

Stech and Paon, the Princess Ponies

By WALTER ANTHONY

IN THE aggregate, and together, there were just 230 pounds of vivacious soubrette assembled for a chatter at the Princess theater in Manager Lovrich's big office. They might have been overlooked in their extreme littleness by a hurried visitor but for the indicated chatter and the suggested vivacity, for there were two of them, Miss Olga Stech, the tiny soubrette, and Miss Frances Paon, who is a new and diminutive twinkler, too, at the house wherein music and mirth mingle to be alliterary.

The whirl of the rehearsal was just over. Both were somewhat breathless, but happy. Chances come, now and then, for something more remunerative and for posts higher in the scale of things theatrical, and when the chance turns out to have been encompassed successfully the ambitious ones are, naturally, jubilantly vocal.

So in this case.

Miss Olga, whose 16 years of mortal existence are not contradicted by her girlish face and half uncertain gaze, had made a hit Monday night, as the soubrette, and surprised the nerves of hearing at the size of her voice. We wondered where so much volume came from, though its sweetness was easier accounted for. One may speak so, I hope without offense, of a girl just turned 16. She smiled and beamed, and was happy. If she said little for publication it was perhaps due to recollections of recent childhood and to those admonitions frequently uttered about children being seen and not heard.

Miss Paon, not much larger, and no longer on the stage, volunteered to speak for her.

"Tell the public," said she, "that Miss Stech is the nearest girl in the world. She is no mere soubrette," continued the spokesman, "but she can sing." She "proudly as though responsible for the affair" is a

prima donna soubrette. And she's going to study and get out of her voice all there is in it, and she's going to—What are you going to do, Olga?"

"Stay here as long as I can. I love it."

"WE OCCUPY the same dressing room. But we can't wear each other's clothes, so there's not the smallest chance for quarreling," said Miss Paon.

It seems, indulgent one, that musical comedy girls are wont to swap clothes and shoes and things, without the knowledge or consent, sometimes, of the one who is getting the worst of the trade.

"Do you think I could wear her shoes?" I said I hadn't speculated on the matter, but was interested, whereupon I discovered Miss Olga's foot. I say discovered advisedly.

"Size, please?" (like a clerk in a shoe store.)

"Thirteen."

Do not misunderstand—13, children's size.

Miss Olga blushed as though the fact were, somehow, against her, and insisted that she couldn't ride on half fares, anyway. Which, I say, is a pity.

MISS PAON mothered the interview along gravely, like a very old, a very large person indeed. This encouraged, Miss Stech resumed.

One can not have a long story about themselves when one is only 16, but in Miss Olga's case the facts are more numerous because she has been on the stage since she was 9 years old. That is to say, she made her debut seven years ago, which, when you think of it, is quite a career.

"You'll never guess what I played first," she challenged.

"If I can't, then I'll give it up."

"Little Eva," said she.

I might have known it.

"My father was a Hungarian and my mother was a Russian," said the little soubrette, "and I was born in St. Paul. We moved when I was quite young to Butte, Mont., and it was there that my first stage entrance was made, in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' It was a stock company, and afterward I played kid roles as often as there was a part for me.

"The second night of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' I clean forgot my lines and I couldn't go on to save my life. So I stepped over to the footlights and leaped over to the manager's wife, who was seated at the piano to play the shivery music, and asked her with complete composure what my next line was. She told me, and the play went on. I think even then that I must have had the assurance of one who is bound for a stage career. At least I like to think that is the case."

After stock experience in Butte, Miss Stech played in English pantomimes, and then went to Los Angeles, where she was playing in a minor company when Charles Sinclair, stage director of the Princess, and Jack Raines, musical director of the company, heard her and threw the net of a contract about her. She was too valuable to lose. That happened during the sojourn of the Princess company in Los Angeles, and San Francisco, I think, may be reconciled to the six weeks' absence of the merry makers because they found this doll soubrette with the voice.

