

By

**C. S. FORESTER**

Author of "The General"



**Marionettes  
at Home**

*Illustrated*

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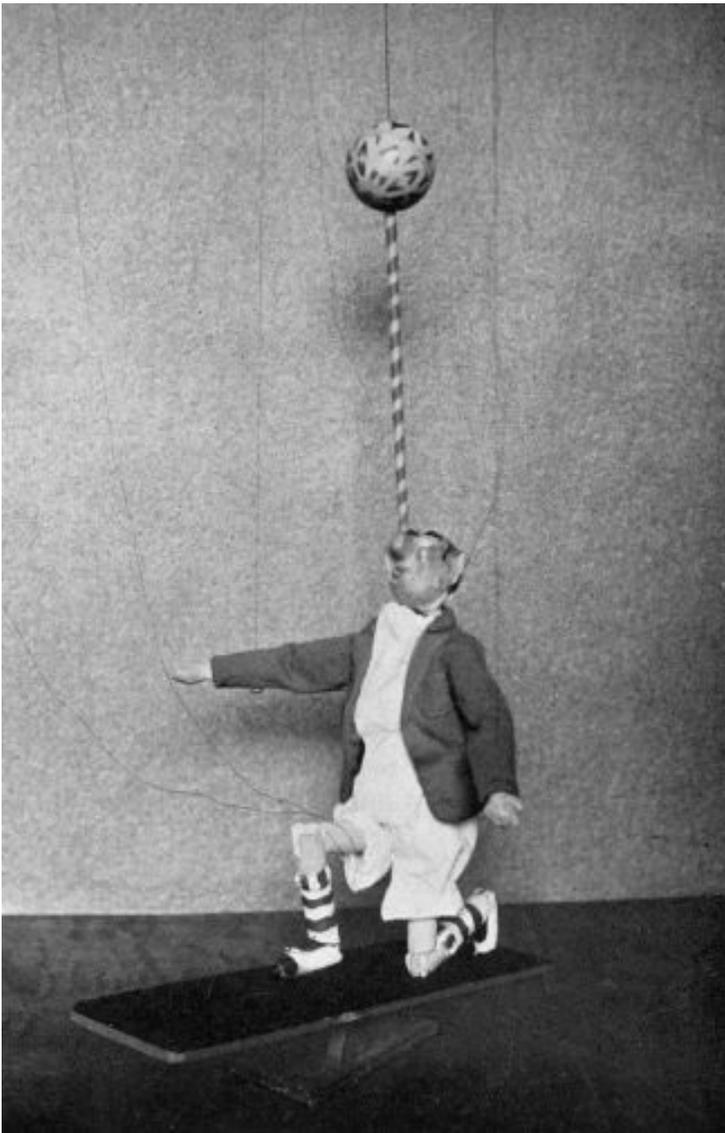
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BINGO THE BOY BALANCER  
*If the stick sways he sways too*

C. S. FORESTER

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*Marionettes*  
*at*  
*Home*

M I C H A E L  
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# PROLOGUE

*Spoken by the compère*

Good evening, humans. Here before the play,  
I have a chance to say my little say;  
To show you how despite all this to-do  
We're very little different from you.  
Our cheeks are painted and our hair is dyed;  
Our figures ebb and flow with fashion's tide.  
The thought of stage fright wakes you in your beds,  
And we have nightmares, too, of tangled threads.  
Like you, we're fond of taking striking poses;  
Like you, we can't see farther than our noses;  
And as with you upon the mortal earth  
A puppet's clothes decide a puppet's worth.  
The words we say are said for us. No less  
Are your opinions moulded by the Press.  
We think we rule our fates, but do your kings  
Know more than us about who pulls their strings?  
We strut our hour upon the stage, nor stop  
To think of the approaching curtain drop.  
We are, like you, at th' ending of our day,  
Laid in a box. I've said my little say.

## A P O L O G Y

There really seems very little need to explain or apologise for the ambition to own one's own theatre. Most people seem to have the same desire at some time in their lives. And as for me, I had worked in other people's theatres. I had seen flesh-and-blood actors making (or trying to make) the gestures I had imagined for them, and I had heard them saying the lines I had written for them, and I had encountered temperamental actors (half temper and half mental, as my friend K. R. G. Browne said) and untemperamental actors; and in a wild wave of reaction I had come to believe it would be far better to be able just to have to pull a string in order to achieve my effects. Besides, there had been encounters with theatrical managements, too, and, after those, the prospect of owning my own theatre seemed by contrast ineffably sublime.

That was how the ground was prepared. The sowing of the seed was brought about by a trifling incident—a visit to someone else's marionette theatre, which in turn was the result of a whole series of trifling coincidences. It was after we had seen that show, Kathleen and G. and I, that, sitting round a table in the Café Royal, we agreed that if we couldn't do a better show than that we would eat our hats. And from that conclusion to the decision to run a theatre was only a step.

