compromise?'

'I am perfectly willing to compromise, Mr. Harris. I always *have* been willing. I have not the faintest objection to Miss Pearl, providing that she keeps to the roles I have suggested.'

'Three screams, offstage,' muttered Humbert.

'What did you say, Humbert?'

'I said, three screams off stage, dear. That's all you've left her.'

'I'm afraid I don't understand you, Humbert. A little beyond me, dear. You must explain it to me, some time. In the meantime, my offer stands.'

'Her offer!' Starr rose to his feet. He glared at Thelma. A terrible noise came from his throat. She drew back in alarm. For a moment she thought he was going to leap at her. Then, turning his head away, he spat. And sat down.

There was a terrible silence. Thelma looked as though she had been physically assaulted.

'And so say all of us.'

The voice was Lou's.

It was the last straw. Thelma rose to her feet. I

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intend to waste no more time being insulted,' she cried. She rapped on the table. 'Do I look as though I were joking?'

'No dear.' Once more it was the irrepressible Lou. 'You look like the Spanish Armada.'

It was too much for Humbert. He exploded. It was a soft, discreet explosion, but it was ... well, an explosion. He rapidly turned roud and covered his face with a large silk handkerchief.

'Pretty,' said Thelma through clenched teeth. 'Very pretty indeed. My producer. Acting like a gutter-snipe. Dribbling in corners with a small-part, second-rate ...'

'I'm not dribbling, dearie,' observed Lou. 'Speak for yourself.'

Thelma, for a moment, was rendered speechless. In the brief silence that ensued, Robin spoke.

'Then you're definitely going to break your contract?'

'I consider it broken already. But not by me.'

'That will be a matter for legal opinion.'

Mr. Harris put his head in his hands. 'Oh dear, oh dear!' he wailed. 'If we go to law we're all ruined.'

'Shut up, Harris.'

'You'll be sorry for this,' said Robin.

'I think not. I'm sorry *for you*,' she cried. ... 'because you're letting a silly infatuation ...'

'That's enough, Thelma.'

'Ruin one of the greatest chances you'll ever have. That makes me sorry. But I'm not sorry for anyone else.' She turned on Humbert. 'I'm not sorry for an incompetent nincompoop of a producer who doesn't know the difference between a drop-curtain and a back-

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cloth.' To Bert ... 'I'm not sorry for a blundering lout of a stage-manager who couldn't hit a battle-ship with a spot-light...'

'He'll be able to, after he's practised a bit more on you, dearie.' The remark, needless to say, came from Lou,

'*I am* sorry for you, dear,' hissed Thelma. 'I'm sorry for anybody with a diseased mind. But as for *you* •. •' and here she stepped towards Winterton. 'For two pins I'd ruin you. I'd get your manager's licence cancelled. I'd ...'

But we shall never know what else she might have done. For the intensity of her rage turned, at last, to simple hysteria. And with tears streaming down her cheeks, and hoarse and meaningless sounds coming from her throat, she ran from the room.

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A great deal happened in the next fifteen minutes. And at the end of it, the situation was summed up by Humbert, who had followed Winterton after Thelma had left the room.

He came back, threw himself into a chair, and said:

'Well, we're up against it. Thelma's out. That's definite. Winterton's finished with her. And I think that goes for all of us. Any complaints?'

Silence.

'But that's not the most serious part of it. Winterton's out too.'

'What d'you mean, "out"?' asked Robin.

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'He's through with the Show.' He put his hand on Robin's shoulder. 'Sorry, Robin.'

'It's all right.' Robin stared at the wall. 'I thought this would probably happen.'

'We can't blame him. He's a business man. He backed us because of Thelma. Without her ...'

'There are moments when I just don't believe in anybody or anything,' said Bert wearily.

'There are moments when I firmly believe in the devil,' said Humbert. 'And this is one of them.' He lit a cigarette, and threw it away after a single puff.

Starr suddenly gave a long, angry snarl from his corner. 'In my country,' he said, 'such women would be battered. They would be battered till the blood-gushings arrive.'

'But we mustn't be *hopeless*,' wailed Mr. Harris, in a voice that hardly matched his words. 'Mr. Winterton might be persuaded.'

'Not a chance.'

'But he will lose at least £2000! He has *spent* £2000.'

'He says he's not going to throw good money after bad.'

Mr. Harris ran his hands through his hair. Then he asked, 'Would he still let us have the theatre?'

'Certainly. If we can pay for it.'

'How much would we want... the barest minimum?'

'Three thousand.'

Mr. Harris frowned. Then, somewhat mysteriously, he left the room. Nobody paid much attention to his departure.

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'I've got two hundred.' said Bert, gruffly. 'In Savings Certificates. They're easy to cash.'

'Bert, if you say things like that, I shall burst into tears.' Humbert scowled at him. Then he added, 'For that matter, I could manage three hundred myself. My one and only legacy was paid last week. But what's the use of three hundred?'

'I can get two hundred.' said Robin.

'How?'

Robin felt like saying, 'By selling my soul'. For his only means of getting two hundred pounds was by signing that degrading contract with the Perkin W|rbeck Press, whose offer still held good. Well, he'd sign it. Other people broke contracts, he'd break his. And he'd pay them back somehow.

'Never mind how.' he said.

'I know a very nasty old gentleman who'd give me a hundred.' said Lou, 'if I'd allow him a few liberties. Which.' she added in lofty tones, 'I certainly would, in such a cause.'

Bert sat up. 'D'you realize that makes eight hundred already?'

'If only I could take my gold from my country.' sighed Starr mournfully. 'But they sit on it.'

Humbert smiled at him. 'Even if they didn't sit on it, we wouldn't accept it.'

'But Humbert... eight hundred in a few minutes!'

'Yes. And where are we going to get the rest? And even if we get it, where's our star? We open in ten days. *Where's our star*'

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IV

There was a knock on the door.

'Come in!'

They looked up, without much interest.

It was Sitters.

'I say,' he said nervously. 'I hope I don't intrude.

"Anything appertaining to Miss Ganges intrudes/ snapped Humbert. 'What is it?'

'I . . . I only wanted to see if I could help.'

'If you drag that she-devil back here on her bended knees, we won't look at her,' growled Bert.

'Oh, I wasn't thinking of bringing Thelma back. She doesn't even know I've come. It's . . . it's just that I met Harris outside and . . .'

Mr. Harris appeared. His previous dejection had given way to a sudden exultation. Positively, he seemed to have swelled. He beamed at them all. He patted Sitters on the back. And he announced:

'Gentlemen! Our new backer!'

'Our new *what?*'

'Oh Mr. Harris, I didn't say *that*' Sitters looked nervously round the room. 'I only said a thousand.'

'*Only* a thousand?' Bert leant forward. 'Phew! That makes eighteen hundred!'

'Sitters dear,' said Lou. 'Have you been robbing something behind my back?'

'Oh no,' said Sitters, still very timidly. 'I *have* money, you know. Quite a lot, really. I mean, I don't *get* anything from Thelma. I just do that for fun.'

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'Good God!' Lou turned to Robin. 'He does it for fun!'

'And it hasn't really been such fun lately,' continued Sitters, a little warmth coming into his voice. 'She really has been ... but you *know* about that. And I thought, well ... if we could go on, without her.' it might teach her a lesson. Mr. Harris thought so too. That is to say,' he concluded lamely, 'if Humbert and Robin agreed.'

Humbert folded his arms and gazed in wonderment at Mr. Harris. 'What is the secret of your fatal charm?'

Mr. Harris smiled benignly. 'Mr. Sittingbourne didn't need to be persuaded.'

'Indeed I didn't,' said Sitters. 'I *want* to do it.'

'Then you shall, Sitters,' said Robin. 'And we're all damned grateful.'

Sitters blushed and lowered his eyes.

Humbert rapped on the table. 'But this still doesn't solve the problem of ...'

Robin rapped a little louder. 'Never mind about that for the moment,' he said. 'Listen. All of you please. We've got to think very quickly and very clearly.'

He turned to Sitters. 'Can you produce your thousand at once?'

'Of course.'

'Thank you. I can get my two hundred in a day or two. Humbert's got three hundred. Bert, I'm accepting your two hundred. And Lou's hundred.'

'Oh, what a rash girl I've been!' wailed Lou, with assumed dismay.

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'On the contrary, you're making a damn' good investment. That gives us eighteen hundred.' He turned to Humbert. 'Are you sure that only leaves another twelve?'

'Wait a minute.' Humbert did a rapid sum on a piece of paper. 'It pays the rent for three weeks, and all pressing debts. But it only gives us one week's salary list, even if we ask everybody to go on a percentage. And it leaves out the orchestra. And ... oh Lord! I don't know. Yes, I guess we could manage.'

'I'll *get* it.'

'But

'I said,' repeated Robin, 'I'll get it.' He felt slightly dizzy. How would he get it? Lord alone knew. He didn't care.

He turned to Bert. 'How long does the show run now?'

'Nearly forty minutes too long.'

He looked at Humbert. 'Well, that means that a good many of Thelma's things would have had to come out in any case. And if we give a bit more to Lou and Starr .. .'

Humbert interrupted him. 'However much we give to anybody else,' he said ... and to emphasize his words he took up the ink-pot and banged it on the table ... 'we still haven't got a STAR!'

Silence.

And it was Sitters who, once more, saved the situation. For, very innocently and softly, he said: 'If only Fay Pearl had more experience!'

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V

It is curious how an idea, which has long been at the back of a number of men's minds, but has been constantly rejected by them as individuals, becomes suddenly acceptable when it "is voiced by somebody else. That which they had regarded as their own private folly is seen to be shared, to be not so private after all, and therefore, maybe, not so foolish. And from being afraid of giving utterance to their thoughts, they become determined advocates of them.

Thus it was, as soon as Sitters said, 'If only Fay Pearl had more experience!'

The reaction came in a quick crescendo of approval.

Bert: 'I've thought so for the past three weeks.'

Starr: 'She will be a star one day. Why not to-day?'

Lou: 'I'd risk it, if it were my show.'

Sitters: 'So would I.'

Humbert: 'My God . . . d'you think we could?'

Mr. Harris: 'It's that or nothing.'

Bert: 'The whole company'd sweat their guts out for her.'

Humbert: 'Wait a minute. Robin, what do you say? Have we all gone mad? Or is it possible?'

Robin shut his eyes for a moment. He was trying to get an unbiased view of things. To see it from the outside.

But he couldn't. He was too close to it all. She meant too much to him. He must trust the others now. *They* believed in her. It was not for him to disbelieve.

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'Don't forget,' added Humbert, 'that there's only a week.'

I'm not forgetting. Let me think a minute.'

He tried to think of Fay singing *A Touch of the Sun*. Dancing in the ballet. Taking Thelma's part in a dozen roles. But all he saw was a tiny figure in gold, singing about daffodils. Was it because that was all she *could* do? Was it that there was no more in her than that? Damn it all, he mustn't suggest such a thing, mustn't even let them know he'd thought it.

He took a deep breath.

'I'd risk it,' he said. 'I think ... I believe ... she may be sensational.'

Everybody began to talk at once. Their mood was festive, jubilant. Bert darted off to inform the company. Lou dragged out Sitters to have a drink. Humbert seized his papers, and was just preparing to start on the first hundred problems that faced him, when he turned and said:

'By the way, where is Fay? She might be faintly interested to know that she's now a star, and has at least three years' work to get through by next Friday.'

'I'll tell her,' said Robin. 'She's gone home.'

'Well, telephone her.'

'No. I'll fetch her.'

'AH right, if you feel like that about it. Bring her straight round to my studio. And warn her that we shall be up all night.'

Robin grabbed his hat, and ran down the stairs. This was Life, with a capital L. An L as big as any of the letters of Thelma's name on the posters .. • which he reflected, would now have to come down.

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He leapt into the car. And as he started, with a lurch that nearly knocked him off his seat, he thumbed his nose at that poster, and laughed to think of the name that would soon supplant it.

CHAPTER XIX

STRANGE INTERLUDE

1

WHY Robin was not arrested for furious driving, as he sped towards Battersea, must remain a mystery. He ignored traffic lights, he cut in, on two occasions he passed a refuge on the wrong side of the road, and along the Chelsea Embankment his speedometer touched sixty. But nothing happened.

He drew up outside Palm Mansions only twelve minutes after he had left the theatre.

Slamming the door of the car, he took the entrance steps in a single leap, ignored the lift and ran up to the second floor, three steps at a time. There he paused for a moment, to get his breath. As he leaned panting against the wall, outside the door on which Fay's professional card was pinned, he thought how strange it was that although he had often seen this door, she had never once asked him to come inside. In fact, he had never even seen her open the door. She had always stood, latchkey in hand, waiting till he was well on his way downstairs.

Well, perhaps it wasn't so strange, really. Fay was poor. Presumably the flat was shabby. And he had a suspicion that Fay's mother was perhaps not very socially presentable . . . although it was not like Fay to be worried by anything like that. However, the

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message he was bringing her was so tremendous that any little embarrassment she might have felt, in the ordinary way, would certainly be swept aside.

He took a deep breath, straightened his tie, and rang the bell

There was silence.

He waited. Rang again. The silence was unbroken. He began to curse. She must have gone out. Perhaps to dinner. Perhaps to a party. Of all the damnable luck, when every hour was so precious, when it was so vitally necessary that he should have a long evening's rehearsal.

He was just about to ring for a third time, when he heard footsteps inside. It was certainly not Fay, for the footsteps were slow and shuffling, as though somebody were sliding unsteadily over the floor. Presumably it was her mother. Well, that was better than nothing. At least she would be able to tell him where Fay was. Why didn't she hurry up? Through the semi-opaque glass of the door he could see a black shape moving very slowly nearer. It suddenly struck him that the old lady might be an invalid. Perhaps that was why Fay had never asked him in. Perhaps she'd be furious.

However, it was too late to draw back now.

It was indeed too late. The door slowly opened. For the first time he was face to face with Fay's mother.

And he saw, in an instant, that she was hopelessly drunk.

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'What's . . . what's matter?'

