

A YOUNG CHAP NAMED JONES

By DEEMS TAYLOR

THIS is not, strictly speaking, an interview. For in the case of a genuine interview the party of the first part approaches his victim with a definite object in view. He arms himself with a list of questions covering certain things he wishes to know, including the interviewee's past history and future aspirations, his opinions of himself and his contemporaries, and his favorite flower. Having obtained more or less satisfactory answers to these questions, he retires to tabulate the results.

In Jones's case I hadn't the slightest notion of what I wanted to know. I knew beforehand that Robert Edmond Jones had been chosen by the Russian Ballet to design the settings for its forthcoming new productions; I knew, too, that he is a young American who first attracted attention three years ago by his settings for some of Granville Barker's productions, and who has since done some remarkable settings for the inner scenes of "Caliban" and for "The Happy Ending." Knowing this, and admiring his work, I was curious to see him, and to talk to him; but I had no very clear object in view, no definite questions to ask. I just wanted to see what he was like.

I found him at a scenic studio over in the west sixties—a young man (not yet thirty, although he looks older) of medium height, slender, rather pale, with hair and beard of brownish red. A difficult man to describe accurately. He does not in the least resemble the picture of him on this page, yet I find it impossible to point wherein the portrait differs from the man himself. His hands are long and pointed, the sensitive hands of an artist.

He and another man, a painter, were standing before an enormous rectangle of jet black canvas—a drop evidently. Upon the inky surface were traced in chalk the outlines of a huge cathedral, flanked by clusters of ramshackle houses with peaked roofs. An area of several square feet was covered with an apparently meaningless smear of orange and violet. I asked Jones what it was.

"That? That's the back drop for 'Till Eulenspiegel,' one of the new ballets; they're doing it to Strauss's music. This is the market-place of Till's home town. Here's my original sketch for it"—and he picked up a small colored drawing of the scene. "You see, the cathedral and the houses are black against the sky—no details to speak of; just the outlines of things in bluish gray. The fore part

of the scene is treated in the same way. In front, at the left, will be a cloth merchant's booth, and I'll have nearly a quarter of the stage, around the booth, covered with bright colored cloths of every description. Stretching across the square, from the top of one house to the other, there'll be hanging a line full of wash—all blue, the brightest blue I can find."

I glanced up at the drop once more. While we had been talking, the painter, using the sketch as a guide, had been applying brushful after brushful of color, at random, it seemed.

"Step back," said Jones. I did. And suddenly the whole thing took on meaning. The streaks of paint turned into a sky, a strange, mad sky of pink and orange and gray and white clouds, whirling up, up against a background of lilac and violet and purple. What had been the ragged edges of this mass of color became the skyline of a row of houses. They were not the sober, perpendicular affairs that grow in real streets. They leaned crazily to the right and left; they swayed together drunkenly, with a "united we stand" air; from their absurd chimneys rose preposterous columns and spirals of sooty smoke; their roofs were not on straight. The thing was plainly impossible, but it was irresistibly funny.

COLORS SEEM TO SHOW UP BETTER IF THEY HAVE TO FIGHT FOR EXISTENCE.

"I'm glad you laughed," Jones was smiling contentedly. "It's exactly what I hope the audience will do when they see it. I'm hoping to get some of the spirit of 'Till Eulenspiegel' into this set. I want it to look as though the sky had exploded and the whole town had gone crazy."

"It does," I said. "Why is the canvas all black, to begin with?"

"That's a new scheme of mine—or rather a new application of an old one. It's been done in easel painting, but never before, I think, in scenery. Putting the colors on over the black seems to give them a peculiar brilliance. They seem to show up better that way. Somehow you get more out of them if you make them fight for their existence."

And it was so. The flaming sky seemed to possess a quality of light far beyond the mere brightness of the colors themselves, while the black bulk of the cathedral loomed up with a startling effect of solidity and relief. It was hard to believe that the scene possessed only two dimensions.

"I hope you won't mind my interrupting now and then to bother the painter," said the artist. He found two rickety chairs. "Sit down and we can talk."

He told how he happened to get the commission to design the setting for "The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife," the Granville Barker production that first made him known to New York.

"It was just luck," he said. "The Stage Society were planning to put on 'The Dumb Wife' and I was doing the scenery and costumes. Then Barker took over the production. I was one of the properties. He just inherited me. The other Barker sets followed 'The Dumb Wife.' I painted all the scenery for that myself, besides designing the costumes and building the properties."