I ought to have suspected that decision. It is just that kind of decision which has been responsible for most of the labour and effort of my life. Once I decided in the same way to abandon the practice of medicine and become a novelist; and that decision has led me in the past ten years into all sorts of unexpected byways, into Fleet Street and the St. James's Theatre and the Vaudeville Theatre and the Savage Club and the studios of Elstree and Hollywood. Once I decided that a fifteen-foot motor-boat was the ideal vehicle from which to see the world, and that decision took me to Paris and Berlin and Llangollen (and, believe me or not, it is far harder work to take a motor-boat to Llangollen than to Berlin) and starved me and buffeted me and pretty nearly drowned me. There were other decisions with profound consequences which I ought to have remembered, about marriage and parenthood, for instance; but I forgot all about these experiences in the enthusiasm of the moment.

Anyway, it was round that table in the Café Royal that the decision was reached, and perhaps one of these days the management will screw a brass plate to that table to tell the world so.

This is all very flippant, but if I were not a flippant person I could moralise

to some purpose. The marionette theatre has potentialities which have never been properly exploited. Its productions can be things of charm and beauty. They can be works of art, and without any aping of other works of art, either. There may perhaps one day arise a Shakespeare of the marionette stage. Our own Shakespeare could have written very competent and lovely work for marionettes, just as he could have done for the films; but in the same way as his work was pre-eminently suitable for presentation on the human stage, so some day there may be found a genius whose work is specially adapted for the mechanical stage. What kind of things he will do I cannot even guess, just as no one who was not a Shakespeare himself could guess at the nature and quality of Shakespeare's work while only acquainted with the early Elizabethan theatre.

Playing with marionettes is a very satisfactory way of amusing oneself and of killing time. It satisfies one's literary tastes as well as one's mechanical tastes, and it offers scope for amusing experiments in dress and colour. But even in a very rudimentary form the marionette theatre can be a great deal more than this, as anyone will find who tries it.

# CONTENTS

	PAGE
PROLOGUE	<a href="#">5</a>
APOLOGY	<a href="#">7</a>
THE THEATRE	<a href="#">15</a>
THE PUPPETS	<a href="#">25</a>
MANIPULATION	<a href="#">44</a>
BERTIE ET CETERA	<a href="#">67</a>
BUTTERFLIES AND ANGELS	<a href="#">81</a>
THE BALLET	<a href="#">91</a>
THE DRAMA	<a href="#">108</a>
LIGHTING	<a href="#">121</a>
PRODUCTION	<a href="#">137</a>
IN CONCLUSION	<a href="#">165</a>
<i>Epilogue</i>	<a href="#">187</a>
<i>Appendix.</i> AN EXAMPLE OF A PUPPET PLAY	<a href="#">189</a>

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

BINGO THE BOY BALANCER	<a href="#"><i>Frontispiece</i></a>
THE BARE BONES OF THE THEATRE FROM THE FRONT	<a href="#">16</a>
THEATRE FROM THE BACK READY FOR PERFORMANCE	<a href="#">16</a>
GOD REST YOU SIRs	<a href="#">32</a>
BERTIE SWINGING ACROSS	<a href="#">64</a>
BERTIE STRIKING AN ATTITUDE	<a href="#">64</a>
PROSCENIUM AND STAGE	<a href="#">112</a>
JOINTS	<a href="#">144</a>
STAGE WITHOUT PROSCENIUM	<a href="#">144</a>
GOOD EVENING HUMANS	<a href="#">160</a>
THE BALLET	<a href="#">176</a>
BUTTERFLIES	<a href="#">176</a>

## Chapter One



### THE THEATRE

As far as I can see, the whole essence of a marionette theatre lies in its portability and adaptability. You want to be able to give shows wherever you like, at a moment's notice. You don't want anything of the nature of a permanent building. Besides (as I realised in a moment of temporary sanity), when the theatre is up in your house and all the members of the family and of the domestic staff are engaged in rehearsals, things have a habit of spreading from room to room until all your meals are being eaten in restaurants and you have to sleep in the garden. You simply have to be able to pack the thing away and forget it sometimes, in order to do some work and restore discipline among the children.

All this presupposes a theatre which can be taken to pieces, and which can be erected in any ordinary room. The ideal house for a marionette theatre is one with a double drawing-room with dividing doors which either fold right back or can be taken away. In this case the dividing doorway constitutes the proscenium. I realised this right from the start; but my house has no double drawing-room, and although I offered to move, Kathleen would not hear of my sacrificing the remainder of my lease, because, as she pointed out, we should not always be certain of having dividing doors wherever we might perform. So we must have a theatre which was not dependent on this architectural survival.

