

The Home Reading Circle

THE REHEARSAL OF THE NEW PLAY. By BRANDER MATTHEWS...

Author of "Vignettes of Manhattan."

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SYNOPSIS.

Harry Brackett and Wilson Carpenter, dramatists, have written a new comedy, "Touch and Go," which is about to be produced at a New York theatre...

PART II.

"It was very good of you to come this evening, Mrs. Loraine," he began. "I feel as if having your daughter act in this play of mine will bring me luck somehow."

Sherrington insists that his way of playing it is so dramatic. Well, I don't say it ain't, but it isn't half as funny, is it?"

After Carpenter had given his opinion upon this question, Dresser allowed him to escape. But he had not advanced ten yards until he was claimed by Mrs. Castleman.

"Mr. Carpenter," the elderly actress began, in her usual haughty dignified manner, "how do you think I ought to dress this part in the first act? She's a housekeeper, isn't she? So I suppose I ought to wear an apron."

The young dramatist expressed his belief that perhaps an apron would be a proper thing for the housekeeper to wear in the first act.



MR. FOOTIT: "Do you think it rude to ask a lady her age?"

"I think there is more in it than I thought at first," said Mrs. Loraine, "now I've seen the play, and I'll go over Mrs. Loraine's part with me tonight and show her what can be done with it. I'm waiting for that scene in the second act with Fostelle. I think that Mary ought to share the call after that."

"Oh, mother," the daughter broke in, "that would ever do! I should get my two weeks' notice the next morning, shouldn't I? And I don't want to be out of an engagement just at the beginning of the season when all the companies are made up."

"Are you sure that the ghost will walk every week with this Fostelle company, if you strike bad business for a month or so?" asked Mrs. Loraine, with a suggestion of anxiety in her voice.

"I think Zeke Kilburn is all right," the dramatic author responded; "he made a pile of money last year on that imported method of driving the 'Doctor's Daughter'; and besides he has a backer."

"A backer?" she rejoined; "but who backs the backer? I've heard your friend, Mr. Brackett, there, say that a jay and his money are soon parted."

"I hope it will make a hit," Mrs. Loraine answered, "for your sake, too. You haven't sold it outright, have you?"

"No, indeed," the young dramatist replied. "Harry Brackett is too old in the business for that. We've got a nightly royalty, with a percentage on the gross, whenever it plays more than four thousand dollars a week. We stand to make a lot of money—if it makes a hit. What do you think of its chances, Mrs. Loraine?"

"Cut it down to the bone, when you can—that's what I say," he explained. "What you cut out can't make people yawn."

But once he stopped the rehearsal to suggest that a speech be written in. "You've got to make that complication mighty clear," he declared, "and this is the place to do it. I think, if you want the people to go to the play, they must understand the situation. Now and then either Carpenter or Brackett made a suggestion or a criticism, but both yielded to Sherrington, if he was insistent. The stage manager kept the whole company of actors up to their work, and imposed on them his understanding of that work much as the conductor of the orchestra leads his musicians at the performance of a symphony."

When the whole act had been rehearsed, and the final scene was repeated three or four times, until it ran like well-oiled clockwork, the stage cleared so that the scenery of the third act might be set.

Sherrington accompanied Miss Marvin through the door behind the proscenium box into the dark auditorium. "You will play that scene very well," he said, "but you've got to have confidence."

"It is a beautiful part, isn't it?" she responded, with enthusiasm. "I never had a part I could enjoy playing so much."

Carpenter was about to leave the stage to tell Mary what a delight it was to him to hear her speak the words he had written when his collaborator tapped him on the shoulder. As he turned Harry Brackett whispered in his ear:

"Look out for the Stellar Attraction. I'm afraid she has just dropped on Marvin's part. If she once suspects that the little girl may get that scene away from her, she can make herself mightily disagreeable all round. I guess we had better go up and tell her she is a greater actress than Charlotte Cushman."

PART III.

Carpenter laughingly answered: "Take care she doesn't drop on you; it would be worse if she thought you were gulping her."

"There's no danger of that," Harry Brackett returned. "That Stellar Attraction of ours is a box-contractor for flattery—there's isn't anything she won't swallow."

The two dramatic authors found Miss Daisy Fostelle standing in the wings and discussing with Dresser the personal peculiarities of another member of the dramatic profession.

As Carpenter came up, the actress was saying, "Why, she had the cheek actually to tell me I was more amusing off the stage than on—the cat! But I got even with her. I told her I was sorry I couldn't return the compliment for she was even less amusing on the stage than off."

The two dramatists joined in the laugh; and then Harry Brackett began, "If you had rated rival you are having fun with it?" he asked. "Well, if she comes to see you in this play tomorrow, they'll have to put a waterproof carpet into the private box, for she'll weep bitter tears of despair while she's watching you in the second act of ours."

Shakespeare will be good enough for your next season. Now that would be taking the bread out of our mouths!"

The actress laughed easily. "I don't think you would starve," she returned; "and I might, maybe—if I took to the legitimate. Not that it would be my first attempt either, for I played Ariel in the 'Tempest' when I was a mere child. And it wasn't easy, I can tell you. Ariel's a real hard part, I think; there's a certain swing to the words, too, and you can't make up a line of your own if you get stuck, as I could in this piece of yours."

"No," Brackett confessed solemnly, "the dialogue of 'Touch and Go' is not as rhythmic as the dialogue of the 'Tempest'."