That reminded me of a question to ask, a leading question. It was not a question that I particularly wanted to ask. I thought I knew the correct answer to it beforehand, anyhow. But it was a question that a lot of people do ask, indeed one that he had probably been asked before—perhaps a hundred and fifty times or so. I decided that I might as well do my duty and be No. 161. I asked:

"Isn't this new art of stage decoration primarily suitable for productions like 'The Dumo



Photo by Goldberg

"DRAMATIST, PRODUCER, ACTOR, SCENE PAINTER—WE DON'T MATTER ANY OF US. AT OUR BEST WE ARE THE MEDIUM THROUGH WHICH AN IDEA IS TRANSMITTED."

wife" and "Till Eulenspiegel," dramas whose man theme is itself fantastic and improbable?"

"Certainly not. I admit that in its present state of development it has been applied chiefly to settings of the character you mention. But that is the fault of us scene painters, and the producers, rather than of the art itself. I believe that many of the men who are designing this new style of scenery limit themselves unnecessarily. It's a great mistake to assume, as so many people do, that scenery of this school is suitable only for wild, exotic settings. If the new art of the stage isn't adaptable to any subject, any mood, then the new art of the stage will die, and deservedly."

"Have you tried to get away from the more bizarre side of it?" I asked him.

"Luckily, I have had to. The Barker productions and 'The Happy Ending' were more or less fanciful in spirit. But take the inner scenes of 'Caliban.' Here was a far different mood, and a different problem. I was confronted with the necessity of designing Shakespearean settings for use on a stage that was only six feet deep. Moreover, they were to be shown in the open air, before an audience that sat, part of it, more than a hundred yards away. That meant the entire elimination of detail. Those 'Caliban' sets were prac-

tically all a matter of simple planes and lights—colored lights.

"Between 'Caliban' and the Russian Ballet settings, moreover, I had to design scenery for a modern society comedy, a piece somewhat similar in locale and mood to 'The Boomerang.' Here was no chance at all to introduce any of the more fantastic features of the new art. I had to paint smart interiors. As a matter of fact, I didn't paint them at all. We simply built sets of walls with windows and doors in them, and then papered them and fitted them with hangings and furniture, just as you would decorate a real room."

SOME DAY THE AMERICAN DRAMA IS GOING TO GO BANG—AND LEAD THE WORLD.

"That doesn't sound much like the way an average 'commercial' manager would do it."

"It isn't. But the commercial manager is coming around. We're gradually getting him. We've got to, if the stage and stage decoration are to advance. We've got either to convert the commercial manager or eliminate him." Jones grinned. "Maybe we can convert him and then eliminate him."

He was silent for a moment. "Before long,"

he resumed thoughtfully, "we Americans are going to lead the world dramatically, I think."

"You mean we'll evolve a great school of playwrights?"

"I don't believe it will be a matter of evolution. It will come suddenly, I think. We are an imaginative people, a concise people. We think in terms of the dramatic. And we're gradually losing our self-consciousness. We're getting closer and closer to the real thing. Some day we'll just go bang, like that"—a wave of the hand—"and find we're leading the world."

Subconsciously he must have been watching the scene painter, for he suddenly called out to him:

"Don't touch that, Mr. Vincent." The painter had just added a great splash of vivid yellow to the sky. "That's exactly right. Leave it just as it is."

"You know," he resumed, turning back to me, "it's extraordinary the way he's caught my idea on this stuff. Of course, he isn't exactly an ordinary scene painter. He does easel work, too, and they use him here for the little details that require an expert knowledge of painting; he does pictures on walls, and articles supposed to be seen through shop windows—things like that. But, even so, it's amazing to see how he adapts himself to this new style. If you could see some of the stuff these people are called upon to do! Not that mine is better, necessarily; simply, the two styles are utterly opposed."

THROWING THE WORKMAN ON HIS OWN RESPONSIBILITY PRODUCES BETTER SCENERY.

"The way a scene painter usually works is to take the scene model and square it up, inch by inch, upon the canvas. Then, when he paints it in, he must follow the coloring and drawing of the model absolutely."

