

CAST FOR A THINKING PART

BY HOWARD FIELDING.

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In theatrical parlance the supernumerary who speaks no lines, but merely appears upon the stage, plays a "thinking" part. Usually he is seen only a few minutes, and he himself beholds but little of the performance, a fragment of a scene, the backs of the principals as they declaim to the audience, action without meaning to him, since he knows not the context. He could not tell the story of the drama of which he is so small yet an essential part.

Such being the fact, let me introduce to you Mr. Wallace B. Tinkham. Do not fancy that Mr. Tinkham is connected with the theatrical profession. He keeps a store in Rutledge, Vt., the best store in the place, quite good enough, in fact, for a city.

A few years ago, when human existence was not so strenuous, Mr. Tinkham would have been called an ordinary man. His life moves evenly along, and he is happy in a quiet way, proud, too, of his commercial reputation and of his wife and children and well ordered home.

Mr. Tinkham had been in New York for a couple of days buying stock for his store. His business done, with the exception of one small matter which must be completed on the morrow, he found himself with an evening on his hands, and he decided to go to a theater.

All the plays mentioned in a list of amusements in an afternoon paper were equally unknown to him, so he selected "The Christian" for the sake of its name. He was fortunate enough to secure a good seat on the center aisle, and there he bestowed his ample form much earlier than was necessary and awaited with serene patience the rising of the curtain.

At last the orchestra began to play, and Mr. Tinkham, whose mind had been in Rutledge, Vt. became suddenly conscious that his body was in New York. He experienced an almost boyish sensation of pleasure; it was so seldom that he went to the theater. He wished that his wife and children were there, especially his daughter, who always enjoyed everything so much. Then the play opened, and Mr. Tinkham was transported to the Isle of Man.

About this time two persons were ushered to seats behind Mr. Tinkham, but he was so intent upon the drama that he was unconscious of their arrival. They were a man and a woman, obviously New Yorkers both. The man was tall, dark and nervous—so nervous, in fact, that the quality is rightly included in a description of his personal appearance. His face was not handsome, but it bore the stamp of fierce earnestness, which lent a fascination to his irregular lines. He had a habit of holding his head eagerly forward, as if he were restrained only by a cord fastened to the back of his collar—the attitude of a hound held in leash. His hair had turned gray in an irregular fashion that came near being a disfigurement; it was so palpably the result of hasty living.

The woman was young and of very attractive, high bred appearance, marred only by a restlessness not like and yet akin to that of her companion. Her dress was not especially conspicuous, but the value of all that she wore, including her jewels, was about equal to the expense of Mr. Tinkham's household for seven years, and he lived well.

"We were mad to come here," said the woman. "Some one we know is certain to see us."

"A little additional gossip about us won't make any difference," said the

man. His left ear was as good as any man's, but the right one was a bit dull. When the people on the stage lowered their voices, Mr. Tinkham naturally turned his good ear toward them.

This movement was misinterpreted by the lady behind him, who was deeply interested in her own affairs and not at all in those of John Storm and Glory Quayle. She saw that Mr. Tinkham had shifted his position for the purpose of hearing better, and she supposed that the ear turned toward herself was the one that was doing the work. On the contrary, the gentleman from Rutledge had really placed himself in the least favorable attitude for listening to her.

"Never mind him," said the young man with the gray hair. "He doesn't know who we are."

"Well," said she, "what were you going to say?"

"Only this," he replied: "It seems providential that your aunt is going to Europe just at this time."

"Providential is rather a queer word for it. Don't you think so?" said she.

"Oh, you take this matter altogether too seriously!" he declared. "The fact is this: I must go abroad. You and I



THE STRUGGLE WITH THE COLLAR BUTTON. are very good friends. It would please me more than anything else in the world if you could go across at the same time and be somewhere near me on the other side."

"On the contrary," said she, "the fact is this: My husband is much absorbed in business and is beginning to grow old. He enjoys my society. He would do anything in the world to please me, but the life he likes to lead is rather dull for me. Therefore I am tempted to go abroad; to run about on the continent having a good time and doubtless enjoying a great deal of your amiable companionship. Viewed in one way, the plan is entirely innocent; viewed in another, it is selfish and wicked, for it is desertion of a man who has given me his name, his wealth, his heart and everything that a man can give a woman."

