

THE UNCONSCIOUS COMEDIAN IN THE THIRD ROW

HOW would you like to go to the theatre expecting to sit next to a friend, find the seat occupied by a stranger whose face was oddly familiar, have your friends visit you between the acts, and gaze curiously at your companion, and then find out the next day that—

Well, the experience of no less a celebrated first nighter than Paul M. Potter is the best answer to this hypothetical question. Furthermore, Mr. Potter, who admits the joke is on him, declares that the incident actually took place as described.

"I rarely go to first nights," said the playwright. "But once I was actually induced to put on my evening clothes and attend an important opening night. Never mind what play it was—it was a Broadway first night, and I was there at the particular request of the author, who happened to be an intimate personal friend. The author had the management send me two seats on the aisle in the third row—a most conspicuous location, for all the aisle seats in the neighborhood were occupied by the critics and by prominent theatrical people whom I knew well.

"I was in doubt as to whom to invite to this premier, for as a rule I seldom go to the theatre unless with a party of friends, and I knew no one in particular to invite. I happened to run across an artist friend at luncheon, and, as I hadn't seen him for over a year I invited him to come with me to the opening the next night, at the same time handing him the ticket calling for the aisle seat.

"His thanks and protestations of friendship were somewhat thickly uttered, but I concluded that the incipient jag would disappear within twenty-four hours, and that he would be in a suitable condition to put on his evening clothes and make a creditable appearance.

"The next night I arrived a trifle late, and was shown to the second seat in the third row, expecting to find my artist friend. To my amazement a stranger occupied the seat. Not a stranger, either, for his face was familiar to me, and he at once spoke with an air of cordiality.

"'Good evening, Mr. Potter,' he said. 'Mr. B— couldn't come, and he asked me to take his place and explain that something unexpected happened so that he couldn't get here. He hopes you don't mind.'

"'Not at all,' I replied, puzzled, for I couldn't recall the man's name, though I was sure I had met him before. I meet

so many people, however, that it is difficult to recall the names unless the party you are talking with gives you some clue to work upon. This man, however, was a Sphinx, only speaking when I spoke to him, and giving me positively no clue whatever to his identity. Yet he knew me and that convinced me that I had met him. Moreover, the fact that he was a friend of my artist friend made me extremely cautious, for I dislike hurting any one's feelings.

"I tried several times before the curtain rose to get some inkling of who the man was next to me, but in vain. He was a middle aged man, with hair slightly tinged with gray, smooth shaven. He wore a Tuxedo coat with a black tie, but there was nothing wrong with that combination except that his collar seemed unusually low. However, as corpulent men often wear low collars, this did not seem out of place. His shirt bosom was perhaps a trifle soiled, but this might easily have happened on his way to the theatre. One thing, about his dress coat, however, struck me as being funny. It seemed very shiny and thread-bare, but even this I passed over as being merely the evidence of financial stringency such as artists often encounter. For, since he was a friend of an artist, I made up my mind that he was an artist.

"'You have an—er—studio?' I finally hazarded, just before the curtain rose.

"'Oh, Mr. Potter,' he said, reproachfully, 'You know very well I haven't. I only wish I could paint.'

"'Of course!' I said, laughingly, pretending that it was only a joke. But if he wasn't an artist, I pondered, who the devil was he?

"Further speculation was cut short by the rising of the curtain, and I sat back to watch the first act. When it was over, the usual exodus to the lobby began, and as my newspaper friends and the critics passed me, they paused to shake hands. The stranger had the aisle seat, so that all who spoke to me had to lean over him, and he seemed to attract unusual attention from the bohemian set with whom I mingled.

"One of the critics, who often lunched with me, nodded to the stranger, who promptly recognized him, calling him by name. The critic, after passing a few words with me, made a remark that greatly annoyed me, for I couldn't understand what he was driving at.

"'Getting material for a new comedy?' he asked with a smile, and a nod in the

direction of my mysterious companion.