THOUGH Frances Paon is comparatively new to San Francisco playgoers she is not new to the profession; albeit her stage experience is not as long as Miss Olga's. She accepted a position in the chorus at the Princess before the company went to Los Angeles, and on its reorgani-

zation under Sinclair, whose policy seems to be to give everybody a chance, she was promoted to the cast, and Monday night she was one of the principals to win applause and flowers.

"Never mind," she said, "about this career business. Let me tell you an awful story."

"You know I played Mamie Clancy Monday night. It was my first chance before a San Francisco audience, and you can imagine whether I wanted to make good or not. I had played bigger roles and had made good in them, too, in Savage's productions; but this was my chance in San Francisco. That's how I forgot about the gum. Now Mamie Clancy without gum isn't near as 'tough' as she ought to be, and I just had to have gum. I don't suppose you'd call a mouthful of gum 'property,' so there wasn't any good asking the property man for any. It was between the acts, and I was racing around among all my friends begging for some gum. Then I saw Jerry Kenny. (She meant Gerald Kenny, who plays the trombone most excellently well and who is a friend in need.—Ed.)

"Well, Jerry's jaws were working reassuringly.

"Give me that gum," I commanded.

"He was so surprised that his mouth opened, the gum fell out, I caught it and I got my needed 'prop.'"

"Did you give it back to him afterward?" I inquired earnestly.

"Naw."

"Why?"

"I got so excited on the stage that I swallowed it."

AND now I will tell you another awful story.

It was my first appearance on the stage, too. Never had been in the glare

of the footlights before. But I knew I was destined to be a great tragedienne, or something like that. It was in Boston, too.

"Mrs. Fiske came to town with a production that needed 'supers.' I can't remember what the play was, I only saw it once. But I got a job as a 'super' for 50 cents a night. I was about the smallest spot in the mob, but I was 50 cents' worth of mob, at that, I thought. They gave me some tight and things, which I struggled into. Now I don't mind telling you I was not—how shall I say it?—Well, anyhow, I attempted to overcome what shortcomings nature had been guilty of with reference to myself by taking some towels and wrapping them symmetrically where I thought such treatment would render the best account to beauty.

"Looking down on the job I pronounced it good, and gathering courage went upon the stage to join the mob.

"I'll never forgive the girls who let me make a sight of myself.

"Pretty soon the scene was on. Mrs. Fiske was declaiming grandly, while I edged up front, for two reasons—I wanted to let the people witness a debut which was to become historical later on, and I was hypnotized by Mrs. Fiske's eloquence. I'll bet my mouth was open, and that my eyes bulged out. It was a tremendous moment. As I emerged from the center of the mob the house saw me, and roared. The stage director nearly lost his wits at the apparition I made. But I didn't see or hear anything but Mrs. Fiske, and the glare which like a curtain hides the audience from the players.

"Get her back! Get her back!" implored Seymour, the stage manager. "Pull her out of sight!" He wept and tore his hair. The girls around me enjoyed it and wouldn't 'put me wise.'

"Finally I edged so far front that Mrs. Fiske's gaze fell on my adoring person. She was commending the mob to 'be gone.' She turned a horrified gaze on me, and pointing

my way shouted, 'And you!' Then I woke up. Seymour grabbed me as a cat grabs a wriggling mouse.

"Go down stairs," he roared at me, "to your dressing room and take those things off. Then come up here and get your 50 cents; and if anybody ever tells you that you can act you run like h—l."

"As long as Mrs. Fiske was in town I passed that theater on the other side of the street.

"But afterward I got my confidence back.

"Mr. Raines was in Boston with 'Peggy From Paris.' He was the musical director and I worked up courage enough to go and ask him for a position in the chorus.

"Can you sing?" he asked.

"I told him that I could, and he heard me to.

"Then I sang a scale. It was an awful scale.

"You say you can sing?" he asked, after the spasm had ended.

"Sometimes," I qualified.

"Guess this isn't one of your best days," he told me cheerfully.

"Anyway," he said, "you're just about crazy enough to try anything, and I'll give you a chance. We will see what you can do with Tessie Higgins. Act just as crazy as you can."