"And I've played Francis in 'Richelieu,' too," continued Miss Fostelle. "But I don't think I really like any of those Shakespearean parts."

"No," Brackett confessed again, with feigned gravity, "Francis is not one of Shakespeare's best parts. It wasn't worthy of you, no matter how inexperienced you were. But Rosalind, now, as Carpenter suggests, and Beatrice—"

Carpenter here guessed from Dresser's spasmodic manner that the actor was about to intervene in the conversation, and not knowing what might be the result of the younger of the dramatists dropped out of the group and managed to draw Dresser away with him.

After they had exchanged a few words Carpenter looked into the auditorium to discover where Mary Marvin might be. He saw that she was by the side of her mother, and that Mrs. Loraine and Sherrington were still engaged in an earnest conversation. He made a movement as if to leave Dresser, whereupon the comedian begged him for a moment's interview.

"It's about that speech of mine in the third act that I want to make a suggestion," said the actor. "It's a very good speech, too, and I think I can get three laughs out of it, easy. You know the speech, I mean the one about the three old maids: 'There were three old maids in our town, one was plain as a pike-staff, and the other was as homely as a hedge fence, and the third was as ugly as sin; and whenever they all three walked out together every clock in that place stopped. Their parents had christened them Faith and Hope and Charity; but the boys always called them Battle and Murder and Sudden Death.' Now, don't you think it would help to bring out the point more if the orchestra was to play 'Grandfather's Clock' very gently just as I say that 'every clock in the place stopped short'?"

"The new scene had been set swiftly and the furniture was already in place. The first of the actors to enter was the cadaverous and irritable Stark. He began glibly enough, but soon hesitated for a word, and then broke out impatiently, regardless of the presence of the two authors: 'Oh, I can't get that line into my head! And I don't know what it means, either! How can you expect a man to speak such rubbish!'"

As before, nobody paid any attention to this pertinence, and the actor went on with his part without further comment.

Dresser then entered and the two men proceeded to misunderstand each other in the most elaborate fashion. The character which Stark represented had reason to believe that the character which Dresser represented was the uncle of the character that Daisy Fostelle represented and was also a soldier. In like manner Dresser had reason to believe that Stark was the lady's uncle and also a sailor. They addressed each other, therefore, in sailor talk and in soldier's talk; and the fun waxed fast and furious. At the height of the misunderstanding Daisy Fostelle entered unexpectedly and found herself instantly immersed in the humorous complication, with no possibility of plausible explanation.

speech. It goes better there—you see if it does not."

And Sherrington decided that "Confound it, man!" was more effective in the later speech, so the transposition was authorized to Dresser's satisfaction.

The stage manager had this important scene of mutual misunderstanding between Stark and Dresser and Daisy Fostelle repeated twice, until everybody felt glibly and every gesture seemed automatic. And so the rehearsal went to the end, Sherrington applying the finishing touches, and seeming at last to be fairly well satisfied with the result of his labors.

"The final lines of the comedy were, of course, to be delivered by the star; but when the cue was given to her, Miss Fostelle simply said 'Tag!'—everybody being aware that it is very un lucky to speak the last speech of a rehearsal—as unlucky as it is to put up an umbrella on the stage, or to quote from 'Macbeth.'"

"That will do," said the stage manager. "I think it will be all right to-morrow night."

And with that the rehearsal concluded and the company began to disperse.

"I hope it is all right," Harry Brackett remarked to Carpenter, "and I think it is. But I shall have a great deal more confidence after the man in the box office shakes hands with me cordially, say, next Wednesday or Thursday, and inquiries about my health. He'll know by that time whether we've got a good thing or not!"

Carpenter helped Miss Marvin to put on her light cape. Then, after her mother had joined them, they said good night to the others and left the theater together.

When they came out into the warm night the street was quieter than it had been when Carpenter entered the theater. There were fewer cable cars passing the door and the trains on the elevated road in the avenue were now infrequent. The lights had been turned out in front of the variety show across the way and evidently the Grand Sacred Concert was over. The moon had sunk; and before they had gone a block the bell of the church tolled the hour of midnight.

The young man who was walking by the side of Mrs. Loraine broke the silence at last.

"Well," he asked, "what do you think of the play now?"

"I think it is a good piece of its kind," the elder actress answered, "a very good piece of its kind; and it is well staged; and it will be well acted too. Sherrington knows how to get his best work out of everybody. Yes, it will be a success."

"Is it good for three months here now?" the young author asked, "and for the rest of the season on the road?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," replied Mrs. Loraine. "Indeed, it's safe for a hundred nights here at least!"

"They paused at the corner to wait for a cable car, and Sherrington joined them."

This gave Carpenter a chance to lead the daughter away from the mother half-a-dozen steps.

"I'm so glad mother thinks the play will go," the girl began, "and mother is a very good judge, too. You ought to make a lot out of it."

"I've wanted to make money mainly for one reason," he returned; "I wanted to ask you to take half of it."

"Half of it?" she echoed, as though she did not understand.

"Oh, well—all of it," he responded swiftly, "and me with it."

"Mr. Carpenter!" she cried, and her blushes made her look even lovelier than before.

"Won't you marry me?" he asked ardently.

"Oh, I suppose I've got to say yes," she answered, "or else you will go down on your knees here in the moonlight!"

(The End.)

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