My drawing-room is fourteen feet wide, and at one end is a deep bay. We decided that that end of the room would be the right place for the theatre, and to work to those measurements—and we have found that what we eventually constructed is well adapted for performances anywhere. On each side of the stage there must be a wing for those assistants who are engaged in looking after the curtain and the gramophone and the scenic effects. A floor-space three feet square seems to be the minimum one can allot for this, so that the two wings take up six feet of the fourteen feet width. Then you must be able to get into and out of the theatre from the front; and I (full of memories of what goes on in a real theatre in the wings at a dress rehearsal) insisted that this should be possible at either side. Two free spaces of eighteen inches together make up three feet, and so you have arrived at the width of your stage, upon which everything else necessarily depends. That width is fourteen feet minus

six minus three, making five feet. That decides the size of your puppets, the sort of performance you are going to produce and everything else.

Now, even to anyone who has never worked a puppet, it is obvious that if the puppeteer is to be behind the stage (and not on a framework above it), the depth of the stage, from footlights to backcloth, cannot usefully be greater than the full stretch of the human arm—three feet at most. So that the stage is five feet wide and three feet deep. As to its height above the floor, opinion differs. At first sight the higher the better for the audience's sake. But puppeteers like to stand above their puppets, and experience shows that the more expert the puppeteer, the higher he wants to be. So that if the stage is four feet high, say, there must be a "castle" for the puppeteers six feet high, and the puppeteers will be bumping their heads on the ceiling. Moreover, if the audience's eyes are on a level with the stage, they have more chance of looking up under the proscenium arch (unless this is unnaturally low), and that would never do.

Everything considered, it is better to have a low stage. Experience shows that in a fair-sized room, and even in a small hall, an audience seated in chairs in three or four rows have quite a good view of a stage a foot high. Actually it is possible, and from some aspects desirable, to have the stage actually on the floor, because the stage, a piece of plywood reinforced with battens, five feet by three, is the clumsiest item in the whole theatre (from the point of view of portability). But on the other hand, if the stage is raised a bit, the space beneath is very convenient for concealing electric lighting wires and for storing properties during a performance and so on, while its edges can carry the footlights in a way which saves a whole lot of trouble as compared with any other method. In my opinion the balance of convenience inclines towards a stage a foot high—just a sheet of plywood supported on detachable frames at each end with a pile of books to hold it up in the middle. Books are a legitimate device, because they can be found wherever you happen to perform, and they are convenient because it is easy with them to make a pillar just the right height.

That settles the stage, thank goodness, and it only remains to construct the theatre. Mine has never varied at all from its original design; the front of it is composed of two collapsible clothes-horses—I had a terrible business explaining a clothes-horse to a generation accustomed to airing cupboards. Take two battens, nine feet long and two inches square in section. Join them by two similar battens, each two feet six long, at either end, by the aid of dowels. This gives you an oblong frame. Make another oblong frame exactly the same size. Now on one long member of one frame put two galvanised iron eyes, and on one long member of the other frame put two galvanised iron hooks in corresponding positions; put the hooks through the eyes, and your two frames

are bolted together, and they will stand upright when placed at an angle to each other; one frame faces the audience and the other guards the flank of the theatre from prying eyes.

Now make two more identical frames for the other side of the stage. When the two wings are standing up, by the aid of more hooks and eyes you join them by a piece of reinforced plywood six inches wide, at a height about three feet above the stage and by another at floor level. You have now only to pin curtains over the whole affair with drawing-pins and the front of the theatre is complete.

This may sound a very unreliable contraption. You have to take my word for it that it is not. To this day we are still occasionally tormented with the idea that the whole front may fall forward, revealing everything inside, but it never has and I don't think it ever will. To set our minds at rest we tie strings from the top cross-members to the window-frames over the puppeteers' heads, but they are unnecessary. The strings, however, serve a useful purpose from another point of view, in that they carry a horizontal sheet which cuts off the light from the theatre and prevents revealing shadows appearing on the ceiling—a very necessary point.

As a matter of fact it is the drawing-pins and the curtains which give the whole thing solidity. It sounds chancy, but it is not, really. Fifty drawing-pins, well driven home, will fix anything. And the framework can be dismantled in a moment and carried anywhere, although the four nine-foot members are, after the stage, the most unwieldy items in the whole theatre. I have dallied with the idea of making them jointed, but I really do not think the gain in portability is balanced by the increased complexity of construction. But I would like to add the hint that it is as well to mark every member with its place in the ensemble. It reduces very much the time necessary for construction, and, later on, if the wood begins to warp a bit as wood may well do, the theatre can always be put together in that particular way even if it cannot be in any other.