Paraphrasing it might be well to explain briefly the "squaring-up" process. The artist's original design is a tiny model of the finished scene, made to a scale of about 1/4-inch to the foot. The scene painter takes this, piece by piece, and by drawing lines across it divides it into a network of squares 1/4-inch across. He then divides the large canvas into one-foot squares and fills these in from the corresponding squares on the model, thus obtaining a perfect enlargement.

"Here, on the other hand," Jones continued, waving his hand toward the black drop, "the painter is thrown more or less upon his own resources. Vincent enlarged this, for example, freehand, taking no great pains to duplicate every line of mine exactly. The same with the painting. He follows the general scheme of the original, of course, but, not being guided by the squares, is bound to deviate somewhat in details."

"What is the advantage of that?"

"Why, he approaches the work with an entirely different attitude. He is responsible not only for the execution of the work, but partly for its conception. As a consequence, he takes a genuine, creative interest in it. Besides, he frequently gets accidental or experimental effects that are better than the original."

"It's all wrong, I believe, to assume that the artist's first design for a scene is perfect, and, therefore, sacred. After all, a scene is to be looked at on the stage and not in an artist's studio. Consequently when it comes to the actual making of the set certain defects are almost bound to become apparent that couldn't possibly be foreseen."

"Then you're not always certain of your effects?" I asked.

He laughed. "I should say not! There's no use pretending that we are. There was a scene in 'The Happy Ending,' for instance. It showed a rainbow, and the thing looked beautiful in the model. But when we got the set painted, and up—well, that rainbow looked ex-

actly like a slice of watermelon. It had to be done over.

"The point is," he went on, "scenery isn't architecture. The lines and dimensions indicated on an architect's plan of a building must be followed implicitly, otherwise the building wouldn't stand up. But that fact is a limitation, not a virtue. Suppose you could change the skyline of a building overnight if it didn't look right when you came to put it up? In the case of scenery you can do just that. Why not do it?"

"That, I think, is the outstanding feature of this so-called 'new art' of scene painting—flexibility, a certain sketchy and impromptu quality that enables it to fit into the dramatist's plan with a minimum of friction. We don't lay a scene out once and for all and then assume that it is beyond change. We experiment, and also and fit . . ."

"The ideal arrangement, from the scenic point of view—in fact, the only satisfactory one—is the repertoire theatre, with its own scenic studios. There are plenty of these in Europe, and it wouldn't surprise me to see one here. In such a theatre the scene designer would be a permanent member of the staff, like the actors and the executive force. He could experiment, studying the effect of his scenery in performance, changing it from one day to another until he had evolved something that approached what he wanted."

He sighed. "It all looks very simple and easy when it's finished, but you get to worry pretty hard to get it right, to get it decorative and harmonious and still not intrusive."

"The best scenery, to my mind," he continued, "is virtually invisible. The nearer it comes to fulfilling its proper function the less the audience will notice it during the performance."

"You mean that it should merely form a perfect background for the actors?"

"No; not exactly. The actors are not important, either. Nor is the dramatist, for that matter. It's only the play itself, the underlying idea, that matters. What is a dramatist, anyhow? Just a man who gets hold of an idea that's bigger than he is. And he generally spoils that."

"What is holding back the development of the stage is the fact that the people concerned

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TILL'S TOWNSPEOPLE AREN'T MUCH ON LOOKS, BUT THEIR CLOTHES MAKE UP FOR THAT.



TWO OF THE "TILL EULENSPIEGEL" COSTUMES. (From Designs by Robert Edmond Jones.)

Continental literature abounds in plays and stories illustrating the European peasant's passionate attachment to the soil which he owns or cultivates. It is his deepest instinct—the one touch of romantic idealism in his nature. The struggle in the minds of the Lutheran peasants of the Tyrol, forced by the House of Hapsburg to choose between expulsion from their homes and renunciation of their faith, forms the theme of Karl Schoenherr's noted historical drama, "Glaube und Heimath," which won the Schiller prize some years ago in Germany and the Grillparzer prize in Austria, and was warmly praised by the German Emperor.

The little sketch which follows, by Anna Gade, deals with this inmost sentiment of the German peasant's heart. The longing for home and its surroundings—for burial, even, in the familiar, cherished home soil—which possesses the minds of the country population of Germany, is pictured with unaffected and delicate sympathy. The appeal which the story makes is therefore universal. Its tragedy is the tragedy of thousands and thousands of German homes, from which fathers, brothers and sons have gone out never to return—to sleep their last sleep in far-off, inhospitable, alien earth.

