The Choruspondent by Jack Lait

THE director blew a fierce blast on his whistle; the perspiring pianist stopped mid-bar; the ponies of "Pep of 1922" balanced on their right toes, slowly dropped their left feet, and fell limply into at-ease to see what the monarch of the rehearsals had on his chest. And he let them have it:

"Listen, you flat-footed, flat-headed, bush-league hoofers—the name of this show is 'Pep,' not 'Sleep-walkers.' If that's the way you're gonna do the number the opening night, this troupe is closed now. Y'understand?"

Several of the ponies said, "Yes, sir," weakly—those who hadn't had more than a season or two at it; the veterans knew that that sort of questions neither expected nor required an answer.

"All right, then—if you got that through your numb nuts, see if you can radio a little of it into your dumb dogs—I oughta call 'em curs, at that. Now let me repeat it once more, an' for the last time.

"You do one-two an' left foot over front, then one-two an' right foot over back, then one-two downstage, then one-two upstage right zigzag, then one-two downstage left zigzag, then one-two an' right foot forward, then one-two an' left foot forward, then right foot cross down, then right foot back, then left foot cross up an' left foot cross down, then right face in two beats, each girl puts her arms around the girl in front of her an' off on a right foot skip, swingin' the left foot up on the down beats and down on the up beats. That's simple enough, isn't it? All right. Ready! GO!"

And they went.

It was a hot night in the empty theatre and it was late. Rehearsals had been sizzling along for more than two weeks, ten and twelve hours daily. The principals were doing theirs in another theatre—this was the chorus end of it. Pfister, the little genius who was "putting on" the new show, was a hard task-master.

No one else on earth could have talked to these little chorines as Pfister talked to them—and lived.

Not the owner of the theatre or the company, not a stranger or a star—least of all, the Johns who waited patiently outside the building for the tired girls to come out. The mildest of them would have bounced a chair off the dome of the most desirable Daddy had he said to her half of what Pfister barked at them all every ten minutes.

They adored him. They feared him, they groveled to him, they never talked back. They took his insults and his slurs collectively, and girls of the stage are, as a rule, sensitive, temperamental and spirited. But they never—even when he wasn't around—discussed his abuse in any other mood than to exclaim over his wonderful stagecraft, and each told the others that she would die for him.

When Pfister staged a revue it was a foregone verdict—a Broadway hit. He could pick girls and "size" them and train them into vibrant, synchronizing human machines. Besides, he had beneath the crust of the roughneck and the martinet the soul of an artist and the fine imagination of a poet. Many an author who writes a stuttering lyric with a feeble thought suggested in its trite jingle, thought himself a prodigy when he saw his verses dramatized and illustrated by a Pfister product of staging.

The little chap had an executive drive that got over, despite his incredible arrogance and brutal candor.

He had been everything that has to do with the bitter-sweet vicissitudes of the broad realm of entertainment, that profession of charlatanry and romance, of cold-blooded gyp and hot-blooded romance, of calculating machinations and desperate speculations, of over-night triumphs and lifelong heart-breaks and intense labor and high adventure and dirty work and glorious play and thrills and disasters and lights and fame and suicide and divorce and scandal and worship and friendship and hate and love and treachery and felony and virtue and shame and profanity and sentiment and flowers and poison and grease-paint and perfume and wrong-angled triangles and vicious circles and crooked lines and straight shooting and bohemia and Fifth avenue and Broadway and one-night stands and Wall street and the rialto and the levee and the upper crust and the underworld.

He had been a mustang rider and an animal trainer, a ballet master and a bit actor, a medicine show shill and a fly-by-night showman, a blackface minstrel and an art-theatre impresario, an orchestra drummer and a vaudeville monologist, a legit player and a burlesque ham. The theatre was his home, his workshop, his hunting ground, his stamping ground. He knew it from the picture frames in the lobby to the mail-rack at the stage exit.