Robin couldn't speak. His throat seemed to be paralysed. He stared at the figure before him with a horrible fascination. It was like an obscrttie parody of Fay. A Fay who had not only aged, but decayed. A Fay who had not only ripened, but gone to fat. A Fay whose inner light had been quenched by corruption. She was small, as Fay was, but obese. Her hair was as pale, but it lacked all lustre. And the radiant transparency of Fay's skin was mocked by an unhealthy pallor . . . a pallor that was accentuated by the myriads of little purple veins that ran from her nose, over her cheeks, down her neck.

'What's matter, I say? Who d'you want?'

With one hand she clutched on to the side of the door. With the other she held the greasy dressing-gown together.

' I . . . I was looking for Miss Pearl,' he said.

'She's' . . . a stifled hiccup . . . 'out. Who're you?'

'My name's Frost.'

'Oh . . . Mr. Frost.' Her mouth spread in a leering smile. 'Mr. Frost. Why didn' you say so b'fore? Come in, Mr. Frost.'

Robin hesitated. What could he do? His first thought was to spare Fay the humiliation of learning that he had seen her mother in this condition. But how could he prevent her from learning it? Even if he went away at once, her mother would certainly tell her that he had called. Besides, how could he go away

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at once, when she was holding the door open for him?

An idea struck him. He would go in, and scribble a very short note, making an appointment somewhere. Then he would fly. And when he saw her, he would pretend to have noticed nothing.

'Well,' he said, 'it's very kind of you. If I could just come in for a moment and leave a note. I don't suppose you're expecting her for a little while?'

'About . . . ' another hiccup . . . 'half an hour.'

That would give him time. He stepped inside.

She shuffled ahead of him, putting out her hand to the wall to steady herself. He now noticed that underneath the dressing-gown she was wearing shabby mauve pyjamas. Her feet were thrust into mules that were fringed with feathers, that had once been white but were now grey. She was muttering to herself.

'This way.'

They entered the sitting-room. It was a charming little room, that might have been furnished by an undergraduate with more taste than money. The walls were primrose, the curtains of plain sacking. The sofa was a gay grass-green. There was a long bookshelf, stretching right round the room. Otherwise the walls were bare.

On a table of unpolished oak there was a bottle of whisky, nearly empty, a jug of water, and one glass.

The room was very tidy, except that the fireplace was littered with cigarette ends, and that one of the cushions had fallen to the floor.

She bent down to pick it up. The effort was a little beyond her. She staggered, and would have fallen, had not Robin put out his hand to steady her.

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'Thank you, Mr. Frost.' She swayed back into an upright position. 'Thank you.' She looked at the cushion and shook her head, very solemnly. 'It's my heart,' she proclaimed. 'Mustn't stoop.'

She held on to the mantelpiece. He picked up the cushion.

'Doctor's forbidden me stoop. Abs'lutely.' She thrust out her arm. 'Feel it. Feel pulse.'

He felt her pulse. It was quite normal.

'*Feel it,*' she repeated. She came closer. Her breath was appalling.

He let go her hand. 'Yes,' he said. 'It must be bad to have a pulse like that.'

'*'s terrible.*' Her eye wandered to the whisky. 'What about a li'l drink. While waiting. Eh?'

'I don't think I will, thank you very much.' He was longing to get away. 'If I could just have a piece of paper to write on . . .'

'Over there.' She jerked her head towards a desk. As he went to it, she put out her hand for the whisky. She poured out all that remained of the bottle, about half a tumbler-full. She swallowed it neat.

'My dear Fay,' began Robin. He paused, and put his hand over his eyes. What could he say to reassure her?

'I rushed in for a couple of seconds with this note. I've got wonderful news. So excited that I'm afraid I'd hardly time to say a word to your mother. "Please meet me at. . .'

'Robin!'

She had come back.

The pen dropped from his fingers.

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She stood in the doorway, a picture of dismay, of anguish. She looked from Robin to her mother, and back to Robin again. Her lips parted, as though she would speak, but no words came. She only kept pulling, over and over again, at the button of her glove.

Robin got up. He longed to go to her, to comfort her, to say 'It's all right ... I understand. And I don't care tuppence, except for your sake.' But he had to keep up this ghastly farce of pretending not to notice anything.

'Fay!' he said, 'I had to see you. I've got very exciting news.'

'What's that?' His words seemed to animate the figure on the sofa. She had looked, for a moment, as though she were falling asleep. They also seemed to pull Fay together.

She ignored Robin. She hurried over to the sofa.

'Mother, dear.' Her voice trembled, very slightly. 'You shouldn't have got up.'

'I'm all ri'. Want to hear news.'

'You know what the doctor said. About your heart.' The last part of the sentence was obviously spoken for Robin's benefit.

'Nothing matter with heart. Not if I was treated ... prop'ly. Not always ... left alone. Never ... told things. Want hear news.'

'Later, mother, later.'

'Want hear it now.'

Robin stepped forward. Being forced to stand still and witness this degrading spectacle was a little more than he could bear. 'It's really quite simple,' he began.

STRANGE INTERLUDE

'Robin!' There was an expression on her face that seemed to say, 'Come nearer, if you dare! This is my job.' He stepped back again.

'Come, Mother.'

She put her hand gently on her mother's shoulder. With mock terror, the figure on the sofa heaved away from her. 'All ri' ... all ri'!' she cried. 'Til come.' With a sly look at Robin she rubbed her shoulder, pretending that Fay had hurt her.

'All ri' ... all ri'!' She staggered to her feet. 'Leave me alone.' She dabbed vaguely in front of her as though warding off an imaginary blow. 'Trying to knock me about. That's what she is. Trying to knock her old mother about.'

Robin turned to the window. He felt physically sick.

Fay put out her hand once more. 'Mother, *please* .. '

'Leave me *alone*!' The voice rose to a scream. 'I'm going. I don't want to hear your bloody news.' There was a sound of shuffling footsteps. 'You can keep your bloody news to yourselves!' The door opened. Then in the corridor there was suddenly the sound of raucous, maudlin tears. The door slammed again. There was silence. Robin was alone.

He was still standing by the window when Fay came back. She went straight to an upright chair by the fire, and sat down. She pulled out a cigarette, and pretended to light it.

'Mother's very ill,' she said. She did not look at

REVUE

him. She sat very straight in the chair and stared at the mantelpiece.

'I know, Fay, I could see.'

'I don't know what you mean ... "you could see".'
There was a note of hostility in *bet* voice ' 'It's an illness, I tell you. '

'I'm awfully sorry, Fay.'

She still did not look at him. She, still stared ahead.
'There's nothing for you to be sorry about. It's my responsibility. I don't ask anybody to share it. I don't ask anybody to butt in.'

She got up suddenly.

'What's this news you came to tell me about?'

As she said it, she forced herself to look at him. And as she saw his face, so grave, so plainly moved by a sympathy which he dared not express, she seemed to crumple up. She gave a little sob. She sank down on the sofa and turned her face to the cushion.

'You oughtn't to have come,' she cried brokenly.
'If I'd known, I'd have stopped you. I never wanted you to see her like this. That's why ... that's why I never asked you in before.'

'Oh Fay ... if only I could do something.' He went over to her.

'Nobody can do anything. It's a disease. Every doctor says so. I've tried and tried. I've bought things and dropped them in her tea. I even saved up to send her to a home. It's no use. It just goes on.'

He took her hand in his.

'I can deal with it alone,' she said. 'But I can't if **there are** other people about.' She gave a deep, shuddering sigh. 'Oh dearP she said. 'To be crying

STRANGE INTERLUDE

like this. Before you. I hate crying. It's silly. Please lend me a hanky.'

She dabbed her eyes, and sat up.

'She used to be on the stage,' she said. 'She was so ... so pretty. And people have told me she might have been great. . . *really* great, I mean.'

'So that's where you get it from,' muttered Robin, almost to himself.

'But she had a hard time,' continued Fay. 'Things weren't easy for her, like they've been for me.'

'Easy!'

She sighed. 'Oh dear, I'd wanted it to be so different when you came,' she said.

'It doesn't matter, Fay. Perhaps it's better for me to know.'

'No. I wanted you to see her as she really is. That wasn't her. That wasn't my mother. It was just an awful thing that gets inside my mother. Sometimes it stays so long ... for weeks ... that I wonder if it'll ever come out, if I'll ever see her again. And then it goes, and I feel it's all right again, and perhaps something wonderful will happen to make her give it up. Oh dear, if I go on like this, I shall begin to cry again. Please tell me your news.'

He told her.

We need not repeat the news, for we know it already. Nor need we prolong the suspense in which Robin was plunged, for nearly an hour, while she explained to him the impossibility, the sheer madness, of his proposal. She did not seem to be thinking of herself. She did not even seem to be doubting herself. Deep inside

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her there was a queer confidence, an instinct that she could rise to the occasion. But she knew the risks ... the appalling risks which her acceptance would involve. It did not matter for her. She was prepared to face them. 'Heavens,' she said to herself, 'what girl *wouldn't* face them, in my position?' But with Robin, it was different.

It was only after he had told her, for the twentieth time, that they all trusted her, that if she refused, the show would be lost for ever, that she at last accepted. And within a moment of her acceptance, she was all efficiency. She sprang up from the sofa, and pointed to the clock.

'It's nearly eight. Let's run out and get a sandwich. Then we can come back here and work.'

'But Fay ... we want a piano.'

She paused. She seemed to be looking down the corridor. 'Oh, of course.' She spoke slowly. 'You mean, we'd better go to your place?'

'Yes. Humbert's going to be there at nine.'

'I see.' She seemed to be trying to make up her mind. 'Just a minute,' she said.

she ran out of the room. He heard her go into the bedroom. There was the sound of low voices.

She came back. 'It's all right. Let's hurry.'

They went out.

At the foot of the stairs she paused. She seemed to be making a great effort.

'Robin. Will you lend me twelve and six?'

'Of course,' he said, and smiled.

But she did not smile back. As he handed it to her he said, 'What's it for?'

STRANGE INTERLUDE

'I may as well tell you. You ... you couldn't be more shocked than you'mjist have been already. It's for a bottle of whisky.'

'But... but why?'

'She wants it.'

'But you're not going to give it to her, surely?'

She nodded.

'But Fay, I can't understand that.'

'No. I don't suppose anybody could. But I've got to.'

She put her hand on his arm. 'Please don't look at me like that. It's just... well, it's just because I want to keep up appearances a bit longer, that's all. If I get it for her, she'll stay quietly at home, and perhaps go back to bed. If I don't, she'll go out and get it for herself. She's got the money. Nothing would stop her. I can't lock her in. I can't go round to every pub and tell them not to serve her. And if she does go out...' she shuddered ... 'something terrible might happen. She might fall down. They might take her to prison.'

'A damn' good job if they did,' muttered Robin.

She stiffened. 'You shouldn't say that, Robin. It's a disease.'

'Oh, I know, but. . .'

'There aren't any "buts" about it. If I thought there were, I couldn't go on. As it is, I can. I can deal with it. Perhaps you think I'm wrong to go out and get it for her. I'm not. But even if you did, you couldn't change me.'

He felt almost unbearably affected. 'I don't want to change you, Fay.'

He held her hand for a moment. They smiled at

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each other. Then she seemed to recollect herself. 'I'll just run down to the pub at the corner. I won't be a minute.'

'No. Let me go.'

She shook her head. 'I'd rather.' And as she went, she called back, almost lightly, 'It won't be the first time.'

CHAPTER XX

CRISE DE NERFS

I

THE incredible was happening. She was rising to the occasion. She was rising far above the occasion. She was dancing over all their heads, singing with an inspired gaiety.

'It is not to believe,' muttered Starr, after the first rehearsal of *A Touch of the Sun*. He blew his nose in the violence of his emotions. 'One would say she had done it all her life.'

Lou swelled the chorus of praise. 'My dear, I've allowed the old man his liberties, and I've got my hundred pounds, and I wish it were a thousand. She's a genius. She makes you laugh, she makes you cry, she does anything she likes with you. The public's going to eat her.'

Humbert was far too dizzy with work, worry and fatigue to express any opinion. All he could do, as each scene gradually shaped itself, was to mutter ... 'Well, that's another miracle. I wonder when the crash will come?'

In spite of this, they had been forced to postpone for a week. As the days went by, Robin became more and more desperate. For his light-hearted assurance that he would collect £1200 showed no signs of being

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fulfilled. In the excitement of the moment it had seemed so easy. And his enthusiasm had been so infectious that they had trusted him, left it in his hands. They thought he had something up his sleeve.

For the first few days he did not disillusion them. If only Mr. Harris had been there to advise him, he might not have allowed things to drift on. But Mr. Harris had chosen this moment to have a motor smash, and was lying in a darkened room, closely guarded from all visitors. And even if Mr. Harris had been there, how would it have helped?

Every member of the company was making a tremendous effort, and if he were to give them a hint that it might be in vain, there would be a dangerous collapse of morale. So when Humbert, in a voice that was hoarse with shouting, abruptly asked him if the money was coming in all right, he merely nodded and said, 'Fine'.

But nothing was coming in. Not a penny. He had gambled on being able to persuade Winterton to let them leave the rent of the theatre in arrears for a few weeks. Winterton would have none of it. He offered to tear up his contract, and to sign a new one, which would give him only one per cent of the gross. He even offered to add a clause binding himself to write another show for nothing at all. Winterton was adamant.

'**But**, Mr. Winterton, when you managed the company, you were prepared to pay me £100 a week in royalties. I must be worth *something*,"

'That may be so.' replied Mr. Winterton. 'But I am responsible for other people's money, as well as my **own**.'

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Robin had great difficulty in keeping his temper. 'But we're *all* prepared to work for practically nothing.'

'Quite. But the stage hands have got to be paid, haven't they? And the dressers? And the chorus? And the costumiers? And the orchestra? Why, the orchestra alone costs £120 a week! How do I know there'll be £100 a week in the house? No, Mr. Frost! I myself have lost two thousand pounds in this unfortunate undertaking. I cannot risk losing any more. And unless the rent is forthcoming . . .'

Money. How did you get money?