"I did, and played it for a season with the Savage road company. I understudied the role of Sophie Blotz and then had engagements in good roles with Joseph Hall in 'Ermine' and in 'Jack and the Beanstalk.' After that with Raymond Hitchcock in 'The Yankee Tourist,' and now I'm here with lots of ambition and the hope that my chance has come and that I'll be equal to it.

"My ambition is to be a comedienne. I like to make people laugh; I like to help in the measure of the world's misfortune, which isn't too great at best, and when I feel that an audience is enjoying the fun I forget I'm working."

A MOST UNUSUAL TROUPE TO INTERVIEW

THE troupe was gathered together in the dressing room for the interview. I was too bewildered to count their number, and they were too occupied in taking my measure to display that formality of politeness which usually accompanies introductions under similar circumstances.

It was a very embarrassing moment, so far as I was concerned.

To be led directly into the presence of players you have discussed freely in public—without having ever met any of them—and moreover, to be unable to recall on the second what one has said about them, are circumstances calculated to render embarrassment inevitable.

It is very difficult, sometimes, for a theatrical reviewer to justify, in the presence of the individual performer, certain things said late at night under the glare of an incandescent light and in the hurry and worry of hammering typewriter keys to the end that "copy" may be rushed through mysterious processes wherein the thoughts one thinks he thinks are made to mock him next day in a column of more or less readable matter.

With thoughts such as these, confusing and jostling half made apologies for anything amiss I had ever said, I was introduced.

Jessie (or one they called Jessie) threw a somewhat. Imagine my surprise! Jack came forward sullenly and sniffed around as though he were hunting trouble. Fitz lifted up his voice and crowed, "Peanuts" (an odd name at that) squealed derisively, Less and Bill (I never saw such exhibition of boorishness) turned away and paid no more attention to me than as though I were the house manager.

Thereupon, and on the instant, a din set up such as even an Italian opera company in a quarrel over the honors of the billboards could not have equaled. Not that this troupe of the Farmyard circus was disturbed because their names were not printed and pasted on the bulwarks of many vacant lots. This troupe at

the Orpheum was clamoring for dinner and paid no further attention to me—a courtesy, by the way, as Samuel Watson, their trainer and master, explained. Their attention, it seems, is not always of a nature to be kindly remembered. That fact one may well believe, in the face of the bull terrier Jack's quite unforgiving and very forbidding countenance, and the little lightning-rooster Fitz's energetic pecking at every object, animate or otherwise, within reach of his active and comb topped head.

"Oh, but Jack," Watson hastily explained, "is the kindest and most benevolent of dogs. He wouldn't bite you for the world."

But one does not always do things for worldly gain. Many a fight has been waged merely for honor—that is to say, for sentiment; and Jack, who holds with a cavernous mouth full rowed with ossifications the coat of the fat policeman in the show, might, I feared, have conceived a sentiment relative to dramatic critics similar to that entertained by other footlight prowlers. However, Watson was firm on the point of Jack's unyielding good humor.

"Why," said he, "Jack is the very soul of bull terrier honor. Many times when I was training him, and with back turned, encouraged him to grab hold where he should, he has missed his aim. He would discover his mistake as quickly as I felt it, and his remorse and chagrin for his clumsiness robbed me at once of all resentment. He would let go instantly and sneak away in a piteous condition of shame and contrition."

All the same, under those precise conditions, I'd rather be the dog with the contrition than the man with the misplaced teeth prints.

BUT Fitz, the red cochin rooster, fights on purpose. He is very ill natured indeed. His is no docile disposition like Jack's. He hates the world and would devour it if he could.

Watson takes advantage of this vicious disposition

and bears with fortitude the injured hands that bear mark of Fitz' distinguished hatred. One thing, Watson didn't have to labor over him for 18 months to teach him to do what his nature yearned to do from the moment he cracked his shell and stood a triumphant though somewhat comical fact opposed to creation. When Fitz makes his plucky fight with Watson he means it, and would, if he could, tear a cheek or take out an eye. So Fitz enjoys but little freedom here below, and his conviction that the world is against him grows stronger every day. He is like those men we see who become anarchists because everything always was at crosslines with their lives, and he is happiest when most wretched. He seldom crows.