A striking story by the same author, "The Last Greeting," appeared in The Tribune Sunday Magazine of June 25.

MONOTONOUSLY, with a peculiar metallic note, the voice of a woman pierced the gray silence of the early spring morning.

Huh! Hrrr!

Now inclining, now restraining. And besides her voice no other sound, nothing but the puffing and blowing of the two steaming horses, and over there on the wood's edge now and then the shrill call of a pheasant hen.

The woman, an apron over her dark dress, stepped with a heavy, even gait over the soft earth of the furrows which the silvery-shining ploughshare cut in the hard, herb-scented soil. With the reins hanging over her shoulders she ploughed tirelessly, furrow after furrow, up

and down the field, the busy field crows at her heels. The silvery ploughshare loosened layer after layer of the fat, black-brown soil and turned it smoothly to one side.

The woman's eyes were fixed on the furrow which stretched crumbling before her feet. Only when she turned dexterously at the upper end of the field her glance strayed expectantly in the direction in which the big, straw-roofed gable of her house, with its crossed wooden horseheads on the ridge, loomed through the early morning mists.

Had Klaas Brookmann come yet? It was a long way from the village to the lonely farm, to which Peter Karstens had years ago brought her, that she might become a loyal helpmeet in his life and labors and might bear him inheritors for the land of his fathers. Guarded by ancient oak trees, the house lay in a dull silence. One would not have thought from its stern exterior that warm, young life pulsed beneath its roof, that childish voices laughed there as silvery as the peals of tiny bells—laughed despite the fact that war, the implacable, had also here knocked imperiously on the door and converted the tranquil cheer which customarily ruled behind its walls into anxiety and apprehension.

But Wiebke Karstens had clenched her teeth and had refused to let herself be conquered by circumstances. A woman's strength was wiry and a woman's shoulders were elastic. Though husband and farmhand were gone, war, with its needs, had doubled her capacity. It blessed the hand of the woman who courageously guided the plough and carefully sowed the seed.

As Wiebke Karstens cut her last furrow a flaxen-haired boy came toddling along a path which led from the house across the field. In his hands were a little gayly painted tin pail and a broken wooden spoon.

A light came into the woman's eyes. It was her youngest, her Peterkin. He had found things tiresome at home. With fearless confidence the little fellow walked close by the horses in order to nestle at his mother's knee. She tenderly stroked his blond head and then bade him go off to one side. Obediently he stepped away and squatted himself down on the edge of the field, where in childish sport

HOME SOIL

By Anna Gade. Translated, with Introductory Comment, by William L. McPherson

he shovelled the dark brown earth into his gayly colored bucket.

But the woman looked up again with a new start of surprise. The blood rushed to her heart. Wasn't that a blue and red cap bobbing up and down behind the bare row of birches over yonder? Yes; it was he—Klaas Brookmann, the crippled letter carrier. Had Peter written at last? He had never before let her wait so long in suspense.

Yet one ought not to despair too soon. Such a letter might easily go astray. Despite the anxious care which robbed her of sleep by night and preyed on her strength by day, she still cherished a consoling hope, an inextinguishable confidence. Perhaps he would soon come home himself, on a furlough, for sowing time, quite unannounced, as the eldest son of one of the village families had done, just to surprise her!

She knew that although he had answered the call of the King with loyal fervor every fibre of his being drew him homeward—not only to wife and children, but also to the soil, to which he was attached with all a peasant's passionate affection, with a love which was all the deeper because it never passed his lips, because it never clothed itself in any outward expression.

On that golden, sunny morning when he had taken leave of her, what had he said to console her, his face set and pale, but his lips smiling?

"Don't worry; weeds are hard to kill."

He would come back; he certainly would come back. He in alien soil? He never could find rest there. The good Lord would not permit that. And he himself had motioned to the inscription carved over the house door:

"Lord, bless us in our work, And bless graciously all we do.

And allow us to rest at last in peace In our native earth."

Yes, she hoped and trusted that the Lord would grant the pious prayer written over the portal of the homestead.

How he would be amazed, her Peter, when he came back and saw what her woman's arms had accomplished!