You could sell your body to a hospital, couldn't you? Or was there a law against it? Anyway, it was probably only worth five bob, unless it were decorated with some very exotic sort of wart. And he was wartless.

You could be photographed for the advertisers, in vests and pants, at a guinea a time. In his first days in London he'd done that. He'd shivered in bathing-trunks in draughty studios, or stood against a rising sun, half naked, holding up a bottle of fruit salts. But it would take about ten years to get £1200 that way.

Gentlemen with intensely British names offered to lend you anything up to £5000 with no sort of security. But when he'd once offered to sign almost anything in exchange for a fiver he had been shown the door. 'No prospects, Mr. Frost, no prospects at all.'

He'd got his £200, all right, from Messrs. Perkin Warbeck. But that was all. And even that meant another millstone round his neck in the future, for he

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didn't see how he was ever going to write that filthy book.

It was a nightmare. How could he be expected to stay up till all hours of the morning, strumming on the piano, coaching newly-promoted chorus girls, trying to help Humbert to arrange some practical running order? Yet he did all these things. It couldn't go on much longer.

Saturday dawned. They were opening on Wednesday. A week's rent was due on Tuesday at nine o'clock. ^300. He *must* tell them now. He rang up Mr. Harris. A nurse answered him, in a voice of piercing brightness.

'Yes, he's coming out to-day, and going home. *Much* better, yes. Could you go and see him? Oh, yes! As long as you don't stay more than five minutes, and don't worry him about business, I'm sure he'd be delighted. You'll wait till to-morrow? Very well. I'll give him your message.'

Saturday drifted by like an appalling dream. It was their first dress rehearsal. It was chaotic. When the break came for dinner, at eight o'clock, they had not even reached the end of the first half, after 'six hours.

He had to tell somebody.

He told Fay.

He told her on the roof, under the stars.

It was a secret place which they had discovered **for** themselves. A former manager of the Burlington

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Theatre had once played with the idea of a roof-garden, and there was a little corner where the ivy had climbed over the chimney-pots and two clipped bay trees struggled bravely against the soot.

'But Robin,' she said quietly, 'it doesn't matter for me. It's for you it's so terrible.'

'Fay, don't be an angel for a minute. Be human. Hit me with something.'

She put her fingers on his forehead. 'You've got two wrinkles with all this worry,' she said. Her hand rested there. 'No, three.'

'Don't you feel like chucking everything up?'

'It doesn't make the faintest difference to me. I shall just go on. Oh, dear, I wish I had some money. Or mother . . .'

'How is she?' he asked abruptly. 'You never tell me.'

She turned away. 'The same.'

'Oh, Fay . . . that, on top of everything I'

She spoke with forced brightness. 'No. We're in luck. She's got to the stage where she stays in bed. She'll be there for at least another week. So I don't have to worry.'

He put his hands on her shoulders, and held her from him, staring at her.

'I wish you weren't so perfect,' he said.

'I'm sorry.'

'So am I. There ought to be something. Spots somewhere. Funny little bits. You haven't got any. It's a bad omen.'

'Robin!'

He held her to him. 'It's damnable,' he muttered.

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To fall in love with somebody that's perfect. There *ought* to be something.'

He shut his eyes. They stayed very still. The wind rustled in the little bay trees. For a moment he felt at peace.

111

Three a.m.

They had run through the Show at last. The company had gone. He caught Humbert on the stairs leading to the stage-door.

'Humbert ... I've got to speak to you.'

'Can't it wait? I'm dead. I want to go home.'

'No, it can't. It's about the money. I've failed.'

Humbert stared at him. 'I don't understand. What money?'

'The £1200 I said I'd get.'

Humbert sat down on the staircase and put his hand over his eyes. 'The £1200 you said you'd get,' he repeated mechanically. 'I remember. And you can't get it?'

'No.'

'Then I suppose we can't open,' said Humbert calmly, and shut his eyes.

'For God's sake, man, wake up!'

'I'm trying to. I suppose it'll seem very awful in the morning, but just now it seems a relief. It means I can stay in bed.'

Robin stepped forward and shook him by the shoulders.

'Make an effort, man!'

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Humbert opened one eye and quickly shut it again. 'We can't do anything now. It's three a.m. Sunday.' He rose to his feet. A last flicker of energy came to him. 'Let's meet to-morrow. Twelve. Get Harris. Even if you have to drag him out of bed. And ... no, don't get anybody else. And don't tell anybody. It'll be all right. It always is. If the worst comes to the worst .. . ' The rest of the sentence was engulfed in a tremendous yawn. He shook his head, waved his hands, and shuffled up the stairs.

And Robin had to console himself with the thought that at least he no longer had to bear his secret alone.

i v

All Humbert's old energy had returned by twelve o'clock on the following day. But it was of little avail. They seemed to be up against a blank wall.

From twelve till nearly six they telephoned. London calls, toll calls, trunk calls. They telephoned to everybody they knew and a great many people they didn't. Mr. Harris, who seemed to be thoroughly restored by this crisis, had even put through calls to Budapest, Vienna, and Copenhagen. All they got, as the result of six hours' hard work, was a tentative promise of fifty pounds from one of Humbert's uncles, a rural dean who stipulated that he must first satisfy himself that the revue was in every respect a 'wholesome family entertainment'.

And yet they went on. Had they been in a normal state of nerves they could not possibly have done so.

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But they were not only unnaturally alert, they were also half asleep. Like all men in this strange profession, as the time of their ordeal draws near, they were capable of prodigious energy. But it was" a doped energy. It didn't make sense.

Thus, on the following day, when Humbert broke the news to Bert at the final dress-rehearsal, it was some time before Bert realized what he was talking about. He had too many other things to think about. Too many curtain cues to fix, too many notes to give to too many people. And five minutes later, a new disaster happened which put everything else out of their heads.

V

The disaster came with *Daffodils*.

To the layman it may seem incredible that at this late hour, at the final dress-rehearsal, a number so important as *Daffodils* should never have been orchestrated. Actually, however, there was nothing very strange about it.

In a show like this, which is three-quarters music, it is customary for the simpler numbers to be farmed out to hacks. It would have been a waste of time for a fine musician, like Sol, to spend hours writing band-parts for comedy numbers which needed only a simple jog-trot accompaniment in the strings and, occasionally, an obvious outburst from the brass.

What had happened, in the case of *Daffodils*, was that Robin had given a piano copy to Lilian, who naturally assumed that he had also given a piano copy

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to Sol, particularly as he had written very clear orchestral instructions with the piano score, inducing a number of elaborate cadenzas for the harp. But immediately after this, the Thelma crisis had occurred, followed by the money crisis, and he had forgotten all about it.

But what about Fay? And Humbert? And Sol himself? How was it conceivable that they should not have commented on this strange gap in the music of the Show?

Fay is easily explained. She had been suddenly raised from the position of a chorus girl to that of a leading lady, and she did what she was told, without asking questions. It seemed to her very extraordinary that they should continue to rehearse *Daffodils* to a piano, and she was very nervous at the thought that she would only have one rehearsal with the orchestra before the first night, but she did not think it her job to protest.

Humbert, of course, ought to have raised the question long before. But it must be remembered that there were several other musical numbers (admittedly light comedy) which were still being rehearsed with the piano. And since these would not be ready for the orchestra till the final dress-rehearsal, he had, in his fatigue, his overwork, and his general state of nerves, lost sight of the fact that *Daffodils* was in a different category.

As for Sol . . . he orchestrated what was given him. He already had twice as much as he could manage. It was not his job to ask for more.

And so this astonishing and frightening situation arose.

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VI

Picture the scene. Stage-hands rushing forward to pull off the props for Lou and Erich's comedy number. Curtains swooping from the sides. Girls, in yellow, fluttering in from the wings. Humbert, standing in the centre of the stage, shouting through a megaphone to the lighting-men.

'O.K.!'

He ran off. A moment's pause. '

'Come on, Fay. What are you waiting for?'

A small figure, in a gold skirt and a woollen jumper (the top part of her costume was being altered), appeared at the side.

'The music,' said Fay, timidly. 'There are eight bars of introduction.'

'Well, what's happened to the music? Sol!' He lifted his megaphone. 'Where the hell's Sol?'

'Here I am.' The voice came from the back of the stalls.

'Damn it all, Sol, this is a dress rehearsal.'

'So what?'

'But ... we're doing *Daffodils*'

Sol scratched his head. 'Daffodils? Well, nobody's ever told *me* anything about it.'

'What!' Humbert, in his consternation, dropped the megaphone. Robin ran up the gangway. Lilian fluttered towards them.

In a moment the awful truth had come out.

'Oh dear, oh *dear*!' cried Lilian. 'It's because we had to hide it from Thelma in the first case, I suppose.'

'But hell's bells, Thelma's been gone a week,' stormed Humbert.

'It must be my fault,' said Robin. 'I just assumed ...'

'I don't care whose fault it is. We can't do the damn' thing to a piano. And at this time of night Sol can't possibly...'

'Is there anything the matter?'

They all turned round. It was Fay. She did not look at all like a leading lady. She looked like a frightened little girl who was wondering how long her courage would hold out.

Robin went over to her. 'It's all right, dear . . . don't worry.'

'But the music?'

'There's been a mistake about the orchestration.'

She stared at him in utter dismay. 'But Robin . . . what's going to happen?'

'I don't know yet.'

'But I *must* have a rehearsal with the orchestra, even if Sol managed to. . .'

'I'll manage,' sighed Sol.

'But Sol, how *can* you?'

'The night is long.'

Humbert shook his head. 'I don't like it,' he said. 'You've had no sleep for Lord knows how long. You'll be falling off your stool to-morrow night.'

'I'll be all right,' sighed Sol. 'You might ask somebody to get me some strong black coffee, that's all. Then I can go away with Robin, and we'll get busy.'

It was at that moment that Robin first realized the **heroism** — no other word is adequate — of those who

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enlist in the service of the theatre. Sol was a delicate little man. He had a knock-me-down-with-a-feather look. His physical frailty was aggravated by a highly nervous disposition. He was a Jew. And though anti-Semitism has never flourished in the theatre—if it did, the theatre would cease to exist, the footlights would splutter out, and the stalls be shrouded for ever in dust sheets—yet the sorrows of his race lay heavy upon him.

Added to all this, his wife was having a baby. So even when he got home, exhausted, there would be little chance of sleep.

Yet, here he was ... 'managing'. And only 'those who understand what it is to write a full or orchestral score (which in this case would stretch to some forty pages) at a time when one is hurrying through six other orchestrations, keeping one's instrumentalists in order, rehearsing for light cues, watching out for the vocal eccentricities of a large chorus ... *and* trying to keep awake, will realize the magnitude of the effort which was implied in that little word, 'managing'.

v II

1.30 a.m.

The company had gone. Humbert, Bert and Robin sat at a table on the empty stage, staring at a bottle of beer which they were too tired to open.

'Well, that was that,' sighed Humbert.

'Sol looked as if he was going to pass out.' muttered Robin.

Humbert stretched out his hand for the beer, thought better of it, and yawned. 'You don't look so health-and-strength yourself.' He turned to Bert. 'How long did the show run this time, barring repeats?'

'Just under four hours.'

'An hour too long. How much can we speed it up, apart from cuts?'

'A good forty minutes.'

'That means I've only got twenty minutes to cut. Thanks, Bert. You've done miracles.'

'I wish we hadn't got to rehearse to-morrow,' said Bert. 'They've all had nearly as much as they can take.'

'We must. They'll have the morning off. I shall run through the whole show from three to half-past six, without stopping, whatever goes wrong. That'll give them an hour's rest before dressing ...' He paused, as though suddenly recollecting something. 'Oh, by the way, I forgot. It looks as though we shan't be able to open at all. Unless you happen to have a thousand or so on you, Bert.'

Bert leant forward. 'Let's get the low-down on this situation,' he said. 'It's the first chance I've had.'

And so the whole dreary thing began again. Robin got up and wandered off into a corner. He couldn't bear any more just now. They'd have to cope with it for a bit.

He sat down on a property balustrade. 'I Suppose gamblers feel like this,' he thought to himself, 'just before they commit suicide. Just before they put their last louis on zero. Well, I've put on my last louis. And zero's pretty near. But not the sort of zero I want. '

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The voices went on,
'Robin,' called Bert,
He shuffled back, 'Thought of anything?'
'Only a last appeal to Winterton.'

'It's no use. I've been at him till I'm black in the face.'

Humbert pillowed his face on his arm. 'I want to cry,' he muttered. 'For several days.'

'Have a benzedrine.'

'He shook his head.'

'Have a drink.'

'It's no use. It just flows into me and stagnates.'

There was a pause.

'Well,' growled Bert, at last, 'I suppose the only thing to do's to put the notices up.'

'We *can't*Y

'Don't shout, Robin.'

'Sorry.'

Through a sort of haze, he saw the faces of Bert and Humbert — Bert's with a two-days' growth of beard, because he hadn't had time to shave for forty-eight hours; Humbert's with a two-days' accumulation of dirt, because he hadn't had time to wash.

'We'd better send telegrams,' said Bert.

'I f the cash box'll run to it.'

'It'll make a good story for the papers,' said Robin, bitterly.

He stared into the wings. Out of the corner of his eye he saw scraps of scenery, pieces of material, bits of furniture. He'd been so proud of them, a little while ago. For on the backs of the canvas and the wood, and **the** silk and the satin, had been printed *Something to*

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Sing About. How his heart had leapt when he first saw those words, painted on a back-cloth.

'People have sweated to produce that scene.' he'd thought to himself 'Men have hacked out the wood, and women have sewn the cloth, just because of a tune that came into my brain, or a scene I thought of. All that labour and that effort have sprung from *me*.'

Well, a fat lot he had to sing about now. Or any of them.

Suddenly Humbert jumped nervously.

'Who's that?'

'Who's what?'

'Didn't you hear somebody?'

'No. You've got the jitters.'

Bert threw away his cigarette. 'Probably the night watchman,' he said.

'In that case, you'd better step on that cigarette. If we can't raise the rent for a week, we're hardly in a position to build a new theatre.' As soon as he had spoken, he put his hand on Bert's. 'Sorry to snap, old thing. But I hardly know what I'm saying.'