Watson told me it took him about 18 months to train his other roosters. One marvels at patience so stupendous, and one could almost wish it had been to training men to do useful things.

YOU may think that Chocolate and Grandpa—those are the names of the little and big rooster, respectively, which—I nearly said "who"—do the competitive crowing—I say you may think that they crow because they understand the verbal instruction and encouragement of their master. You may think that when the little fellow standing on his pedestal shouts, like a second Phoenix might have shouted, he does it to please the man who feeds him; or that when the big Plymouth Rock gentleman called appropriately Grandpa, because he is so gray and toothless, utters his hoarsely defiant note, he does it because Watson urges him to the contest. But he doesn't. The two rasals only want to be fed. Like obstinate children they are amenable to the reason that lies in a tangible tidbit. With the roosters it's corn.

When they are babies, hardly free from the pieces

of their broken shells, Watson begins. There are the two pedestals from which later the barnyard stars are to address future multitudes; there are the two birds, and there is Watson. He begins by tossing the stupid fowls, one at a time, on their respective pedestals. The first time that one of them crows, which ultimately he must do, Watson gives the singer some corn and considers the lesson only just begun. It may be days before the rooster does his first crowing on the pedestal, but Watson's patience is ultimately rewarded and the rooster will crow again. Then he gets some more corn. In the course of 18 months, if the bird is bright, it will dawn somewhere (in his gizzard, I guess) that there is some mysterious coincidence between his landing on the pedestal and crowing and getting some corn or wheat. Thereafter he will mend his ways and soon will be crowing every time he lights fluttering on the stand. From that time until he learns that not every time, but the last time he is tossed he will get his food, the way to his complete education is easy. For Watson always gives the birds something to eat when the act is over, and they, of course not knowing which is to be the last time, keep on crowing and hoping and hoping and crowing until the end of the act.

It is doubtless very wonderful, but the miracle rests in Watson's patience to keep that up for 18 months.

HE HAS understudies for all his Farmyard players, the stupidest of which are, he says, the geese.

He has finally taught them to remain in stupid goose fashion on a seesaw and make believe they don't mind its ups and downs. For the rest, they have a superiority over the roosters, for they can lay eggs, a feat with which, by the way, Watson says he has had nothing to do, and an accomplishment which, in my opinion, renders them vastly superior to possessors of the talent to crow.

As for Less and Bill, the sheep and the lamb,

they are proof, thinks Watson, of the unreliability of tradition. There's nothing to the lamb and Mary story. A lamb is a very hard beast to get intelligence into. A lamb is stubborn, for one thing, and perfectly contented with a clouded brain. Better a dull intellect than to have it breaded and served on a plate, says the lamb. However, as you may see for yourself, there is a possibility of making sheep and lambs do stunts on the stage, and the butcher will be long awaiting the coming of Less and Bill.

HANDS Off. This Donkey Bites."

That's the reassuring inscription painted large and white on Tommy Tittlemouse's crate wherein he rides from town to town in many lands. Tommy's crate reaches to his belly. His head sticks over the front, and he grabs at everybody who comes his way. He doesn't think much of footwork and he never kicks. You are safer at his heels, where I stood, not altogether assured, than at his head. Like Fitz, he is a fighter with his heart in it. Only Watson himself is safe near him. Some days he is worse than other days, but his disposition is always mulish and mean.

"He is as bad as a lion to handle," said Watson, while I moved away with a leisure I didn't feel was wise.

And Watson ought to know.

Watson was born in Londonderry and has been an animal trainer for 30 years. As a boy he was apprenticed to Sanger's circus in England, and has traveled with animal organizations all over the world. He has trained lions and tigers and elephants, roosters, giraffes and kangaroos; sheep and cockatoos and leopards, pigs and canary birds, dogs and cats, and almost everything that creeps or walks or swims. He never trained an ornithomimus—he admits that.

