JOHN HENRY AT THE THEATER

By George V. Hobart

FOR ME.

I was down on the card to lead a lady friend of mine to a New York theater where you can roll around in an orchestra chair at fifty cents a throw.

When a guy can buy a couple of cosy-corners in a dead swell theater for fifty cents per coze, he's a mark to blow four plunks to squeeze into one of those joints where they feed you on problem plays and fricassed pasts.

I figured it out that way, and stood pat.

That evening finds me in the parlor as usual. You know the parlor I mean. When a guy reaches that condition where he gives himself the careful glance and says, "Gee! I got to get shaved this evening!" you can bet there's only one parlor in the world for him.

I'm sitting on the sofa with one mitt lying carelessly on the family album and the other bunched around a 51.70 cane, when my lady friend floats into the arena.

There's a short-arm clinch, a break-away, and we're back in our corners.

"Oh, John Henry!" says my lady friend, giving her real hair a couple of taps and glancing out in the dining-room to see if mother was rubbering.

I tell you, boys, it's aces when your lady friend does that after a short clinch. There's nothing to it.

When a girl stamps her foot and talks with a tobasco lisp and says, "How dare you kiss me, sir? You are impertinent, sir!" it's a 30 to 1 shot that Gussie Gladtop, the ribbon clerk, who calls every Tuesday evening, first gave her an excuse for writing that libretto.

She's just dying to have you bite her again, but she handles her language wrong, and the four-flush call-down makes you back-pedal so hard that you grab your hat, and you find yourself saying day-day long before papa drops in with his usual bundle of benzine and an A-flat hiccough on the side.

For me the glorious creature who simply says, "Oh, John Henry!" and pats her temples to see if her Seven Sutherland Sisters happens to be mussed.

Anyway, after the bell rings I says to my lady friend, "If you'll tease a trolley with me, we'll be on our way to-morrow night to the theater!"

"Oh, how lovely!" says my lady friend. "I do so love to go to the theater. Where shall we go? Oh, I know! Let's go and see Sara Bernhardt! I'm just dying to see her!"

Up and away to the mines! Sarah Bernhardt at five plunks a chair and me scratching gravel to get my laundry back from foreign lands of a Saturday night!

"I'm just dying to see Sara!" says the Sweetest Thing Ever, and I'd be a small bunch of parsnips if I hadn't volunteered in the life-saving service then and there.

"Yes," I says to my lady friend, "I thought you'd like to see Bernhardt!" and all the time I'm giving this glad speech I'm going down the line mentally to see who will give me quick action on a steam-heated touch.

"I think it is awfully nice of you to ask me to see Bernhardt," says The Real Thing, throwing a goo-goo at me that settles everything. After a joyous glance like that I'm game to break into the box office and wrestle the keeper for the gate money.

Anyway, after a Labored Conversation with a friend, I'm helped to the price next day, and I patter away for the pasteboards. My lady friend togs out in her revelry rags, and I'm somewhat of a Big Event myself when we slide into the Gold-Bond building and reach out for Ten-Dollars' worth of amusement, hot off the griddle.

"Mercy me!" says my lady friend, after the curtain has been up awhile, "what are they talking about? I can't understand a word!"

I'm sitting there holding the funeral services over my ten plunks, so I'm not wise to what's doing on the stage.

"What's the matter?" I says.

"Listen!" says Clara Jane.

I listened. In a minute I was next. The trackwalkers on the stage were talking Dago! Dago, mind you! and me just after putting on mourning for my ten plunks!

"Oh!" they're doing the trick in French," I says, offhand, just as though I paid my car care in French every morning.

Say! I don't know enough about French to find Paris on the map—honest, that's straight! But I'm thinking of my dear departed ten, so I makes the play!

"What are they saying now?" says the Proposition in Peaches.

Right there was where I fell in the cellar.

"Bon gre de la tour be jee!" I says, handing her the hottest accent that was ever turned loose.

"Oh, John Henry!" says my lady friend. "Why, I didn't know you could speak French! How lovely! What does it mean in English?"

MUST GET A SHAVE FOR TONIGHT.

It was up to me to make good.

"It means," I says, "that Sara is handing a call-down to the old guy that looks like a cheese sandwich. She says to him, 'See here! you've got another bun on! How dare you trail into my flat with your tide high enough to float a battleship?'"

"That doesn't sound very poetical," says the Extreme Limit.

"It isn't political," I says, "but it's the goods, all right. 'Bon gre,' that's French for a bun, and 'de la tour' means the rest."

That was where I caught step with my finish.

I had to translate everything that was said on the stage, and I couldn't even pronounce the name of the piece they were playing.

All I could do was to remember some of the swell language I had heard at other play joints, and I rushed them at my lady friend so fast that she hadn't time to decide that I ought to be on my way to a foolish house.

When Bernhardt addressed a lot of French supers I used up a bunch of tickle-your-fancy language that May Irwin hands to her rib-racked audiences, and my lady friend stood for it.

"HOW DARE YOU?"

When Coquelin pushed out his chest and jawed every one in sight, I threw my whole soul into the translation and handed my lady friend a line of talk that I heard in a burlesque at "The New York." Coquelin made an awful hit with my lady friend. If I could have remembered more of those good things Coquelin would have been aces with her ever after.

When Coquelin and Sara got into one of those short-arm duets, I sprung some of Florodora on my lady friend. She seemed to like it. Especially when I handed her some of Edna Walnace Hopper's epigrams, with a short line of talk from Tommy Ryley and a side-speech here and there from Ed Rosenbaum. I hated to do it, but I was in up to my neck, and I couldn't holler for help. No one in the audience would have responded. They were all too busy making the same bluff that I was. Even the ushers were trying to applaud with a French accent.

I never lost ten plunks so hard in all my life.

Before the first act was over I had Sara talking about a sure cure for rheumatism that I read in an almanac, and I had Coquelin reciting the "Charge of the Light Brigade."

It was a hot evening—for me!

Before the second act was half through I went off my dip. I was nutty from pit to dome. I had enough bum French in my topknot to start one of those sit-back-hold-tight table d'hote places, with wine at 40 cents a grab.

It was fierce.

But it was all off when I put Sara into Mother Goose. That was the last camel. My lady friend wouldn't stand for it when I told her that Bernhardt was saying "Old Mother Hubbard, she went to the cupboard." She thought I was stringing her. I guess I was.

I told her that the French had gone to my head. Clara Jane said I looked pale, and hadn't we better go home; she had enough, anyway!

I'll bet she had. I'll bet four dollars my lady friend had the worst play, bar none, that was ever adapted from the French. That's what she had, and I had such a headache!

After we paddled off home my lady friend said she didn't exactly understand the plot of the play, but she'd be glad if I got the book and read the rest of it to her.

Me!—off to the woods! Me!—to the tall timber till she wakes up! No more glad tidings from the French for me. My lady friend is the Whole Output, but she'll have to get out of her trance and take me without mayonnaise dressing.

I was a lobster to sit in the game, but I'm not pate de foie gras enough to stay there after my feet get cold.

The next time I trot with my lady friend to the theater it will be to "The New York," where they talk plain United States, and where you get two cosy corners at 50 cents a throw!

Believe me!

Yours, on the griddle,

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