'O.K. with me,' muttered Bert.

VIII

It was Mr. Harris.

Humbert stared at him. 'In the name of Heaven, what are you doing here?'

Mr. Harris bowed, somewhat unsteadily. His face was wreathed in smiles.

'You're tight,' said Bert.

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Mr. Harris bowed again. His amiable, though glassy eye, lit upon the helmet which Lou used in her Britannia scene. He frowned,

'Careless!' he exclaimed. 'Leaving things about. ' His hands encircled the helmet. He put it on his head. Then, he curtsied.

'Go to hell,' said Robin.

Mr. Harris shook his head so violently that the helmet almost fell off.

.'Stow it.' Bert rose to his feet. 'This isn't a time for camping about.'

'Who says I'm camping about?' Mr. Harris put his hands on his hips and tossed his head. 'Don't you lay a hand on me, young man. I'm valuable.'

'What's that?' Robin leant forward. 'I believe he's got something.'

'Something! I've got fifteen somethings!'

'Don't do the cat-and-mouse thing.'

Humbert was so hoarse that he could hardly speak. 'Fifteen what?'

'Fifteen somethings.'

'Come on. Tell us the worst.'

Mr. Harris took off his helmet and carefully laid it on the floor. Then he adjusted his tie. Then he took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. Then he patted his breast-pocket, smiled and nodded. Then, very deliberately, he drew out a wallet, and opened it. Between two fingers he took a piece of white paper and laid it on the table, saying as he did so:

'That is one of my fifteen somethings.'

It was a note for a hundred pounds.

They stared at it as though it were an apparition.

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Bert was the first to break the silence. But he broke it so blasphemously that he cannot be reported.

'Tsch!' Mr. Harris frowned at him. 'That's not the way to talk about a beautiful thing like this.' He produced his wallet again. 'Look!' He drew out a wad and counted out another fourteen hundred-pound notes.

'I've pinched myself — Robin's voice was trembling. 'We're awake.' He took up one of the notes and examined it. 'And it's all right. It's not got an advertisement on it, or anything like that.'

'Who?' croaked Humbert.

'Ah! Mr. Harris wagged his finger at them. 'That's one of the conditions.'

'What conditions?'

'Of the backer. Complete secrecy until after the first night.'

'What are the other conditions?'

Mr. Harris now seemed to be very much in possession of his faculties.

'Pretty stiff. My backer has a very good head for business.' He turned to Robin. 'A fifty per cent cut in royalties for you, my boy. An option on your next show. A twenty-five per cent commission on all royalties from the Performing Rights Society. I've got the whole thing here for you to sign.'

'It's blackmail,' growled Humbert.

'It's manna from heaven,' retorted Robin.

'It's business,' corrected Mr. Harris. He delved in his pocket and produced a contract. It was very clear and short. Robin signed it.

'I say,' he said, as he pushed it back to him, 'you might let me have three of those things.'

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'Tour

'I'd like to make Thelma's nose bleed, and then give her three hundred to wipe it with.'

Mr ' Harris looked outraged. 'Mr. Frost,' he said, 'there are some things which should not be said, even in jest.'

Robin shrugged his shoulders. 'O.K.' he said. He felt curiously light-hearted. 'I wish I knew where that money came from, all the same.'

'Judging from that contract you've just signed,' croaked Humbert, 'it came straight from the bowels of a shark,'

'Perhaps,' purred Mr. Harris. 'Anyway, you will know to-morrow.' He glanced at his watch. 'Or rather . . . to-day.'

CHAPTER XXI

SAY IT WITH FLOWERS

1

WELL, dear, if you want to *throw* my money away, I suppose you must. But I'd rather you gave it to charity, dear. Or bought flowers. Or something. That's all I meant, dear.'

It is hardly necessary to state from whose fair lips these words fell.

The miserable Sitters twisted on his chair. 'You always had a cabin before/ he muttered.

'Always, dear?' Thelma lifted herself up in her *chaise-longue*. 'Have you accompanied me on every trip I have made across the Channel?'

'Well, both the times we went together.'

'Oh, I *see*. I thought you said "always", dear. Silly of me.' She began to hum a tune, as though the subject were dismissed.

'I'll cancel the damned thing.'

'Oh, no, dear. *Please*. You may need it yourself. It's the middle of May. They say we're in for a heat wave. There probably won't be a breath of wind to-morrow. You may feel overcome, dear.'

From the look on Sitters' face, it might well be conjectured that he would be overcome, though not by the heat. Without saying another word, he stamped out of

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the room, and telephoned to Cook's, to cancel the cabin. As he did so, he prayed fervently for a typhoon.

This little scene was enacted some twelve hours before the sensational appearance of Mr. Harris in the last chapter. In other words, it was just after luncheon on the day before the revue. From Thelma's mood it might be concluded that it was just before luncheon. For she had been very difficult lately.

She was a bad invalid, even when she was really ill, and to have to pretend to be an invalid when she was feeling exceptionally healthy, was almost beyond her powers of endurance.

She had been bearable for the first three days. Her hysterics had been genuine enough, and the doctor had ordered her a sedative. But the effects of a diet of Sedobrol and Phanodorm, which would have left most women in an agreeable haze, were very different with Thelma. They improved her temper, but they seemed to charge her with energy.

This energy was at first let loose on the press. The papers had of course been informed that Miss Ganges was so seriously indisposed that she had been forced to throw up her part in the new revue. For three days she was content to let it rest at that. She didn't even bother to read what they said. But on the fourth day, she sat up abruptly in bed, threw her phial of Phanodorm out of the window, and sent for the papers. It was two o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, so she got all the evening papers and all the magazines as well.

The result of a brief perusal infuriated her. She was

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hardly mentioned. And even when she was, she was mentioned in the wrong way.

The *Looker On* for example, published a picture of her doing a high kick.

'Have they no sense of fitness?' she stormed. 'Here am I, lying gravely ill, and they publish *that!* Why didn't you give them one lying down?'

'You haven't got any lying down,' observed the tactless Sitters. 'At least, none that you've ever shown to *me?*'

'I don't like the way in which you speak, dear,' she snapped. 'Not at all. I don't know what you're suggesting.'

'I wasn't suggesting anything at all.'

'No, dear? That's very kind of you, I'm sure. I'm very grateful.' She could not think of any more on this theme, so she chose another.

'Look at this!' she cried. 'Appendicitis!'

'Where?'

'In the *Evening Chronicle*' She pushed the paper over to him.

'I don't see anything about appendicitis.'

She pulled the blanket impatiently over her knees.

'Not in so many words, perhaps, but what else could it be? Read it!'

Sitters read a vague and gossipy paragraph which stated that Thelma was still confined to bed, that her staple diet was honey and grapes, that she was smiling bravely through her pain, etc. etc. It was a description that would have applied, with equal force, to indigestion, tonsillitis, hay fever, fish poisoning, or being omitted from the will of an elderly relative. But she **was**

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determined that it was appendicitis. Nothing else would do.'

'It's monstrousP she said. 'I could sue them for libel. Appendicitis !'

'But my dear, there's no harm in it, even if it does mean appen ...'

'No harm? What possible *appeal* has appendicitis? No *harm*?' Exactly how much more am I worth with a scar on my stomach? How much does it bring into the box-office?'

These aspects of the problem had not struck Sitters.

'I notice, dear, that whenever I ask you a plain, simple question, you sulk.'

'It wasn't a plain, sim . . . '

'No, dear? It seemed very simple to me. But then I suppose some minds are quicker than others. Anyway, we won't argue about it. The main thing is to see that these lies are stopped. Get on to my press agent, at once. And get Sasha, and that man who writes gossip for the *Daily Mail*, and the *Standard* woman, and everybody. I'm going to see them all.'

For the next two days the flat was in an uproar, which only calmed down for half an hour when the doctor arrived, to break out again immediately he departed. New curtains were chosen, ordered, made and hung , . . curtains which filled the room with the echo of their own ghostly pallor. New pyjamas were inspected by the dozen, (The final choice was a very daring pair in black lace.) The sun-bathing apparatus, which looked 'medical', was moved to the side of the bed. And, of course, the room was stacked with flowers.

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Needless to say, there were plenty there already. Thelma's fans had seen to that. But there were still not enough. 'The bedroom must be a "bower".' said Thelma. She proceeded to turn it into an overstocked greenhouse. Pots of azaleas arrived by the dozen ('Floravia's should make a reduction for quantity') sheaves of lilies, huge bowls of Rembrandt tulips. When Sitters suggested that they would all have to be moved out at night, for hygienic reasons, she laughed him to scorn.

'My dear,' she said, 'don't be so old-fashioned. A whole oak tree only burns up as much carbon-monoxide as a nightlight.'

(She had read this, or something like it, in *Popular Science*.)

'You mean *makes*, not burns up.'

'No dear, I don't mean anything of the sort.' She spoke with a conviction she was far from feeling. She wondered if she could make some withering reference to nitrogen, (or was it hydrogen?) but thought better of it.

'And instead of trying to be an amateur scientist, dear, you might write out a few more of those cards, and pin them on the azaleas. Otherwise people are quite spiteful enough to suggest that I bought them myself.'

Luck favoured her, as it always did, when she was seeking publicity.

No sooner had the reporters arrived, to find her in

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bed, with a make-up so subtle that only the closest inspection could have revealed that the pallor was artificially accentuated, no sooner had the first flash-lights exploded, than the door opened, and in walked the doctor.

'Really, Miss Ganges ... my dear Miss Ganges!'

'Doctor!' she exclaimed, faintly.

He hurried to her side. He was a fussy little man — which was all to the good, it looked more impressive. And as he had always had a secret hankering after publicity, he found no difficulty in playing up.

'This is very naughty of you, very naughty indeed.'

He reached for her wrist and began to feel her pulse. This was the signal for more flashlight explosions.

'Really!' he exclaimed, severely, turning round and addressing the reporters, 'my patient is not in a condition to ...'

'Only a few friends,' breathed Thelma.

He released her pulse, which was strong and normal.

'Not in a condition for this excitement.'

'Can you hold out hope of a speedy recovery, doctor?'

'I can say nothing for publication. Nothing at all.'

'We'd like to have *some* story.'

The doctor shook his head. There was an awkward pause. An idea flashed through Thelma's brain.

'Sitters dear,' she called, in a weak voice.

He went over to her.

'A little closer, dear. My throat ...' she put her hand to her neck with a weary gesture.

But it was not from any anxiety about her throat

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that she desired Sitters to come nearer. **It was from a fear that** the reporters would hear what she said,

'Sitters,' she whispered, keeping on her face **an** expression of angelic fatigue which was in singular contrast with her words, 'these damned fools don't realize what **a** story this is. It's front page.'

'Oh!' said the startled Sitters.

'It's *got* to be front page,' she whispered.

'Of course, darling.'

The doctor stepped forward. 'I really must *insist*.. .' he began.

'One more moment, doctor,' croaked Thelma feebly. 'It's a little secret!'

He shrugged his shoulders and waited.

'Listen, dear,' resumed Thelma. 'The story is, "Doctors turn photographers from sick bed. Great star tries to smile for her public. Flashlights may be fatal. Thelma Ganges game to the last".'

'Oh, I see!' A light beamed in Sitters' eyes. She knew that he had got it. And once he got a thing, he really did it very well.

'That's all,' whispered Thelma.

And with a sigh, and a little 'Oh!', as of pain, and a little wince, bravely, but not entirely concealed, she sank back on to the pillows.

i i i

Her judgment, as usual, had been correct. **There** happened to be no other news that day, so **that she made the front** page in all **the** evening papers, **and was**

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well displayed on the following morning. One paper even wrote a leading article about her, asking, but not answering, the question, 'Are women braver than men?'

It was all very satisfactory, and she felt she could now go abroad with a clear conscience. Therefore, when the revue was postponed for another week, she was furious because it meant another week's incarceration. She had determined that she would not leave until after the first night. Why . . . she would have found it difficult to explain. She was not going to be present herself—though, for a moment, she had toyed with the idea of making a rapid recovery, and appearing, unannounced, in the Royal Box. That would have been delightful in some ways, for she would certainly have been a source of acute embarrassment to the whole company. But prudence prevailed, and she decided that any such conduct would be beneath her dignity. Particularly if Fay, as she shrewdly suspected, made a hit.

Why, then, did she stay? If we give the real reason, nobody would believe it. Nobody, that is to say, who has not lived and laughed and wept in the theatre. To *them* it will seem quite natural. For the real reason why Thelma was unable to leave London was *because she wanted to read the notices!*

But surely, it may be said, the newspapers could have been forwarded to her? Surely, if she were so keen, she could have employed a secretary to read them out to her over the long-distance telephone? Of course she could have done these things. But they would have in no way appeased her. They would have left her with a feeling of hunger and frustration. What she wanted to

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do, what her training and her temperament *compelled* her to do, was to sit up till three in the morning, till Sitters arrived with *The Times*, the *Telegraphy* the *Mail*, the *News*, the *Herald*, the *Sketch* and all the rest of them. She *had* to do that. It would be bad enough, after she had gone, to wait till the following Monday to see what Mr. Agate said in the *Sunday Times* . . . (she hoped they gave him a bad seat, behind a pillar, if possible). To ask her to make further sacrifices would have been impossible.

i v

So the dreary days dragged by. She could not go out, because the hall porter would see her, and she was sure he was a spy. She could not sing, because she might be overheard. She could only play six-pack bezique with Sitters, auto-bridge by herself, and an occasional game of poker with the few friends whom she could really trust.

It was therefore in a state of acute irritation and 'temperament' that eventually, on Tuesday, the day before the opening, she ventured out into the world once more. But she allowed no trace of her nerves to betray her to the public. Dressed in deep black, as though she were a Balkan princess at one of those melodramatic funerals which so enliven the life of Bucharest, leaning on Sitters' arm, wearing on her exquisite face an expression of such bravery, such martyrdom ('That little woman round the corner was a genius when it came to liquid powder; somebody

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ought to raise some capital and put it on the market for **her**; make a note of it, dear....'), she looked like the heroine of a mid-Victorian novel, at the point where a 'decline' is essential to the intricacies of the plot.