SOMETHING ABOUT THOMPSON AND MISS IDA ST. LEON

A STORY, said to be authentic, is going the rounds about Frederic Thompson, who is the ingenious producer of "Polly of the Circus," now on at the Van Ness theater. Thompson is noted for an unyielding strength of purpose, as well as for his faculty for dreaming visions which later are set up in canvas and illumined by footlights. This is the story:

One day last March a man who called himself an actor presented himself and a letter of introduction to Frederic Thompson in the latter's office in the New Amsterdam theater, New York.

"Mr. Thompson," said he, with a music master quaver in his voice, "Mr. Thompson, 10 years ago I was a leading man on Broadway, the youngest leading man of my time. Ada Rehan and Madame Modjeska nearly came to blows over me; A. M. Palmer swore by me, and Mrs. Leslie Carter pronounced me the best she had ever seen. Today I am 25 and as good as I ever was. But—tempora mutantur!—the season is bad. I am on the point of breaking my last dollar. I hear that you propose presenting some new plays.

"I know that I am capable and I believe the time has come when I should be started."

"Can you bark like a dog?" asked Thompson, without so much as the quiver of an eyelid.

"Certainly not," replied the disciple of Detterson, rising from his chair

with splendid "business" of indignation.

"Then I can't use you," said Thompson. "My Broadway season has ended so far as new production are concerned. My next play will be Luna Park. I need some men down there who can bark like dogs."

The person in the fitted overcoat rose to leave.

"Be seated a moment," said the manager. "Your sad story interests me, but I, too, have something to say."

"Listen. Nine years ago—that was in 1900—I resided in a hall bedroom in Twenty-third street near Sixth avenue. The hall bedroom was a bad one, and was next door to Child's restaurant. During that year I was a student at the Art School league and was living on \$10 a week. I had been at a showman—the best there was at the Nashville and Omaha expositions—but I didn't go around telling people how efficient I was. I studied hard. I cooked my own meals—bought the meat and eggs and potatoes in the raw and by heating them sufficiently made them edible. I might have eaten at Child's, but if I had, the Hippodrome and Luna park might never have been.

"On Christmas day, 1900—possibly at the very time you were the most talked about person in Deimonico's—I hadn't a cent in my pocket and the ladder was empty. I remember walking down to the postoffice in the hope that a small remittance from my mother had reached me; it hadn't; so I walked back and went without eating on the day when most people eat most."

"That night I turned in early, hoping

that I might dream of a brighter future and thus forget my sore feet and a sorer heart. But I couldn't sleep, and while I tossed about on the only big piece of furniture in the hall bedroom an idea struck me. It struck me so hard that I got out of bed, lit the gas and got my drawing board. By

Just "Three Weeks"

Whatever can be said of the morals or lack thereof of "Three Weeks" as a stage presentation, it is certain that the American theater did the business with it.

At the time of its premiere critics agreed that the play had in it "the makings" of a drama like "Du Barry" or "Zaza" or others of the torrid tide of productions, but that Elinor Glyn had not realized such an accomplishment.

Charles Swickard, who has adapted "At the Sound of Taps" and "Love Tales of Hoffman" and "Fires of St. John," is busy with the book of "Three Weeks" and the American theater company is going to play it a week hence.

Manager Cohn, who has purchased the coast rights from the novelist, says: "With a revised version from the hand of a playwright and an expert in stagecraft and with a company such as we have assembled I believe that 'Three Weeks' will pack 'em in; for there's no limit to the curiosity of women, nor to the masculine disposition to see 'the latest.' Swickard will take care that the artistic values will be conserved. There will be nothing to offend, but much to interest. Anyway, I'm going to try the experiment and see whether there isn't a real play of human interest hidden in the pages of 'Three Weeks.'"

4 o'clock in the morning I had worked out the scheme of the 'Trip to the Moon.' The next day my \$10 came and I continued to buy and cook chops, eggs, ham and potatoes. I also continued to study at the league, for I had a lot of things to learn and not much time or money to spend learning them.