"'Have you any idea what he meant?' I asked my friend in the aisle seat.

"'I'm sure I can't for the life of me explain, Sir,' returned the stranger.

"Two ladies, one of them a well-known leading lady, sitting behind me, now engaged me in conversation, and I was on the point of introducing my friend when I remembered that I didn't know his name.

"During the second intermission I was visited by every one I knew, most of them newspaper and theatrical people. They all took the keenest interest in my companion, who sat there without saying a word. Afterward it occurred to me that some one must have passed the word around that I was down front with a stranger whom every one knew or ought to know, and I found out afterward that the friend critic who had tried to guy me about getting material had told every one he knew to visit me and meet my friend. Several of them, in discussing the play, obviously tried to get me to introduce the stranger, by turning from me to address some innocent remark or comment to him. Each time his opinion was asked, however, regarding the play, or some actor, he would say, quietly:

"'Yes, Sir. I quite agree with you, Sir.'

"Once he forgot himself and said, 'Very good, Sir,' but even this slip of the tongue didn't give me an inkling as to who the man really was, though by this time, as I afterward learned, the tip had been passed from seat to seat and many opera glasses were being leveled in my direction.

"At the next intermission there was an even greater crowd around my seat. I realized that I was attracting attention for some unknown reason, or that my friend was. At first I foolishly attributed it to the fact that I rarely attended a first night, and that all my friends were uniting in congratulating me upon at last coming out of my shell. The attention my friend attracted, however, soon convinced me that he was the magnet.

"I must say, however, that his demeanor was that of a perfect gentleman, and that he withstood the scrutiny to good advantage. Finally, when the play was over, he rose just as I did.

"'Shall I help you on with your coat, Sir?' he asked, and I thanked him cordially, and permitted him to do so, rendering a similar service to him, in spite of his protestations that he could get his coat on by himself. We walked to the

door together, and on the sidewalk he said good night and left me.

"I went to my rooms at the Lafayette Hotel, still puzzling over the identity of this man, whom I was sure I had met somewhere.

"Next day I concluded I'd find my artist friend at luncheon at his usual haunt, and about 1 o'clock I drifted into the café. My artist friend was not on hand, but a familiar face greeted me and a familiar voice inquired:

"'Shall I take your hat and coat, Mr. Potter?'

"It was my friend of the night before, a waiter at the place, who had served me at luncheon a hundred times. That explained his strangely familiar face, the shiny dress coat, and somewhat obsequious manner, which had passed the night before for timidity in the presence of the great author. A waiter—a splendid waiter, too, I may add—but for all that a waiter, who had sat with me at the theatre, in the presence of hundreds of my friends who knew him by sight or who had him pointed out by those who did not know as a waiter whom Potter had brought to the theatre for a joke. I was so upset at the revelation that I couldn't order luncheon, but consoled myself with several drinks. Meanwhile, my artist friend staggered to the chair opposite me.

"'Awfully sorry, Potter, old boy,' he muttered. 'Couldn't get to theatre last night. Too soused. Sent Joe, the waiter, instead. How was it—good show?'

"Just then Joe returned with another drink. I paid him, had him help me on with my coat, and started for the door without a word, leaving the artist friend still half-stewed in his chair. At the door Joe bowed.

"'It was a very good play last night, Sir,' he ventured. 'I want to thank you for the ticket, Sir. It was very kind of you indeed, Sir.'

"After all, it wasn't the waiter's fault. He had simply taken advantage of the chance gift of a ticket, and he had behaved himself in a delicate situation where some waiters would have been obnoxious. I slipped a dollar into his hand and smiled.

"'Yes, Joe, it was a good show,' I said. 'I'm glad you appreciated it. Come and see one of my own some time.'

"But ever since that night I sat in the third row with Joe I haven't been able to let him serve me at table. I elevated him to the distinction of my guest—he is no longer a waiter to me."