This disguise she carried into sundry places.

To her lawyers where there had been some tiresome questions about breach of contract. These were settled, in a manner that was an exquisite blend of frailty and firmness, to her complete satisfaction.

To Floris, in Jermyn Street, in order that an adequate supply of rose-geranium perfume and lemon-thyme bath essence should be awaiting her at the Martinez at Cannes ('But you must pay the duty *here*, Mr. Floris. Then there can't be . . . (cough) . . . any of these dreadful delays.')

To the Bank, where she drew out a staggering amount of money, which she stuffed, with a weary gesture, into her bag.

'But why are you taking so much?' asked Sitters, in an anxious voice. 'You usually take a letter of credit for £100.'

'I usually do nothing,' snapped Thelma. 'I mean, I do nothing usually.' She put her hand to her eyes. 'I *cannot* be cross-examined. I feel I have deserved a *little* peace. Who made the money, anyway?'

'I was only thinking that. . .'

'No, dear. Don't let's go on about it. We'll go back to the Bank. We'll put it all away. I'll take just enough to sleep at a station hotel.' She rapped violently on the window of the car.

'No . . . no, please. I'm sorry. It's nothing to do **with** me.' So said the wretched Sitters. For really, she

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was looking incredibly beautiful just then. And he was feeling in an abnormally masochistic mood.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Straight on!' She gave this direction in a sepulchral voice to her chauffeur.

To Sitters she spoke more sharply. He suffered a strange *frisson* of disgust.. . but also of delight.

v

She had one last mission to fulfil.

She blew through the whistle with an energy that was surprising, in one so delicate. 'Floravia's!' she cried. 'Off Berkeley Square.'

The exhausted Sitters asked, 'Why are we going there, dear?'

'Flowers!' she snapped. 'For that girl to-morrow.'

'You think of everything,' he breathed.

'I have to. There's nobody else round about here who does much thinking. I'm going to send her so many orchids that I hope they'll smother her.'

She took out her mirror and peered at her face. Not nearly pale enough, she decided. She produced a compact, and toned herself down. As she did so, she frowned. 'I don't see why I *should* send her orchids, though,' she murmured, almost to herself.

'Nor do I,' observed Sitters. 'There'd have to be at least ten pounds' worth to make any show, and considering what she's *done* . . .'

Thelma nodded. 'What I'd really like to send her is a hunk of very old, very dusty poison ivy. But I don't suppose they stock it.'

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Sitters agreed that it was improbable.

'It's a pity you can't just send her a bunch of daffodils and have done with it.'

'Darling!' She spoke so shrilly that he jumped, 'You've said it. Daffodils! My dear... such a *gesture* V

'But you can't. It's May. They're over.'

'Nonsense. How can they be over? They're only out of season.'

For Thelma was one of those ladies for whom things are 'over' as soon as they become available to the general public. Thus daffodils were 'over' in March, and plum-blossom was 'over' in April, and strawberries were definitely 'over' in May, because in that month they descended to the sordid level of five shillings a pound.

'Oh my dear,' she cried, 'that's really almost bright of you for once. Daffodils. With gold ribbon. They'll look divine.' She nodded, and added amiably. 'I shouldn't be in the least surprised if they put her off.'

v i

As she swept into the flower-shop one would have said that she was some young and lovely mourner in search of lilies to lay on the grave of a lover. Indeed, one of the attendants, taken by her beauty and moved by her grief, stepped automatically towards a vase of arums. But she waved the girl aside, with a gesture that would have done credit to Duse.

'Daffodils,' she breathed.

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'Moddom?' The girl was startled by such an unusual word in the month of May.

'Daffodils.' repeated Thelma, in sharper tones.

The girl smiled sympathetically. 'Poor dear, it's gone to her head,' she thought. Aloud she said, 'Oh Moddom, I'm afraid they're over.'

'Not for me,' husked Thelma.

It is quite possible that at this point a moving dialogue might have ensued, had not the manager of the shop, recognizing his celebrated client, hurried forward.

'Miss Ganges!'

There was an immediate sensation in the shop, ('And about time, too,' considered Thelma.)

She gave him a wan smile.

'I read in the papers of your indisposition,' said the manager, with a bow.

Another wan smile.

'I just managed,' she whispered, 'to come out for an hour.' She nodded, bravely, 'For an hour.' And she held on to Sitters' arm.

'A chair, Miss Ganges?'

'Thank you.' She sank into it.

There was a moment's pause. She took a deep breath, as though the effort of speaking were painful to her.

'I have come,' she said, 'for daffodils.'

An expression of dismay hovered over the manager's face. 'Oh, Miss Ganges, I'm afraid . . .'

She did not seem to hear him. 'Just' .. . and her voice sank to a whisper, 'yellow daffodils'. She sighed. 'You see,' she said, 'they're for ... for the little girl

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who is taking my part. A little girl whose career I've watched' (which was certainly true) '**and tried to** help. Her name is . . .' A frown clouded her brow. 'What is her name, my dear?' she said, turning to Sitters. 'My brain has gone.'

'Fay Pearl,' said the obedient Sitters.

'Of course. Fay Pearl. And since she is singing this song which I created . . .' A vague gesture completed the sentence.

'But Miss Ganges, I very much regret ...' He shrugged his shoulders, 'You see, it's the middle of May. Daffodils were over nearly a month ago.'

'Over?' She frowned. 'I don't understand. How can they be over?'

The manager was not quite certain of the correct reply to this question. He only shrugged his shoulders. 'If you need yellow flowers,' he began and he waved his hand towards a superb spray of odontoglossums.

'Orchids!' Thelma protruded her lips at them. 'I don't suppose she's ever seen an orchid in her life . . .' and in sweeter tones she added, 'poor little thing!' She shook her head. 'No. It must be daffodils.'

'But Miss Ganges .. .'

'You must send to the South of France,' she said.

'But in the South of France they were over in March.'

'You're not being much help, Mr. Jenkins.'

He twisted nervously under her hostile stare.

'I come into one of the most expensive flower-shops in London ... in the world ... and ask for the simplest flowers. And you tell me they're over.' That word 'over' definitely annoyed her. 'They can't *all* be over. It's ridiculous. Go and find out. Go and ask. Ring

up somebody.' She suddenly realized that her voice had developed a bell-like quality which did not at all accord with the pale cheeks and exhausted gestures. So she took a quick breath and caught her throat, as though the effort of speaking had been too much for her. And with a slight gulp and a little smile, she whispered . . . 'Please, Mr. Jenkins. For my sake.'

The manager retired for a hurried consultation. During this consultation Thelma sighed, very openly. She also (less openly) plucked a gardenia from a bowl by her side. The gardenias were half-a-crown apiece, but she really didn't see why they shouldn't give her a gardenia, considering the fortune she spent in this place.

After a brief interval, the manager returned. He looked a little more cheerful.

'We *may* be able to get some in Scotland,' he began.

'Scotland? Why Scotland?' (Thelma had an inquiring mind. She really wanted to know.)

'Naturally . . . a northern latitude. They would be later. There is a farm in the Orkneys . . .'

'The Orkneys!' Thelma was thrilled. She turned to Sitters. 'Oh my dear,' she said. 'The Orkneys! Can't you see what a paragraph . . .' She checked herself. 'You must wire at once,' she said.

'With pleasure, Miss Ganges.' He paused. 'And I conclude that if they should prove expensive

'Expensive?' She raised her eyebrows. 'Why should they be expensive? I thought you said they were over?'

'Quite. But you see . . . the cost of telegraphing . . . of...'

'A telegram costs sixpence. Well?'

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'And special arrangements ...'

'What special arrangements? They've only got to send out a dirty little boy to pick them.'

Once again she realized that her speech, both in the energy of its delivery and the clarity of its contents, was hardly in keeping with her role of the golden-hearted invalid, rising from her sick-bed to do a kindness to her little protegée. So her hand went once more to her throat, and she produced a very effective cough, of the variety usually delivered by Mimi in Act Four.

'Oh, Mr. Jenkins,' she said, 'don't let us think about expense! Send a dozen telegrams!' (That would be six shillings, she thought to herself.) 'Put them on the fastest train 1' (And *that* wouldn't be extra, either.) 'Send a special messenger to meet them at the station.' (Three and six, that would be.) 'As long as they come. And I know they will.'

She rose, taking Sitters' arm for support. She walked slowly to the desk, in order to write a card which would be attached to the flowers. She dipped the pen in the inkpot. She paused.

What *should* she write? A number of charming sentiments flashed through her head, such as:

Keep these for the funeral.

She even wondered if she might send Sitters out to buy some sneezing powder to sprinkle over the flowers when they arrived.

Her face had a far-away look, as she stood there with the pen poised. The assistants watched her, enraptured. 'She looks like a saint, she does indeed,' they whispered one to another.

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Hoping the show will last as long as these flowers.

No. She could not afford to show her hand like that. After all, she was going to give the story to the press. They'd want to know what was on the card. So she pushed temptation aside, and in her curious straggling script she wrote:

May you still be singing when the daffodils bloom again. Thelma.

Yes. That was just right. Nobody could object to it. The obvious interpretation would be . . . 'May the show be such a success that it will still be running next March'. And the hidden meaning, which she was sure Fay would see (such a nasty, *mean* little mind), would suggest that she would probably have lost her voice by that time. Oh yes, when she read it again, it sounded beautifully sinister. A note of doom. Fay would be bound to understand. Wretched little thing. Always thinking the *worst*.

She blotted the card. She handed it to Mr. Jenkins with her whispered instructions. And as she drifted out, she absent-mindedly took another gardenia, and held it to her delicate nose.

Once in the car, Thelma revived with remarkable speed. .

'That's one of the best stories we've ever had,' she said sharply.

Sitters blinked. 'Yes dear. I'm sure.'

'Don't say "yes dear",' she snapped. 'And don't say you're sure. What are you sure of?'

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She did not, fortunately, wait for Sitters to inform her, 'Get on to the press agents and tell them, as soon as we're home.'

'Tell them what, dear?'

'Ye Gods!' She raised her black-gloved hands to the roof, 'Tell them *what*! Tell them that Thelma Ganges has scoured the world for daffodils. Tell them that she's lying back in a sick-bed sending out special aeroplanes to the Orkneys. Tell them,' and here her voice rose to a scream, 'tell them that she's sitting on the blasted bulbs and hatching them out!'

After which remarkable statement she lay back and began, quite suddenly, to cry. For she was, in her odd way, an artist. And she knew in her heart of hearts, that she might have done something lovely with that song.

CHAPTER X X I I

BACK STAGE

i

THE gallery queue stretched into Shaftesbury Avenue, parted like a bisected serpent at the pavement's end, and curled round the corner into a side street. Although the time was only seven o'clock it was still growing. A monster with an ever-lengthening tail.

The sight of this queue made Robin feel worse than ever. He wanted to go up to each individual member of it and say, 'Please . . . *Please* don't stand here so patiently. It isn't worth it. I feel I'm cheating you. Please keep your money. I know how hard it was to earn. Please go away, and see something else.'

He stood forlornly on the other side of the street, clutching the bag of sausage rolls which he had hurried out to buy. He could not take his eyes off that queue. The people in it looked so terribly intelligent. Not hostile — only very embittered, unsuccessful dramatists are silly enough to attribute hostility to the gallery — but critical, alert, expectant. If only he could go up and say, 'Please don't expect too much!'

And if only he had known that they most certainly didn't!

He crossed over, and walked alongside the queue. He would have given a great deal to be standing among

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them himself, as he had so often stood. For the first time since we have met him, he was thinking solely of himself. Fay was out of his mind, and Humbert and Lou and Sol and all the rest of them. They had all been driven out by fear. He had never known that fear could be like this; he had never known the extraordinary things it did to one's stomach. If he had not been so tired, he would have been interested in studying his own sensations. They were almost exclusively stomachic. The top part of that organ seemed to be frozen, and the bottom part seemed to be filled with a cold heavy metal. He was sure that if he had to have an operation for appendicitis, at this moment, it would be unnecessary for them to give him even a local anaesthetic.

He was not the only one who was thinking of himself. Fay too was alone in her little universe. A nerve specialist, taking a look at her as she sat, very still and rigid before her glass, staring at herself, would have prescribed a strong dose of bromide. The pupils of her eyes, the tightly clenched fists, the abnormal pulse — all indicated a dangerous condition of strain. But you cannot give bromide to leading ladies just before a first night. Benzedrine, perhaps, or Kola Astier, or caffeine, but not bromide. Besides, there was nobody to give her anything. Everybody, at this hour, was for himself.

The charwomen, bustling round the stalls with dustpan and brush, removing the last cigarette ends, polishing the ash-trays, filling baskets with waste-paper — they were thinking of themselves, and how cruel it was to be made to run about like this, what with

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their feet and their knees and their hearts, just because a lot of silly theatre people couldn't finish a rehearsal till an hour before the curtain went up.

The box office clerk, trying to answer two telephones at once, while he pointed out seats on the plan before him, was thinking of himself. 'It's a madhouse,' he muttered, resentfully. They'd be packed to-night, and after that it would be all paper. ('Q14 and Q15 have just been returned, sir.') Why hadn't he gone in for a sensible job? This was too much for any man's nerves. And of course, he thought, as he deftly shovelled the change across the glass counter, it would be a flop. Damn that telephone! ('No, Madam, Miss Ganges will *not* be appearing to-night.') It was bound to be a flop. These amateurs . . . they never made good. Only in cheap novels. No draw. No glamour. No nothing. And with the summer coming on . . . well, he'd give it three weeks. And then the theatre'd be closed again, and he'd be on the street, and why the hell he hadn't gone into something sensible, like a bank, he'd be very pleased to know? ('Yes, Madam, she *is* indisposed.')