"Finally my money ran out and it so happened that about that time the directors of the Pan-American exposition advertised for concessions for their midway. That was my chance. I entered my 'Trip to the Moon,' and with Dundy's assistance built it and made it the most successful feature of the Buffalo fair. Two years later we built Luna park. A year after that I drew the plans of the Hippodrome, built it, managed it, and made it the most popular theater in the world. Last year I produced 'Brewster's Millions,' the comedy hit of the continent, and this year 'Polly of the Circus' has repeated 'Brewster's' success. I am not living in a hall bedroom now. I don't cook my own meals. I don't tell people how good I was 10 years ago, and I don't blame my shortcomings on God or the weatherman."

"How did you do all this?" asked the actor, who shall be nameless.

"I worked," replied Frederic Thompson, showman. "Talk is cheap and strutting wears out shoes. Just at present I want barkers, not actors."

"I WANT to be a big actress—a real big actress," said diminutive Ida St. Leon, behind the scenes at the Van Ness, during a breathing spell of "Polly of the Circus."

"Heretofore," she continued, "I have known nothing but the big tent and the sawdust ring. Since my infancy I have breathed the atmosphere of the canvas covered show business.

"I joined the company, this company, I mean, 'Polly of the Circus,' three

years ago, and a new ambition took hold of me at once. I mean to be an actress of importance, if hard work will accomplish the result I seek.

"Polly gives me that opportunity in a big measure, and since joining this production with my mother and sister I have been very happy in my work. 'I don't believe,' she resumed, while the scene shifters were getting ready for the big circus scene, "that Cardinal Wolsey ever said what is attributed to him to Cromwell."

The interviewer looked uncomfortable.

"He said, or at least it is said he said, 'Fling away ambition.' But he never said it, I'm sure. Nobody, nor angels neither, falls to grief from ambition. Pride, self-sufficiency, arrogance and other qualities like those do the damage, but not ambition, which is what keeps people at their tasks, though the work is hard and the compensation nothing but weariness and worry. Ambition and hope keep folk going and winning."

Miss St. Leon's particular ambition is to excel in the portrayal of sentimental roles—roles which involve the human heart and the emotions.

If her accomplishments in "Polly of the Circus" are to be accepted as a criterion, it is safe to predict that she will compass the aims she seeks.

"You must remember," she says, with unnecessary apology, "that I have been on the stage but a very, very short while, and that there's a vast difference between being a horseback rider, or a tight rope walker, or an acrobat in a circus and being an actress. There's a great deal of distance to travel from

the canvas of a tent, to the canvas on scene frames. I'm glad I'm on the road, and I'll keep right on going you'll see.

COME AND SEE THE NEW AND PRETTY SEXTET

Princess Invites Patrons With Production of "Florodora"

It will be "Florodora" tomorrow night at the Princess, by the new company which has been assembled there and which, for the first week just past of the light opera season, has scored a big success.

"The Belle of New York" will be heard for the last times this afternoon and tonight.

A cast of exceptional strength is promised for the production of "Florodora." Arthur Cunningham will play Silas W. Gilfillan; Percy Brunsom, who has been specially engaged for the part, will appear as Captain Arthur Donegal; Budd Rose will have his big comedy chance as Anthony Tweedledee; Bert Phoenix will be enrolled as Leandro; and Eugene Wilton is cast for Frank Abercromb.

Octavia Brookie, whose success as Violet Gray is now well known, will be in the role of Dolores and pretty little Olga Stech, who has become a favorite, will assume the part of Angel Gilfillan. Marta Golden will be Lady Hollywood; Frances Paon, whose "tough girl" was one of last week's hits, will be cast as Vallette, and the new sextet should be a vision of beauty and grace. Daisy Sutton, the sister of Lieutenant Sutton, whose mysterious tragedy is stirring up an Annapolis investigation, will be one of the show girls in the famous aggregation. Others who will lend charm to the sextet, will be Misses Hayward, Crane, Crandall, Park and Armand.

A beautiful and swift moving production is promised by Charles Sinclair, the stage director.