Then the young man with the gray hair turned about in his chair until he faced his companion. He put his elbow on the chair back and shielded his face with his hand so that no one behind him could read the motion of his lips or the expression of his countenance, and he began to prove that black was white and that darkness was daylight. There was a fascination in his subtle eloquence and in the intensity of his earnestness. As he spoke the woman seemed to see that selfishness was a virtue and the ordinary self sacrifice which makes life possible a folly and a superstition. Why shouldn't she run away and play like a child? It was her husband who was selfish if he wished to deny her the pleasure.

Mr. Tinkham heard not a word of all this. The play absorbed him. He twisted about in his seat like a boy at the circus and finally succeeded in dislodging the stud which held his collar at the back. The band of linen crept up in the usual way until it tickled the back of his head, while his tie got under the collar in a most annoying fashion. He experienced, besides, the usual embarrassment, and presently his big, fat hands were trying to repair the damage.

The lady saw this out of the corner of her eye, and her attention was distracted. It is impossible to watch a human creature struggling with a refractory collar button and not take interest in the game. One may take sides with the man or with the collar button, but one cannot be indifferent.

The young man did not notice Mr. Tinkham's struggles, but he observed the division of his companion's attention. It is extremely disquieting to address the half of a person's mind, especially when one does not know what the other half is doing.

"Listen to me," said he. "What earthly reason is there why you should not take this little vacation? You are tired of New York. You are not happy at home. New scenes, new faces, will do you good."

"My excellent friend," said she, "you know and I know that this sort of thing is the beginning of scandal. The

coincidence of our departure will be noted and commented upon."

"Then I will take another steamer."

"In that case why go at all," said she—"that is, from your point of view? I shall not see much of you abroad. You will go to Vienna, where your mother is ill, and surely I will not follow you."

"Wherever you are," said he, "there I will be."

"You have put your finger upon the difficulty," she answered. "I do not trust in the discretion of your friendship. I hardly believe that you wish to be discreet. It seems sometimes as if you deliberately planned to have our names unpleasantly associated."

Here was a dangerous place, and the young man knew it. Dealing with a woman whose most notable characteristic was her amazing frankness, it was imperatively necessary to avoid the suspicion of double dealing. He threw his whole soul into the argument, and she felt his power as never before.

But just at that moment the affairs of Mr. Tinkham also reached a crisis. His struggle with the collar button was on the very verge of success when brutal failure stepped in and crushed all hope. The button slipped from his fingers. It wriggled itself out of the buttonhole, and in a moment it was sliding coldly down his spine. Frantically he strove to reach it. For a few desperate seconds his fingers touched the elusive bit of metal and turned it about like a wheel. Then it went one degree lower and was lost forever.

The lady saw all this and for a moment forgot that there was any such place as Europe or anything to be decided in the world except the fate of Mr. Tinkham's collar button. She was blessed with a lively sense of the ridiculous, and not even the hypnotic power of her companion could wholly overpower her desire to laugh.

The young man saw this and fancied himself ridiculous in her eyes. That is the one thing against which such a man's nature is not armed. The mirth in her glance parried his eloquence and made all his weapons powerless. When she laughed, he felt himself beaten, and he lost his temper.

Then she saw him for a moment as he really was. A rough word in the midst of all this smooth persuasion was a message straight from his ruthless heart, and his anger at her that she made game of him, as he thought, showed her how he valued her.

It all passed in a moment. She gave no sign of perceiving that anything of consequence had happened in the little drama they were playing. With an almost imperceptible gesture she drew her companion's attention to Mr. Tinkham, the supernumerary, where he sat playing his thinking role and quite unconscious of his value in the scene.

The young man with the gray hair saw that he had made a mistake, and he hastened to repair it, but such mistakes are seldom repaired at all. The action of life dramas hangs upon them, for in real existence, as upon the stage, the important thing in the play is the revelation of character.

The curtain fell, shutting off the view of the old Manx castle, and then it rose, revealing quite a different scene. The lady declared that she must watch the second act, and sometimes she did so, and again she watched Mr. Tinkham, with a dim appreciation of the service he had rendered her.

It was impossible after that for the young man to resume his argument in favor of a European tour without reminding the lady of the way Mr. Tinkham had struggled with his collar button, and who could be serious with such a thought? Moreover, Mr. Tinkham did not cease to be annoyed by the collar that would not stay down. At one time he tried to fasten it with a pin, and bloodshed followed, to the lady's great amusement.

The play was nearly done before she would consent to be serious, and then

FORSHADOWINGS.

We may not look across the misty life
Or hear or feel the breath of passing wings,
Yet seen and unseen scarce their fringes wide,
And nature teems with clear forshadowings.