And he knew its people. He was skeptical and he was tough, but he was soft inside, and he loved the girls he swore at, every last stupid, clumsy one. He lent them his money that he knew he'd never see again, he bawled out the sick ones and gave them vacations on pay, he knew their little heart-aches and bled with them though he had no mercy on their ankle-aches, and stormed at their inability to grasp a complicated manoeuvre that was so clear and so sharply defined in his own clicking brain.

He had known his romances with these girls. Yea—he had married one of them.

One of these little rascals that the public thought so cute and winsome, that he knew were so thick-skulled and thin-skinned, that newspaper editors pictured and shopgirls thought too grand for utterance, he had loved well enough to marry her.

Marriage was a confession of weakness to Pfister. Say—any chump could get a girl if he wanted to marry her!

But Dolores, a chubby little bobbed-haired blondie, who had come into his life as one of a drove of girls ordered in bulk, assorted sizes and complexions, and weeded out by the pound and the inch, had brought the mighty, canny, peppery Pfister to his knees.

He had married Dolores and she had retired. They had a little apartment in the theatrical district, where they lived as miserably and as acrimoniously as two madly loving souls may. For two years or so Pfister had endured the nagging jealousy, the whims and caprices, the unreasonable flights and the fisticuffs; and Dolores had suffered the nights of neglect and the days of hangovers and the unsparing verbal lacings and the black eyes and the red eyes of Broadway love.

They had known the embraces of mad affection and the separations of bitter hatred and the threats and the blows and the kisses and the split-outs and the reunions, all the hysterical joys and all the torrid griefs and all the cold, clammy remorses of the situation.

Pfister loved Dolores, but never believed her; Dolores loved Pfister, but never trusted him. And they were both right.

They broke up housekeeping for good and all at last, he convinced that she loved Harvey Toms, an actor, and she so satisfied that he had transcended the proprieties with Thelma Granby that she had sued him for divorce and named her as "the woman."

Thelma, too, was a pony, a yellow-headed little chrysanthemum with the eyes of a burglar and the dimples of a baby.

When Dolores entered suit against Pfister she went back to work. She registered with a bureau which supplied experienced choristers. And when "Pep" sent out a call, Dolores was one of those sent to answer it.

Pfister sat at an improvised desk on the stage, taking down names and addresses as he went through the raw material from which the first choice of the ensemble was to be drawn. He saw Dolores and Dolores saw him. In any other business on earth she would have run out of the building or he would have run her out. But the theatre is unique—its outside relations may operate it altogether or count for nothing. It isn't a business—it is a profession. Mrs. Pfister had an identity as the wife of Pfister; but Dolores Dale had an identity, also, as a known pony who had looks, speed, technical talents and stage presence. Maybe the fact that in "show business" almost everyone has two names, an "off" name and an "on" name, may have something to do with this.

However, Pfister took the names and 'phone numbers and weights and specifications of the strangers, and Dolores came up next in line.

"What's your number?" he asked.

She gave it to him. That was all the information he required—he had the rest of her "points" burned into his memory and engraved in his heart.

A few more filed in and up and by, and again he raised his eyes. And there stood Thelma. He hadn't seen her for some time. She had been out in a traveling troupe. Their eyes met. Pfister knew Dolores was looking—looking with those piercing black eyes that had once penetrated into his soul, that he had seen beckoning him on through inspired dreams and mocking him through agonized awakenings. But he never turned.

"What's your number?" he asked.

She gave it to him. That was all the information he required—he had the rest of her "points" still fresh in his mind's eye, and he had paid with blood and tears for the knowledge.

It wasn't through any maudlin sense of the dramatic that Pfister engaged both these girls for the front-line pony cast of "Pep." Pfister was just, and Pfister, above all, held one religion sacred—"the good of the show."

Dolores and Thelma were first-class steppers and lookers, dependable items; they had made good and they were reliable. The show couldn't have picked two more desirable ones anywhere. Now, just because one had been his wife and the other had been his sweetheart, was that any reason for cheating two eligible girls out of jobs or "Pep" out of two such girls? No. In they went.