And the stage-doorkeeper, sitting at the bottom of the little flight of stone stairs that started at the street and led down, down, down . . . beyond the stage-level, beyond the floor that contained the bars and the cloak-rooms, down to the basements where antique dresses, outworn props and such-like mysteries were housed. He was thinking of himself. He was thinking how happy he would be if only he had the money they spent on the telegrams which kept pouring into his draughty little box. Here were another twenty or so for Miss

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Lancaster. That meant at least ten bob. She wouldn't ever read 'em. Her secretary'd see to that. And even if she did read 'em, what would it mean to her? *He* knew what was in those telegrams. 'All best wishes for tremendous triumph to-night Bob.' 'May you excel yourself darling Ada.' 'I know you will have the greatest success of your career bless you always Tom.' Who was Bob? Who was Ada? Who was Tom? Who cared, anyway? All that mattered was that these poor fools had spent, on those messages (which were probably insincere), enough to pay for some nice steak-and-kidney pudding suppers at the George. And that was money *well* spent.

He beckoned to a call-boy and told him to take the telegrams to Miss Lancaster's dressing-room and to look sharp about it.

Yes, the atmosphere was electric enough. This first night had caught the public's imagination. And by a strange accident, it was Thelma who was largely responsible. For the publicity which she had so deftly arranged for herself had rebounded on to Fay. The flashlights had turned from the sickbed to the stage. Things had leaked out. People were talking. To-night there were all the elements of a sob-stuff success or a melodramatic failure. And it is unnecessary to state by which of these alternatives the audience would be more thrilled.

Robin made his way round the theatre, keeping his head well down in case anybody should recognize him

BACK STAGE

(for he too had been getting his picture in the papers during the last few days). He darted through the stage-door, and remembered as he did so that he had not brought any money to tip the stage hands at the end of the performance. Oh well, they'd have to wait. (If only this idiotic feeling of panic would leave his stomach!)

And then, he stopped dead.

A figure, hideously familiar, swayed before him.

Fay's mother.

'Where's Fay?'

Robin suddenly wanted to laugh. To lean against the wall and howl. He felt his sides shaking. But somehow, his face didn't follow suit. Not the ghost of a smile could he summon to his face.

'Where's Fay?' she repeated, coming a step nearer. 'Where's my little girl?'

He stared at her. She was in evening dress. If you had not known her past history, you might not have guessed that she was drunk. A little fuddled perhaps, inclined to be quarrelsome, but sober enough to pass in a crowd. And if you had not been thinking, as Robin was thinking all the time, of Fay, if you had not seen her as a bloated parody of her own daughter, you might even have thought that she still bore traces of a former charm. She was untidy, of course, but there were still gleams of real gold in her hair, and if her lips had been properly made up, she might have smiled quite prettily. And though her dress was carelessly put on (one of the shoulder straps had come loose, and the tinsel flowers on the waistband were crushed **and** stained) ... it was pretty enough, if you did not look

REVUE

too closely. A very soft grey, with a bodice of silver lace.

Oh, yes, she might pass in the crowd, for the moment, though what she would be like, later in the evening, he did not dare to think. And if Fay were to know, if Fay were even to guess . . .

He frowned at the stage-door keeper and motioned him back. At the same time, he forced a smile to his face. He stepped into the light and held out his hand.

'Why . . . it's Mr. Frost.'

She smiled at him, and clutched his hand.

'Indeed it is. I'm so glad to see you.'

'Where's my little girl? What've you done to her?'

'She's all right. She's grand. She's resting.'

'And what about *me*? Who's going to see to *me*? She swayed, checked a hiccough . . . 'Pardon me. But what about her old mother, eh? They putting me in the gallery? Eh?'

So that was what she had come for? To sit in the stalls!

Robin could think of no words. His brain was in a whirl. What was to be done with her? He could not tell how bad she was. Perhaps, if she could only be sobered up, she might be all right. . . though even then, if Fay caught sight of her, it would be the end of everything. But how could he be sure that she *would* sober up? He couldn't stay by her side all the evening. And if she were left to herself she might go on drinking, and get up in the middle of a song and create a scene. And even if she didn't, the strain of watching, waiting, wondering, would be unbearable. Fay's nerves, even now, were at snapping point.

BACK STAGE

But he couldn't shut her up. Or could he? There flashed through his mind a wild scheme in which he hurried her down to the basement, and locked her in the cellar until the show was over. But that was the sort of thing that happened in opera bouffe. One couldn't do it in real life. She'd probably scream, or set fire to the place. And even if she fell fast asleep, in the dark, among the dusty scenery, Fay would never forgive him. 'It's not *her* ... it's a disease.' Fay's tragic little catch-phrase about her mother rang through his head.

And then, something happened. Something which told him that there was only one thing he could do, one thing he *must* do, however repellant it might be to him.

She asked for a drink.

He knew she was going to ask for it, long before she did so. (At least, it seemed long enough to him.) He could see her struggling with herself. She was standing against the wall, holding her head erect with a great effort, making fuddled efforts at conversation. And every now and then she would stop, and pass her tongue nervously over her lower lip. And their eyes would meet ... his hypnotized, hers with a sort of desperate appeal.

She went on talking. Although this nightmare scene lasted, in actual time, barely two minutes, it seemed an eternity to Robin. The craving in those eyes was heart-breaking. And though she did not say so in as many words, he felt that the message she was trying to convey to him was, 'Look at me! Have pity! Realize the effort I am making, the torture I have endured ... to pull myself together, to put on this dress, to come **out!**

REVUE

Don't tell me I have had too much ... let me have just one more.'

She put out her arm with a spasmodic gesture. She took a deep breath, that was almost like a sob. She said the words that he remembered so bitterly:

'What about a little drink?'

He nodded gravely.

It would have to be that. It would have to be the old remedy, to give her so much that she would be senseless again. If only this horrible thing had happened at some other time, he would have taken her away. . . anywhere, have forced her to eat, to walk, to breathe the fresh air... would have tried to distract her. He would have fought with her, as Fay had so often fought.

But now, at this moment, that was out of the question. It was a matter of minutes, and she was too far gone. Even as she took his arm, he noticed that she had difficulty in preventing herself from stumbling. She was worse than he had imagined.

Deliberately, he would have to force her back into the degradation from which she had made this heroic effort to rise.

In silence they descended the stairs.

III

There are only twenty-five steps from the stage-door of the Burlington Theatre to the basement, where some of the dressing-rooms were situated, but in this passage down them, Robin's mind worked with the rapidity which is conventionally attributed to men who are

BACK STAGE

drowning. When he put his foot on the first step, he had no idea where he was going to take Fay's mother, nor how he was to go through with the revolting task he had set himself. By the time he had reached the twenty-fifth step, he had settled these problems. Not very finally, perhaps. Maybe, if his head had not been splitting, if his whole body had not been sodden with fatigue, he might have thought of something better. As it was . . .

At the bottom he paused.

'Will you excuse me a minute? I'd like you to meet Lou Lancaster, and I just want to warn her that we're coming.'

'But what about my Til girl? What about . . . ?'

He looked at her once more, as though he was finally making up his mind. Yes, she was more drunk than he had thought, and she seemed to be getting worse every minute. He had no time to waste.

He did not wait, to answer her question. He ran to the end of the corridor, and knocked sharply on Lou's door.

'Can't come in!' yelled a voice from the inside. 'Stark naked!'

He pushed open the door.

Lou seized a bath towel. **It was a very large towel,** but not large enough for Lou. 'Say, what is all this?'

'I beg your pardon.' He spoke as if he were out of breath. 'Fay's mother. Drunk. I want you to help.'

'What?' Lou blinked. 'Please say all that again.' (It must be remembered that in addition to being naked, she was also overwhelmed with fatigue.)

'Lou dear, she's coming in now. She wants to go in

REVUE

front. If Fay knows she's there in the theatre, it's the end of everything. And I thought ...'

He had no time to say what he thought. For already the swaying figure was in the doorway. She was still making heroic efforts to control herself. She managed to say one or two conventional phrases. But her eyes were not under her control. Even as she spoke, and smiled, she was staring fixedly at a bottle of whisky on a table by the wall.

Lou tried to adjust herself to this astonishing situation.

'How nice . . .' she murmured. 'How charming . . . such a surprise!'

Robin came to the rescue. 'I'm sure that Mrs. . . . er ... would like a drink,' he said.

'Really?' asked Lou, in a daze. 'Oh ... of course. The whisky's just by your side, Robin.'

He poured one out. 'We'll have to wait for Fay a little,' he said, as he handed it to her. She seized it, greedily. 'You'll have to put up with me for a bit . . . and Miss Lancaster, Of course you've heard of her?'

'I've heard pf her. I've seen her too.' She gave a chuckle. 'Though I've not seen's much of her as I can see now.'

Lou started. For a moment she had forgotten her costume.

'Oh, dear,' she said, 'what must you think?' ('It's a dream,' she kept repeating to herself, 'it's a dream. One's always naked in dreams. I shall wake up in a minute. But I *must* get something on first. Can't wake up naked.') 'I'm terribly sorry ... I was forgetting. You'll excuse me a moment?'

BACK STAGE

She fled into the inner room and slammed the door.

Fay's mother, meanwhile, was staring straight in front of her. She seemed to have forgotten them all. She was holding the empty glass in her hand. 'I suppose I ought to give her another,' thought Robin. He loathed the idea. But what else was there to do? Their only chance was to make her pass out completely. All the same, it was detestable. He was just going to fill her glass, when Lou opened the door a fraction.

'Robin dear ... can you come a moment?'

He went in. Lou had put on a dressing gown. Her dresser, who rejoiced in the name of Mrs. Pilkington, and looked like a well-nourished policewoman, stood with folded arms behind her, registering disapproval.

'Shut the door, dear,' whispered Lou. He shut it.

'Now, dear, what is happening? Who is that frightful drunk? And why do you have to pick on *me*?'

'It's a shame,' muttered Mrs. Pilkington. 'On her first night, and all!'

'There won't be any first night, Mrs. P., if she leaves this room.'

And he proceeded, rapidly, to tell them why.

Once they understood, they were his firm allies. Mrs. P., for a moment, was for trying neat Bovril and an ice-pack, to sober her up, but a few words from Robin assured her of the futility of this proceeding.

'Oh, so she's one *of those*, is she?' she observed, with gloomy relish. 'The three-week-a-time touch, and empty whisky bottles 'idden on the top of every wardrobe. .' know. My old father .. '

'Never mind your old father, Mrs. P., dear,' said

REVUE

Lou. 'The main thing is, you think Robin's right? We've got to keep her sozzled?'

'If she's one of *those*'

'Judging from our brief acquaintance, I should say she was certainly one of those. And it seems that there's nobody else who could look after her?'

'Nobody safe. Fay trusts you. This is the only single dressing room, apart from Fay's and Starr's. We can't possibly put her with Starr. I can't take her home. She wouldn't go. We can't lock her up. What else can we do?'

Lou nodded. 'Well,' she said, 'I must say this is the oddest first night I've ever had. I hope she doesn't have D.T.s all over my finale costume.'

'She won't,' said Mrs. P. grimly. 'I'll see to that. You leave 'er to me.'

'You're a sportsman,' said Robin, 'if ever there was one.'

Lou nodded. 'She's an angel, old P.'

'You 'ave to be a pretty tough sort of angel, if you 'ad my old dad to look after for twenty years.' She rubbed her hands together. 'Now then, Mr. Frost, you'd better scam.'

'Bless you, Lou.'

'Good luck, darling.'

He went out. She was still sitting there, holding the empty glass. She seemed to be half asleep. He tiptoed past her, opened the door, and went outside.

'Next, please,' he said to himself.

But apart from an earthquake, or a descent of the police, he was too tired to imagine what the next crisis would be.

CHAPTER XXIII

FOYER

BELLS to the right of them, bells to the left of them.

'Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen, please!'

'Darling, what fun ... are you going to Cecil's afterwards?'

Hoot, hoot, from the buses outside. A cheer in the street.

'That must be Dietrich .. . stopping the traffic'

'No, dear, it's something on fire.'

'Stalls on the right, dress-circle on the left!'

Down the heated crowded corridor one hears the orchestra. It seems to be playing very loudly, very jerkily, with a great deal of brass and drum.

'Box A, Madame? This way, please.'

'Darling, Ivor *cant* sit in the front row. It'll worry them.'

'No, dear. I shall beam at them all like mad.'

Bells, bells, bells. Bursts of laughter. 'Darling, there's tons of time.'

'Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen, please!'

'Look, there's Cochran. Oughtn't one to wish him luck?'

'He's got nothing to do with this show, dear. Do brace yourself up.'

'That damned photographer ...'

REVUE

'Curtain going up, ladies and gentlemen.'

Hoot, hoot, hoot, from the buses. Another cheer.
The sound of an ambulance.

'You see, dear, it wasn't Dietrich. It was a fire.'

Flash, flash, from the photographers.

'What did you say? The name of the gentleman with me? This gentleman is not with me.'

'Stalls on the right, dress-circle on the left!'

'Is it going to be a flop, d'you think?'

'Not if Lou's dirty enough.'

'But, darling, she says it's as clean as a whistle.'

'Oh, hell... let's go back to the Savoy.'

'No ... let's see the first half hour.'

Curtain up, ladies and gentlemen!'

The doors close. Still they roll in. Still the flash-lights explode. Through the main entrance one sees two packed rows of white faces, the stalwart backs of half a dozen policemen.

Another cheer.

'Oughtn't we to go in, darling?'

'No, I think Dietrich's just coming.'

'But she went in ages ago, when you were talking to Ada.'

'You brute. You swore it was a fire.'

'Well, it's much the same. Come on. We're right in the middle.'

'Stalls on the right, dress-circle on the left'

'Is it going to be a divine flop? Or just dreaders?'

'I think drearier, don't you?'