Nat in wild storms of crashing thunder rung,
But in deep silences that brood about,
Without a word from liping lip or tongue
She cheers the faith that wrestles with a doubt.

From brown cocoons the winds have tossed and whirled,
Broad wings of gold beat up the viewless air,
And dry seed germs that wander round the world
Are quick with strange unfoldings rich and rare.

The shaded beetle bred in marshy fen
Transfigured soars above his risen shell
On flashing wings before the gaze of men,
A royal birth, a living truth as well.

And still, sweet voices speak the ages through:
No germ is lost, but lives forevermore,
The seed unfolds to fairer life anew,
And from the dust strong pinions mount and soar.

—Zion's Herald.

RINGS ON YELLOW PINES.

Two Circles of New Fiber Blending Into One Mark Each Year.

"It is very curious to note the successive growth circles of our yellow pines," said a veteran lumberman from the Pearl River district. "Until my attention was especially directed to the subject by a forestry expert a few years ago I had no idea that the markings were so beautifully clear and distinct. The tree acquires two rings of new fiber every year, one in the spring and one in the fall, but they blend together and form a single, well defined circle."

"During the first ten years these successive accumulations are of about equal thickness, and for the next two decades the diminution is very slight, but after that the rings become thinner and thinner, and when the tree gets into the eighties and nineties the growth is very slight indeed—in fact, a mere film. Nevertheless the ring is always formed as long as the tree lives and can be clearly discerned with a glass after it ceases to be visible to the naked eye."

"During the visit of the expert to whom I referred we cut a good deal of timber on my place ranging between 16 and 18 inches in diameter. 'That tree is 125 years old,' he would say, 'that one is 100, that is about 140,' and so on. Afterward we measured the growth rings with the instruments he carried, and in every instance he had hit the age within a few years. It seemed wonderful, but was simply the result of experience combined with an accurate eye."

"There are some very ancient pine trees in the Pearl River district, and many of them figure in the traditions and folklore of the settlers in their neighborhood. There are a couple of such patriarchs on a tract near my mill, and when the standing timber of the place was recently sold I am glad to say they were especially excepted in the terms of the contract. It would have seemed like murder to some of the country folks if they had been cut down."—New Orleans Times-Democrat.

Performed Too Well.

"The man whom I shall marry," said the proud beauty, "must perform three tasks."

"Name the first," said the lover.

"Go and umpire a ball game."

He bowed and departed.

After two months he returned, having been discharged from the hospital cured.

"Name the second task," he said.

"Go and act as judge of the Asbury Park baby show."

Again he departed.

In a week he presented himself again.

"I owe my life to the Jersey police," he said. "Name the third task."

"Attend a meeting of a bicycle club and state which, in your opinion, is the best make of wheel."

He went and he returned.

"Dearest," he said, "I am still in the ring. At last you will be mine!"

"I have changed my mind," said the maiden. "In the first place, I could not marry a man of your present personal appearance. In the second place, I should be afraid to marry a man with such a record for pugnacity. Forgive me."

After thinking the matter over he forgave her. He thought he might as well do so.

And so they were not married.—Brooklyn Life.



HE DID NOT NOTICE HER.

she would merely shake her head and say: "No, no! This is all folly. I shall remain in New York, where I belong."

Presently the curtain fell for the last time. The audience crowded the aisles and slowly moved out. The young man was cursing his folly in not insisting upon going to some other theater when he had learned that all the boxes in this one were engaged. But the lady's mind was occupied with a desire to get a good look at Mr. Tinkham's face. She paused a moment in the foyer for that purpose. The gentleman from Rutledge, Vt., passed quite close to her, but did not notice her. He would have been interested to observe that, despite the difference in age and breeding and, above all, in dress, she looked a little like his eldest daughter. This is unimportant, however, as he did not observe it.

He was occupied with the confusion, the unfamiliar noises from the street, the painful glare of lights.

"I don't belong here," he was saying to himself. "Thank heaven, I'll be home tomorrow!"



TWO PERSONS WERE USHERED TO SEATS BEHIND MR. TINKHAM. man, not without a certain accent of satisfaction.

His companion did not share this view.

"Nothing that I have done, unless it may be this," said she somewhat coldly, "has given cause for gossip."

"You are very clever," he replied, "and that makes me wonder all the more why you should hesitate!"

"Hush!" she whispered. "That man in front of us is listening."

It happened that Mr. Tinkham suffered from an inequality in his audite-

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