"Tempo—One-Two an' Over. An' When You Put Your Arms Aroun' the Girl Ahead of you, Don't Be Afraid You'll Hurt Her. I Guess Most of You've Had Arms Around You Harder Than That."

And after that Pfister's life was not alone all the hell that it always was when he was in the throes of lining up a company and crystallizing a big show, but it was further complicated by the inter-relations and the inter-situations.

The night, this night, wore along. The grind was on, for the bosses of the show were to be over for a slant at the numbers in the penultimate rough next day, and Pfister wanted a showing of comparative readiness.

"Come on, there, you janes," he shouted. "How many times am I gonna tell you how to do this kindergarten step? Say, I could pick up a flock of scrubwomen and learn 'em more in an hour than I can get through your skulls in a year. It's one-two an' over—that's the tempo. Ever hear of tempo before? Tempo—time—t-i-m-e. It's from the Eyetalian, but to you it's a lot o' Greek. Tempo—one-two an' over. An' when you put your arms aroun' the girl ahead of you, don't be afraid you'll hurt her. I guess most of you've had arms around you harder than that, an' put arms around people harder than that. Now get to it an' DO it, or I'll give every one of you the air—every last ONE. An' I mean it.

"The people that own this show have got a hundred grand tied up in it. You think I'm gonna blow that for 'em, an' make a sap out o' myself in the p'fession after all the years I've been at it an' all the hits I've put on? Like hell I am. This show is gonna be a knockout. You may not be in it—any of you—but the show is goin' ON—an' the girls who go on IN it are gonna be on the job. Do you get that straight? All right—then come out o' your dope dreams an' let me see some action. It's one-two an' over—or it's ALL over. Take that straight an' swallow it. This is the last time I'll call you on it. Ready! GO!"

And they went.

Pfister looked down the line critically out of one eye from his post in the orchestra pit. The whistle stood up diagonally where he gripped it between his jaws. He swayed with the time as punctuated with over-emphasis by the thin jangle of the half-hidden piano that stood back almost out of light-range from the single stand-light on the stage. One-two and over they went, and through the figures up to the right face in two beats and the arms of each girl around the waist of the girl before her, then into the right-foot skip with the left going up on the down beat and down on the up beat and——

Pfister blew a shrill blast on his whistle. Everything stopped.

Every one stood, waiting to see what had gone amiss NOW.

"You," called Pfister. "No, not you, Angie—YOU—Yes, Dolores!"

"Yes, sir. What is it?" answered Dolores.

"That girl ahead of you. You know her, don't you?"

A burning blush spurted into the cheeks of Dolores.

"If you don't, I'll int'oduce you. Miss Dale, Miss Granby—Miss Granby, Miss Dale; Dolores, Thelma—Thelma, Dolores. Now that you girls have met—will you, Dolores, when you put your arms around her, please not be afraid you'll bust a couple o' ribs, or something?"

The tears welled to Dolores' eyes. She started one foot forward, toward Pfister, but she drew it back. Stage discipline did not permit of a girl walking out of the line at a rehearsal. And Dolores was a trouper in the bone.

"But"— she began.

"Never mind the buts. The number calls for it, an' you're in the number—so you'll DO it. Don' tell me you can't hug harder than what you've been doin'—I know better. An' don' tell me she can't be hugged harder than what you're doin'—I know better than THAT, too. Now, that settles THOSE arguments. And if you cry, Dolores, I'll run you right out o' this theatre and this show. This number is got to be done, an' it's got to be done RIGHT. Ready! GO!"

And they went.

There wasn't another whistle through the rest of the rehearsal of that dance, and before Pfister "went to" the next one he had seen it work as he wanted it.