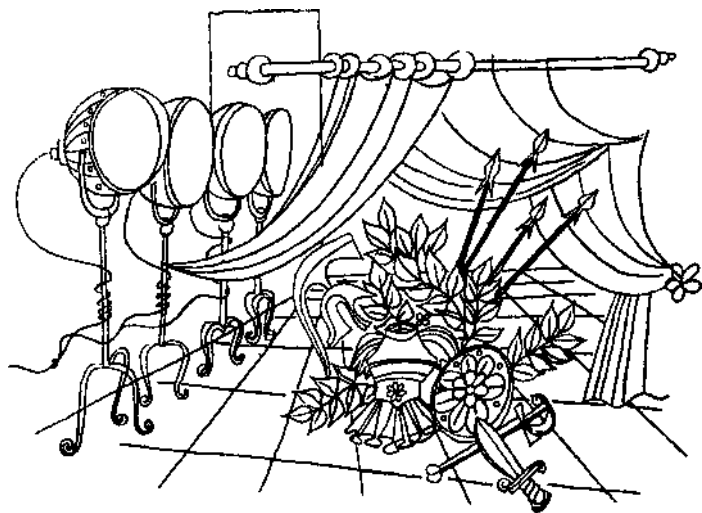
'They say Thelma's filled the gallery with people who are going to scream the most obscene things, like mad.'

FOYER

'Darling, *do* let's hurry. We might miss something.'

And still the doors open and shut, and still the music plays, and still the crowd cheers.

It is eight-thirty, and the revue has begun.



THE CURTAIN RISES

1

IT is eight o'clock, and the revue will soon begin. Zero hour is at hand.

Zero hour. It may seem ill-judged to drag such a phrase from the battlefield, to apply it to the tawdry uses of the theatre, but no other phrase can describe the miracle which was now taking place—which always takes place—behind the curtain.

Just as a platoon commander, in charge of men who for three days have had no sleep, no proper food, and who have been subjected to a pitiless bombardment, must tell himself that the approaching assault is doomed to bloody-failure, so the producer, in charge of a company who for three days have rehearsed until they can hardly see, till some of the weaker members literally fall on the stage, till the nerves of even the strongest are at screaming point, must tell himself that the play is assured of disaster, that the curtain will rise on one of the most frightening fiascos of theatrical history.

Yet, in each case, some queer strength seems, miraculously, to be given, both to the actors behind the barrage and to the actors behind the footlights. The assault proceeds; the outposts are overpowered. The play goes on; the public is conquered.

So it was to-night.

THE CURTAIN RISES

Robin stood by Bert in the wings. He was giving some final directions to the man at the switchboard. As Robin listened, he thought that it was one of the seven wonders of the world that Bert was even able to stand up, let alone to think.

When he had left Bert, an hour ago, he had left a man who, as far as one could see, was walking in his sleep. He had staggered into the office, sunk on to the sofa, and stared with heavy-lidded eyes at the cup of coffee which his little wife had put before him. Fatigue oozed from every pore. He was unwashed, and unshaven. His voice had sunk to a hoarse whisper. It might not be true that you could have knocked him out with a feather, but you could certainly have sent him spinning with a fan.

Yet here he was, an hour later, his mind working swiftly, smoothly, tightening up the lighting cues, making arrangements to dim the ambers in one sketch, to bring up the blues on the cyclorama in another, to cut out a spotlight in the finale.

Nor was Bert in any way exceptional. Every stage hand seemed endued with the same super-human strength. For nights and days they had been run off their feet. They had staggered up the stairs at three a.m., four a.m., and this morning at five-thirty, and somehow or other, by cycle, by lorry, or by the workers' underground at dawn, they had reached their homes for a couple of hours' sleep. They had no glory for their tireless exertions. They were cursed, bawled at, harried from right and left. True, they received a little extra pay. And when the curtain came down, they knew, dimly, that they would get gloriously drunk. In

REVUE

the meantime, they carried on, doing not only their own job, but everybody else's. Under no dictatorship except the relentless dictatorship of the theatre could such an effort have been called forth.

All these men, in fact, were stage-struck.

Never quite so' clearly before had Robin realized that he, as author, held only a small and, as it now seemed, a comparatively unimportant post, in an army of tireless workers. He had written the words and the music, yes. But that was only the beginning. Nothing that he had done could compare with what these men were doing now.

Consider the case of Sol.

Only a few minutes before, he had looked into Sol's little room, on the first floor, to wish him luck. He had found him giving an almost unique example of the powers of human endurance. With his right hand he was swiftly finishing a transposition of the flute part of *Daffodils*, and pushing it over to a messenger boy, who was rushing it down to the waiting flautist. With his left hand he was holding a sandwich — the first food he had eaten since breakfast. While he was doing these things, a stage-hand was leaning over him, fastening his white tie, which he certainly would not have time to tie himself. Another was doing up the laces of his evening shoes. Yet still he kept on scribbling and pushing over the manuscript.

How could he even hear the music in his head, let alone write it down, with his aching hand? All round him there were sounds of distraction, shouts, hurrying feet, banging doors. People kept rushing in, asking questions, to which he nodded or shook his head. And

THE CURTAIN RISES

always there was that terrible consciousness of the great theatre filling up, down below, like the surge of an advancing sea, while the little clock over his desk pointed to five minutes past eight, six minutes past eight, seven minutes past eight . . .

How did Sol do it? He could not possibly have told you himself. He was a fragile little man. If you had taken him for a country walk in the rain, he would have been tired out after a couple of miles and would probably have caught a chill. Yet here he was, performing not only mental, but physical prodigies under which a giant might well have wilted.

But then, he too was stage-struck.

It made Robin feel almost ill to watch him.

Seven minutes past eight. In eighteen minutes the overture would begin. In twenty-three minutes the curtain would go up.

Fay must be dressed by now. He decided to go up to see her, to give her one last word before she went on.

i i

'Come in!'

It was Humbert's voice.

He opened the door. And for a moment his heart seemed to stop.

She was bent over the dressing-table, her head buried in her hands, shuddering convulsively. 'I can't ... I can't ...' She said it again and again, in a desperate whisper. Her whole body shook with an agony of panic.

REVUE

Robin closed the door. It seemed very quiet in here after the noisy turmoil downstairs. There was no sound except the quick, shuddering intake of her **breath**.

Humbert made a hopeless gesture. 'Here's Robin,' he said, in a dead voice. He leant back, and turned his face to the wall.

She took her hands from her face. She saw Robin. It made no difference, except that she stiffened slightly. Her little face was swollen and contorted with weeping. The eyeblack had trickled down on to her cheeks.

'So this,' thought Robin, 'is the end. This is what it has all come down to.'

He smiled at Fay. 'Poor little Fay!' She just shook her head hopelessly at him, like a child that has been whipped for something it does not understand, and knows that it may be whipped again.

One part of Robin's mind was working feverishly. He saw that Humbert was finished. A casualty incapable of revival. He knew that any decisions would have to be taken by himself. He knew that he ought to be sending for Llewellyn, for Bert, for Starr. That he ought to be administering sal volatile, cursing Fay, pleading with her, slapping her, doing anything to get her out of this spell of hopelessness which fatigue had woven round her.

If only he could get this practical part of his mind for once, to dominate him ...

He saw a bottle of whisky and a syphon on the table. 'Mind if I have one?' he said. The calmness of his voice surprised him.

THE CURTAIN RISES

'I'd better go and tell Bert.' said Humbert, as he was filling his glass.

'No. Don't tell anybody yet. Least of all Bert. I don't think Bert could stand it. I think it'd finish him.'

A little moan came from Fay as she heard this. It was as though the full force of her treachery (as she described it to herself) was brought home to her.

'Wait outside,' said Robin. And somehow or other he managed to smile, and make his voice sound confident.

Humbert's face, as far as it was capable of registering any feeling except the desire to sleep, assumed a look of dull surprise. He wondered if by some chance Robin had something up his sleeve, Hope stirred at the back of his brain. He nodded, and went through the door.

'Fay, darling. You're going to be all right.'

She shook her head.

'There's lots of time still.'

And even as he said it there was a scurry outside in the corridor, a knock on the door, and the call-boy's cry of 'Beginners Please!' Of all cries in the world, one of the most frightening. The effect of it on Fay was as though she had had a blow on the back. Her whole body seemed to become rigid.

Damn and blast that boy! Why did he have to do that? If only he could have a little quiet, a little time ... half an hour might do it. 'Fay,' he whispered, 'Please. For my sake try.' (Of all the idiotic things to say.) He put his hand on hers, and pressed it gently. 'You only have to do what you've done so beautifully before.' (As if she didn't know that.) 'And everybody

REVUE

else is just as frightened as you are.' (As if that were of any help, even if it were true.)

Oh Lord, he might go on talking for ever. He looked at his watch. Twenty-two minutes past eight. Why wasn't he running round, getting Llewellyn, Bert, doctors, anybody ... trying to arrange a hectic last minute scramble of understudies?

There was another knock on the door.

'Who's there?'¹

'Call-boy, sir. For Miss Pearl.'

'Come in.'

The boy entered. Flowers. 'Put them there.' The boy left. He stared at the flowers. Yellow flowers. He could hardly see them. He could hardly see anything.

Then suddenly, his eyes seemed to clear. To focus once more. He saw that the flowers were daffodils. And that the card attached to them was in Thelma's handwriting.

A desperate idea occurred to him. He stretched out his hand very carefully. Fay's head was still buried in her arms. He tore off the card and swiftly thrust it into his pocket. Then he touched her very gently on the shoulder.

'Fay. Look. Look what I got for you.'

She turned her head. She saw the flowers. Through her tears they seemed just a daze of gold. And then, her lips formed the word 'daffodils'.

What exactly happened in Fay's funny little tortured brain at that moment, it would be impossible to say. Perhaps it was not so complicated, after all. Perhaps it was just a memory of the happiest day that life had yet given her, the day when she and Robin had

THE CURTAIN RISES

lain under the great beeches at Kew, and had watched the flowers dancing in the sun.

And again, it is possible that even without the dramatic intervention of the daffodils she might have pulled herself together. You may say that a sharp slap might have done it. Or if you are cynical, a very large glass of very cold champagne. As it was, neither of these restoratives were called for.

She was revived by flowers. It is prettier, and it happens to be true.

The next thing she said was very typical indeed.

'Robin! At the end of May!' Her eyes were wide with wonder, and they were no longer clouded with tears, though she was still shaking a little. *'However much must they have cost?'*

As soon as she had said that Robin, knew that all was saved. Nor should any reader be offended by this swift transition from the poetical to the mercenary. If your whole life has been limited by the size of your purse, if a bunch of violets has always seemed to bear an invisible tag marked '6d.' (which you cannot afford), if all the things of life that are sweet and bright and gay have glittered from shelves that are just out of your reach, then you *do* think of money, on the most unsuitable occasions. You think of it when you are proposing marriage, or accepting it. You think of it in the straining hour of birth and the failing hour of death. You think of it with no idea of gain or loss. It is simply a token of what may be and what may not. It is the ultimate court of appeal, upon whose answer depends the final yes, or the final no.

So Fay, seeing the daffodils, and remembering

REVUE

Robin's poverty, and recalling the month of the year, put two and two together. And they made not four, but forty times four. And since she was, in spite of her normal appearance of placidity, as wild a bundle of temperament as you will find on the English stage — (for otherwise, how could she have acted as we have seen her act?) — the daffodils did the trick.

'Oh my dear!' she said, with a gesture of tenderness, that seemed to embrace, not only the daffodils, but Robin himself.

And then . . .

'Oh my Godr she said. 'My face!'

The panic was gone. The miracle had been wrought. The little sobbing bundle of nerves had become, in the space of a single minute, a grim, determined professional. Thelma herself, facing the slings and arrows of outrageous critics, could not have given a fiercer exhibition of efficiency.

'Marie!' she cried. 'Marie!'

Marie, expressionless as ever, emerged from the ante-room. With the cleansing cream. With the number five and the number nine. With the lipstick. With the powders. With the silver paste for the eyelids. She stood there, like a strange robot, handing these things out, while Fay dabbed and stroked and sniffed and powdered.

A loud bang on the door.

'Curtain up!'

She turned. Her voice was quite cool, quite fresh. 'Robin dear, you must go now. It's all right.'

He didn't speak. He didn't dare. He feared that he might break the spell.

THE CURTAIN RISES

She rose from her chair. She was not trembling any more. She put her hand on his. Nor did she speak. But when you can smile as Fay could smile, there is no need for words.

He went outside. Humbert was leaning against the wall, in an attitude of complete exhaustion. His eyes were half-closed. It was with a painful effort that he roused himself to look at Robin.

'It's all right.'

Slowly Humbert opened his eyes.

Robin shook him. 'I tell you, everything's grand. She's going on.'

Humbert stiffened.

'How . . . why . . .' he began.

'Never mind how or why.'

And the miracle was wrought in Humbert too. It was as though new oil had been poured into a guttering lamp. The blood came back to his cheeks. He straightened himself. He blinked. He sniffed. He shook his head. And then, with a sudden grin at Robin, he ran, yes *ran*, down the corridor.

iii

Robin stood once more in the wings.

The revue had begun.

The revue had not only begun, but it was actually continuing.

Nor was it only continuing, it was 'getting over'.

'It's not true,' muttered Robin to himself, as he clutched the back of the proscenium. '**It can't be true.**'

REVUE

But it was.

The opening chorus had gone brilliantly. The speeches had been held up by gusts of laughter. He had momentary visions of Starr, sweating profusely, running past him to change, of the white swirl of chorus girls' dresses, of Lou, twisting and turning on a stage that seemed immense. His brain was swept with the rise and fall of the curtain, his blood fevered by his own music. They were listening to it. Actually listening to it. As though it were real music. Like other people's music. Not just the tunes which had sung themselves into *his* brain, and had therefore seemed to him suspect.

And then, panic again. *Bedside Manners* was on. It was going well enough, though none of the laughs were coming in the places where they were meant to come, and as a result the players were a little rattled. But where was Fay? *Daffodils* was next. She ought to be here. Where was she? Had she had another relapse? Ought he to have stayed? Ought he to run up again? He turned.

She stood before him, in the golden dress.

Thank God!

She looked very happy, and strangely serene. All trace of tears had vanished. And in her hands, instead of a yellow scarf, she carried a cluster of daffodils. Thelma's daffodils.

She lifted them to her face. 'I had to take them, Robin.'

'I'm glad.' Actually he was not at all glad, for once she had taken the flowers on, how was she to take them off again? And she could not dance with the flowers in

THE CURTAIN RISES

her hand. However, he did not dare to point that out at this moment.