Trembling with impatience she stands there. How slowly the old man hobbles along—much too slowly for one who is awaited with so devouring a longing; who with the scantiest postcard from the front can change the torments of sleepless nights into rejoicing and buoyant confidence into the darkest weep.

She called out to him cheerily. Had Peter written?

Klaas Brookmann did not answer at once. That is the way with age—indifferent, stolid, understanding no longer the feverish anguish of waiting. Slowly and stiffly he felt around among his letters, while the wife's gaze fastened in grim suspense on the unsightly leather covers of his postman's bag. Suddenly it occurred to her how black and forbidding was the bag, as forbidding as—yes, as the fate which it carried hidden in its depths.

Klaas Brookmann nodded at last, reluctantly drew a letter out and handed it to her.

"I think there is something in that about Peter."

Then he limped away, much faster, as it seemed, than he had come.

The wife stands motionless in the soft ground of the furrow, the reins still hung about her shoulders, and stares with paralyzing fear at the envelope which bears her name. That unfamiliar, vigorous penmanship—it certainly was not her husband's. Then she sees it for the first time. The name of Captain von Wisnikow is written on the back of the envelope.

Her face has become deadly pale. With shaking hands she opens the letter and reads it mechanically, almost without comprehending what the strange officer has written to her, the simple peasant woman. Painfully she puzzles out the handwriting, even to the end, where it says:

"Be satisfied, dear madame, that we mourn him from our hearts! He, a simple soldier, and yet one of the best and bravest, rests now, together with two of his comrades, far from the home soil which he cultivated, in alien earth, yet in a grave most scrupulously and lovingly cared for."

"In alien earth."

She repeats it aloud, as though she must hear it in order to believe it. She understands first from those three words that he of whose safe return she only a few moments ago was so confident will never come back to her.

Her glance wanders vacantly to the child near by. Her Peterkin an orphan! And he plays there so innocently and contentedly, with no idea of what has happened. The burden of her sorrow is so new. It shows itself at first in all its harshness, all its cruelty.

She stands there, her apron over her face, and does not know how long it is before she realizes that in spite of her own grief life still unfeelingly makes its demands on her. She collects herself, carefully puts the plough aside, softly calls the little boy and drives the horses home. She fills the hay racks, waters the horses, feeds the cows and pigs and trims the fire for the midday meal. The children, of whom the two older ones are at school, will all be hungry and must have something to eat. First come the imperious calls of life; afterward the luxury of grief for the fallen.

When all is finished she goes, taking the little one by the hand, into the low-ceilinged peasant living room. With vacant eyes she looks about. An envelope, with field post paper, lies ready on the table. Near by are pens and an inkstand, two brown paper cartons and a silvery white tin packing box, in which she had intended to send some fresh butter to her husband.

Then it comes over her again, the pain of her bereavement, in all its keenness and bit-

terness. Now he would need nothing more! Never again! She would never again be able to do anything for him. That seems to her the hardest blow of all. Oh, if she could only once more do something to please him! Sobbing, she sinks on the bench, throws her arms in despair on the table and lays her head on it.

The little boy stands by her, shy and frightened. Is mother in trouble? Softly he cuddles up to her, and as she only sobs more violently and he sees that his efforts at consolation are all in vain he turns quietly and patiently against to his play and his gayly colored bucket. He finally clammers on one of the wooden stools and looks for a while at the things which lie on the table.

The pretty white tin packing box, how it shines and glitters, just like his own little pail! He takes the case down—it is quite empty—and passes the time in filling it with the soft, dark-brown earth which he has brought home from the ploughed field.

Three weeks later.

"It was a pleasure to me [so wrote Captain von Wisnikow a second time from his station in the Argonne to Peter Karstens' widow] to be able to fulfil your urgent wish. Even if your dead husband had already found in alien earth a tranquil and peaceful sleep, his home soil will rest all the more lightly upon him. Your old pastor is quite right. To transport the body, since it does not lie in a grave of its own, would not be permissible, apart from the fact that it would involve many difficulties and a good deal of expense. As the burial ground in the woods is very close to our lines, I could all the more easily grant your request. I have had the contents of the boxes which you sent me strewn on the mound, and I return you, as a remembrance, a photograph of the grave and its surroundings. May it be a consolation to you in your grief! Now the gallant hero and father sleeps far from the fields to which he was attached with a true German peasant's love—and yet under his own native soil."