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 night than Paul M. Potter was 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 for once. One night I invited him to come with me to the opening, at eight o'clock, at the same time hand him the ticket calling for the ale seat.

"His thanks and alterations of friendship were somewhat thickly uttered, but I concluded that the incepted 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. E— who told you 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 recognize the stranger, but with a smile addressed him. "It 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 after the play. He was evidently an odd passenger, which, by the way, seems to be a peculiarly characteristic quality of a critic. He entered the theatre, and I my seat, and engaged 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 one of the finest of all newspapermen 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 man was not a stranger at all. He had taken the seat to introduce the stranger, by turning from me to address some innocent remark or comment to him. Each of my opinions was asked, however, regarding the play, or some action seen in the theatre."

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

"Once he forgot himself and said, 'Very good,' but even this slip of the tongue didn't seem to get him down. After a few minutes, however, he began to talk about the play."

"At the next intermission there was an even greater crowd around my seat. I realized that I was attracting attention of a different sort, then of unknown origin, or that my friend was not so foolish as to believe the fact to the fact that I rarely attended a first night, and that all my friends were sitting in congratulating me upon my luck. But it was a pleasant attention, my friend attracted, however, so convinced me that he was the manager."

"I must say, however, that his demeanour was that of a perfect gentleman, and that he without the scrutiny to which a critic is usually submitted."

"''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."

"So we walked out together, and on the sidewalk he told me of the 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 drew me out of my seat."

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

"It was my first thought of the night before, a waiter at the place, who had served me al luncheon a hundred times. The man 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 in the theatre, and that I was a 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 I had brought to the theatre for a joke. I was so upset at the revelation that I couldn't make any comment, but concealed myself with several drinks. Meanwhile, my artist friend staggered to the chair opposite me, with a wry smile.

"'Awfully sorry, Potter, old boy,' he muttered. 'Couldn't get to the 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, he helped me on with my coat, and started for the door without a word, leaving the artist friend still back swathed 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 coming."

"''Yes, Joe. It was a good show.'"