As though she were reading his thoughts she said, 'Just before I do the dance, I'll come to this corner. And I'll hand them to Bert. And you'll put them in water?'

Incredible little creature! At this moment, of all moments, altering her routine, making arrangements to hand flowers into the wings, and then asking that they should be put into water. It might have been the last night instead of the first.

He bent down and touched the daffodils. They seemed to be laughing up at him. Fay gave him a last smile. Then she straightened herself, cleared her throat, and frowned. From now on, she would be the complete professional.

A burst of applause from behind the curtain . . . how far away it seemed! She drew herself up, and turned. Some small-part actors rushed by, sweating, on their way to change. The yellow curtains swooped across. 'Lights! Lights!' Bert rushed to the switchboard. The last chorus girl darted into place. Sol lifted his baton. All this in the space of nine seconds. Once more the curtains parted. And like a little cloud, a little yellow cloud, she drifted on to the darkened stage.

How black the theatre seemed, as Robin stared through the wings. How black! And how immense! And how silent! Was that silence charged, with menace?

The first few phrases of the harp, soft and sparkling. And then her voice.

It seemed as though a beam of light were stealing

REVUE

through the darkness, so pure was it, so childish and unafraid. She might have been singing to herself, in the meadows alone.

Bert turned round. He was shaking all over. In a hoarse voice he whispered, 'She's got them.'

Robin stared at him. And suddenly, all the fatigue in the whole world seemed to press down on him. He found his shoulders heaving, his face falling. He leaned against the pillar and sobbed into his hands, as though his heart would break.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CURTAIN FALLS

1

'I T only goes to show, dear, that you know very little about me.'

And Sitters, staring at the pile of newspapers which lay scattered on the sofa by his side, felt inclined to agree.

It was nearly five in the morning. Already the sky was paling, and the roofs were flecked with silver. But neither of them had any desire to go to bed . . . Thelma because she had never felt less tired in her life, and Sitters because he was far too exhausted even to undress.

'Read out the *Express*, dear,' she commanded.

He took another sip of lager beer, cleared his throat, and read:

STAR SAVES SHOW

AT LAST MINUTE

THELMA GANGES

TO THE RESCUE

BANK-NOTE DRAMA

'WHY I DID IT'

'Those are all headlines,' explained Sitters.

'Yes, dear. Very nice. So *human*. Go on, dear.'

He gulped some more lager, and read:

REVUE

'Little did the brilliant audience which streamed into the Burlington theatre last night. . . '

'Brilliant, did it say, dear?'

'Yes. Brilliant'

Thelma snorted. 'I wonder if the man who wrote that has ever seen one of *my* first nights. It wasn't brilliant at all. I saw the list. The top was a Begum. How can a Begum be brilliant? If it had been me, we'd have had the Kents, at *least*. Yes, dear? What are you waiting for?'

'Little did they realize that but for the dramatic last-minute intervention of Miss Thelma Ganges (for whom the revue, *Something to Sing About*, was originally created) there would have been no performance at all. The theatre would have been shrouded in darkness, the doors would have been shut.'

'Quite beautifully he writes, don't you think, dear? Go on.'

'Two weeks ago, Miss Ganges was compelled, through ill-health, to throw up her part. The financial backers, becoming alarmed, withdrew their support. In spite of this, the company struggled on, hoping against hope that something would turn up. But at the eleventh hour, they were faced with bankruptcy . . . '

'So vivid, dear. Go on.'

'In desperation they turned to Miss Ganges •..'
Sitters paused.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

'But darling, *when* did they turn to you?'

'They didn't.' snapped Thelma. 'They hadn't the sense, I turned to them.'

'But why •.. when .. .?'

'Why? Because I'm a business woman, dear. I knew exactly how much money they owed and how much they'd got.'

'Oh!' There was a note of dismay in Sitters' voice. Did she know about *him*, and his thousand pounds?

'Why did you say "Oh!" like that, dear?'

'I ... I was only surprised.'

'You sounded almost alarmed, dear. I can't think why. What I said was, I knew how much money they'd got. I don't know where they got it, or how. It didn't concern me.'

'I see.' Sitters sighed with relief.

The sigh was not lost on Thelma. There was something fishy here. For a moment, the thought flashed through her head that possibly Sitters himself. .. but no. Such appalling treachery was inconceivable. All the same, she would make it her business to find out, for certain. Not just now. Later. On the boat, perhaps, when Sitters' powers of resistance would be weakened.

'What I *did* know,' she resumed, still keeping Sitters under a very acute scrutiny, 'was that the show had an excellent chance, even without me. If I hadn't believed in it, I shouldn't have gone into it. Particularly after I'd seen how well that odious little girl was sliaping, at the first dress rehearsal.'

'You went out?' gasped Sitters. 'You got in? You saw it?'

REVUE

'Yes, dear. From the gallery. With a duster round my head. I also knew, dear, that I could make my own terms. Without my money, the show wouldn't have opened. The original backers would have lost everything. And so, naturally, I could arrange much better terms than they got. *Much* better.' She stared at Sitters, and spoke very distinctly. 'Before anybody else gets a penny, I have to be repaid in full.'

'Oh!' There was a look on Sitters' face which could only be interpreted as dismay.

'I thought you'd be glad to know, dear.'

'Yes ... yes, of course.'

Thelma pursed her lips. It was, of course, unimaginable that her suspicions could have any foundations. All the same .. .

'I *also* knew, dear, that even if I lost my money, which I shan't, if these notices are anything to go by, I should have the most marvellous publicity.' She made a gesture towards the newspapers. 'It seems that I was right.'

'It does.'

'And now, dear, go on with the *Express*.'

Sitters, in a tremulous tone, resumed:

' " I could not use my voice to save them," said Miss Ganges, speaking from her sick bed to me last night, "and so I used my purse."'

'Oh, my *dear*,' interrupted Thelma. 'Divine! *Most* human!'

'Didn't you say it?'

'No, dear. But I should have done, if I'd thought of it. Do go on.'

THE CURTAIN FALLS

" 'I could not have endured the thought that these gallant young artists . . . my 'good companions', to use a phrase of my favourite dramatist . . . were to have all their hopes thwarted. Particularly in the case of Miss Fay Pearl. I think I may say," added Miss Ganges, "that I was one of the first to have noticed Miss Pearl, and during the time that I was able to rehearse, I constantly . . ."

Sitters gulped. The words which were coming were almost too much for him.

'What is the matter, dear? Constantly what?'

Sitters took a deep breath.

' "Constantly called attention to her."

He glanced up. Thelma met his eye with a very steely look.

'Well, dear? Is there anything inaccurate in that statement?'

He gulped again. 'No dear.' So that was the role she was going to play.

He read on. It became more and more glowing, more and more dramatic. It told of Thelma's last-minute meeting with Mr. Harris, and how, with tears in her eyes, she had handed him a bundle of £100 notes (so that was why she had drawn out so much money from the bank), imploring him not even to bother to count, them. Which, indeed, would have been a superfluous task, considering that the numbers of the notes were carefully copied into her account book.

'It's really charming,' sighed Thelma. 'Very human indeed. And what does it say about the revue?'

REVUE'

Sitters glanced at it briefly. 'Much the same as the rest. Fresh. Melodious. Clean. All that. It says it should run through the summer.'

'Fresh. Melodious. Clean. They all say that. Well, it is fresh and melodious. And as long as they can control Lou, it will be reasonably clean. And Fay... what does it say about[^]her?'

But this was asking too much of Sitters. 'I think . . . I mean,' he stammered, 'perhaps you'd better read it yourself.'

Thelma raised her eyebrows. In silence she accepted the newspaper he handed to her. And in silence she read:

'An ovation greeted Miss Fay Pearl, the unknown chorus girl who, at a moment's notice, stepped into the role of star. Gay, artless, with a voice of exceptional charm, she danced her way into the hearts of the audience. She is a recruit of first-rate importance to the musical comedy stage.'

Thelma closed her lips in a grim line. All the papers had flattered Fay. But this was the first that had used the word 'ovation'.

It was *her* word. Through her mind flashed a bitter picture of the triumph she had sacrificed. The curtain sweeping up, the company behind her, the roar of applause. The curtain falling again , .. the company scurrying off. The curtain up once more ... and she alone on the stage, while the applause swelled to thunder. The bouquets from the right, from the left, the orchestra pit, the little twists and turns to the wings as though she were beckoning to the others to advance

THE CURTAIN FALLS

and share her triumph (though woe betide any who were rash enough to do so). And then, the step forward, the sudden silence, the shout from the gallery, the laugh, the silence again, and the little speech.

Oh — it was hard to bear. But then, she had chosen deliberately. And on the whole, she had no cause to complain. She had Robin under contract. His next show would be a great advance on this. She would run it entirely. No Lous, no Fays. A complete dictatorship. In the meantime, she had achieved magnificent publicity, and done a brilliant stroke of business.

She remembered that Sitters' eyes were upon her. The grim line relaxed. She achieved a smile.

'It looks,' she said, 'as though I were going to make quite a lot of money.'

'Yes, it does,' agreed the exhausted Sitters.

'What a pity, dear, that you didn't have something in it yourself.'

He tried to grin, but it was a very feeble effort. Nor could he think of any words which would not betray him. So he staggered to his feet, and blew his nose.

'A bad sign, dear,' said Thelma, 'when you blow your nose like that.'

Sitters did not attempt to answer this sinister observation. He only grinned again, even more feebly than before, said he was going to bed, and went.

Thelma watched him go. Yes ... something was up. Monstrous as it might seem, Sitters had been doing things behind her back. To what extent, she would make it her business to find out.

It would form a most interesting topic of conversation for the boat.

REVUE

She went to the window. There was a lot of red in the sky. Shepherd's warning. With any luck, it would be a rough crossing.

11

'Shepherd's warning!'

So echoed Fay's voice, as she stood at the window of the little flat in Battersea.

'That'd make a pretty song ... shepherd's warning.' She turned her head, and smiled.

'Think of all the songs I shall be able to write for you,' went on Robin. 'Wherever you go, whatever you do. When you're asleep. When you're awake. There'll be songs all the time. When you're angry. When you're pleased. When you're trying on a new hat ...'

'I *want* a new hat.'

'Come on. Let's go out and get one. I can afford it now.' He sprang up from the sofa, which was littered with all the papers they had been reading.

'But darling ... it happens to be five o'clock in the morning.'

'Never mind, let's go out, all the same.' He went up to her, tilted her face to his, and kissed her lightly on the nose.

'Are we married?' he said casually. 'I keep on forgetting.'

'I can't think,' she smiled. 'I must look it up.'

'Come on, Fay. We'll go and stand on Westminster

THE CURTAIN FALLS

Bridge; And you can recite a lot more Wordsworth,
Very touching, that would be.'

' "*This city now*," ' she whispered.

'Go on.'

' "*This city now doth like a garment wear*

The beauty of the morning . . ." what happens after
that?'

' "*Silent*" ' prompted Robin.

' "*Silent, bare,*

Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie

Open unto the fields, and to the sky;

All bright and glittering in the smokeless air" '

'And now,' he said, 'you can go and get your hat.'

She ran out, down the corridor, towards her room.

Then, she paused.

Outside another door.

She had forgotten.

For a moment she felt like calling to Robin, and
flying away for ever from the ugly figure who lay asleep
behind that door, the figure whom, somehow or other,
they had got home last night, cursing and staggering.

For a moment she felt that she could not endure
what the next few days would surely bring . . . the long
bouts of nausea, the pitiful remorse, the tears which she
would have to dry (tears which would be all the more
tragic because they were so terribly genuine).

But it was only for a moment.

She stepped forward, opened the door, and went
quietly into the darkened room.

REVUE

III

Fay tiptoed to the bed, and touched her mother's hand.

The breathing suddenly changed in tempo. The figure stirred. The bleary eyes opened.

'Who's there?'

'Only Fay, Mother.'

A long loud sigh, like a snore.

'Go t'hell,' muttered the figure on the bed.

Fay closed her eyes. She looked as if she were praying. Perhaps she was. For though she called on no God by name, she felt, dimly that she was summoning power from somewhere, that some virtue was going out of her. Surely, if you wished things as strongly as she was wishing them, they *must* happen?

She opened her eyes again. She saw a glitter of colour in the corner. What was that? A yellow scarf? A broken vase? Something her mother had knocked over?

Then she knew what it was. The daffodils. Her mother must have got up and taken them from the next room. And thrown them into the grate.

Her hand tightened. The pressure caused the figure on the bed to stir again, to mutter a feeble curse.

She went over to the flowers. They were bruised and charred. Some of the stalks were broken.

She knelt on the floor. Very gently she lifted them up. She held them from her, appraising them. A little smile came on her lips. If she could have seen herself,

THE CURTAIN FALLS

just then, kneeling in the narrow shaft of light that streamed through a chink in the curtain, she would have wondered at her own beauty.

She rose to her feet. She went to the washstand. There was no proper vase for them, nothing worthy of them.. There was only a tooth-glass. She dipped it into the water-jug. She put the flowers in it.

She paused for a moment. She needed all her courage now. 'I must never forget.' she whispered to herself. 'Never forget that it's not her. It's a disease.' She must wait another minute. Help would come to her, if she only waited, and closed her eyes. It always had done in the past.

A gust of wind caught the curtain. It blew out into the room. The sunlight, for a few seconds, streamed on to the daffodils. They fluttered in the little tooth-glass. The wind died down, and the room was in shadow.

Fay tiptoed to the bed. She put the flowers by her mother's side. She bent down, and with infinite tenderness, her lips brushed her mother's cheek.

'I'm ready.'

Robin looked up. He saw a girl who seemed to shine with a golden light.

A trick of the sun, of course. Or — if you prefer it — the folly of a young lover.

For, really, Fay looked very tired indeed. There were shadows of violet under her eyes. Her hair was sadly tousled. Her shoulders were drooping. In fact, she looked her age. Twenty, if a day.

REVUE

But Robin saw her in a light of gold. And so we will see her, as she steps out of these pages.

'I'm

she said again.

He caught her arm. She was no longer golden. She was human. She was his.

Together they went out into the radiant streets.