The night ground along and finally the welcome "That's all—one o'clock to-morrow, practise clothes for ponies, two for show girls, mediums report at one at the costumer's for fittings an' here at two. G'night," came, and the girls wearily scrambled down the stairs to shed the polyglot variety of miscellaneous "practise clothes" and powder up and make up to bloom forth metamorphosed through the stage door, a set of smart, snappy, fascinating chicks and sirens instead of the perspiring crew of driven, sworn-at manikins.

As they came up they had individuality, they had personality. Cars awaited them, and important men sat in those cars. Big cafes with dazzling lights and little cafes with shielded lights and the mansions of the mighty and apartments where Japanese maids would tenderly and timidly remove their cloaks, awaited them; and tawdry little back rooms awaited some of them; a little flat with babies and husbands awaited some of them. The mob had melted into its integers of individuals, and among these individuals were as many social and financial and moral and ethical lines of differentiation as there might be among as many girls anywhere.

The chorus has a lure. It has many lures. It is the magnet for the girl who is ambitious to become an actress; it is a magnet for the girl who craves hectic admiration from strangers; it is the magnet for the girl who cunningly plots to attract rich men; it is the magnet for the girl who would rather earn $50 a week in a theatre than $12 at a cashier's window; it is a magnet for the frivolous flapper who wants to prance, half naked, in the light of the spot and the foots, where she will be admired and where she will be courted because of the mystic romance of stage life over all other life. All chorus girls are not alike off the stage. The gold-digger dances beside the Cinderella, the madonna steps with the jezebel, the adventuress smiles the same smile in the smile scene as the innocent washerwoman's ch'ld at her elbow, who brings her wages home so that her little brothers may go to school.

As they filed up and out, one by one, Pfister stood there, putting on his collar and tie. An inscrutable expression was on his face. A cigarette hung limply where the whistle had stood up so cockily.

Thelma came up. She saw Pfister, she hesitated. He called her with his head.

"How's ev'thing?" he asked.

"Oh, pretty good. Ma's kind o' sick again. Her rheumatism drives me off my nut, honey. Why don't you come over?"

"Not a chance. Thelma, it's cold. You knew that before you went away."

"Sure. I'm goin' with Taylor, of Taylor an' Kramer, on the Loew time. He says he's gonna put me in vaud'ville nex' season."

"Vaud'ville my eye. If you go an 'blow one o' MY shows I'll run you out o' the business."

"Oh, no. I'll stick for the run o' the play. You know ME. I mean after 'Pep' closes."

"That's better. Give my love to ma. If I can do anything"——

"Not a thing, thanks. We'll get by. Taylor is waitin'—g'night."

And up came Dolores.

She started to cross rapidly. She was dressed in a nobby little suit trimmed with the latest in monkey fur, costly but not extravagant, and, as everything about Dolores always was, in the best of good taste.

"Hey," called Pfister. "You!"

She stopped and turned—in two beats, and raised her right foot. Then she came to herself.

"Come here!"

And she came.

"Is that bum quartette-tenor you been sketchin' with outside?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"That's all off," she answered.

"Yeh? Since when?"

"The gate for him—a couple o' weeks ago. He started to run me. An' when anything in pants starts to tell ME where I head in at—well, I guess I don't have to tell YOU."

"No, I guess not. Say, Dolores—listen. You're one o' the gamest dames I ever met in my life. When I called you in front o' the whole troupe, an' made you hug Thelma—an' you DID it—say, when I pick one out o' the thousands o' crows I've handled an' I MARRY her, I guess I'm crazy, huh?"

"Crazy is right. You an' me both."

"You think so, Dolores? I guess so, at that. I'm crazy over you an' you're crazy over me. What do you say?"

"I say I am, an' I always will be. Will you tell me why, when a woman is dippy over a man like I am over you, an' he's daffy over her like I know you are over me, how—why"——

"It's this business, Dolores. It's rotten. But I love it, an' so do you. An' I can't blow it, an' neither can you. An' we can't blow each other, so what's the use?"

"No use," said she. "Come on home. And when we get there, I'll give you a little direction—the one-two an' over; an' who to hug an' how. Ready—GO!"

And they went.

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