To complete the front of the theatre the needlewoman of the company must now set to work to make a proscenium arch (the picture shows what a pretty one we have) and the act drop-curtains. And here and now I must lay it down definitely that it is vitally important to have an efficient act drop. The curtains must slide across quietly, smoothly and slowly. It is easy enough to buy curtain-runners which will do this—you need a brass rail carrying a lot of little wheels with hooks; and everything which moves must be thoroughly and regularly lubricated. The whole mechanism can be bought at an upholsterer's, including the strings and pulleys which enable the two curtains to be opened and shut from one side simultaneously. Everybody can work out how this is done, although it would take me a couple of pages with diagrams to explain it.

But at the risk of being tedious, I must repeat that the curtains must work properly. The finest puppets and the finest dialogue in the world are wasted if the curtains squeak, or jerk, or fail to meet so as to reveal the scene-shifting processes. All illusion is destroyed and the show might just as well not be put on. A puppet show is more dependent on illusion even than a real theatre, and efficient accessories are as important as the cast.

There are only two more curtains wanted—strips three feet long and nine inches wide. These hang one each side of the stage from rods (Woolworth towel-rails) projecting diagonally backwards and inwards from the vertical members, and serve to prevent the audience from looking round the sides of the proscenium into the wings. If they are made with seams to slip over the rods they can be changed quickly when changes of scene are necessary, so as to suit the colour scheme of the backcloth.

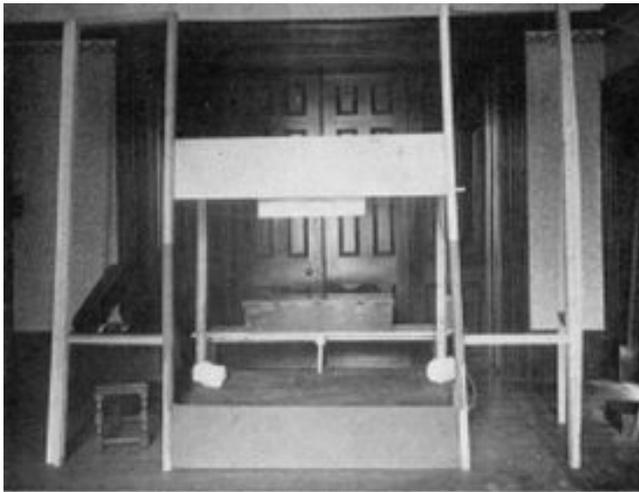
This mention of the backcloth brings us to the description of the last part of the theatre. It is technically called the “castle,” and is the piece of furniture which provides the puppeteers with their bench to stand on, their rail on which to rest their arms and at the same time acts as a framework to carry scenery. It is far simpler than all this implies. A stout board five feet long, a foot wide and an inch thick, acts as the bench, and is supported on three detachable feet, eighteen inches long, made of the same board, slid into grooves on the underside of the bench. Two stout uprights five feet long in stirrups made of galvanised iron at each end of the bench act as additional legs, and in their turn support a horizontal bar slipped on to dowels in the ends for the arm-rest.

The bench, then, is only a few inches higher than the stage, and after half a dozen rehearsals the puppeteers will be clamouring to stand much higher than that. But there is no need to make new and longer legs for the bench—although there is no reason why you should not. The properties and puppets have to have a box in which they can be packed away, and during a performance this box is necessarily empty. Consequently it can be used to give additional height on the bench—a good stout box, strong enough to bear the weight of three adults, five feet long, a foot wide and a foot high, will hold everything necessary, and will at the same time (allowing for the thickness of the wood) give the puppeteers fourteen inches more height if they put it upon the bench and stand on it.

There is one slight precaution which may be taken. Nail a batten of wood along one edge of the outside of the lid and, when the box is on the bench, keep that edge against the backcloth. For enthusiastic puppeteers in the excitement of the performance have a way of standing on the very edge of the box and leaning as far as possible over the arm-rest, until the whole thing—box, bench, arm-rest, backcloth, puppeteers and all—overbalances forward.

Then the puppeteers crash head first on to and through the stage, and perhaps straight out through the proscenium arch into the audience. The batten along the edge of the box discourages them from doing this by compelling them to keep their feet back.

To the front of the arm-rest is pinned the backcloth. This, hanging down, serves at once to conceal the puppeteers from the audience and as scenery. There can be as many backcloths as you please; the ones not wanted are lifted up and hung over the arm-rest, so that when a change of scene is required, all that has to be done is to twitch the cloths over until the one wanted is exposed. That makes both for speed and simplicity—matters which will be dealt with in far greater detail in the chapter on Production.



Above THE BARE BONES OF THE  
THEATRE FROM THE FRONT

*The whole essence lies in its portability and adaptability*



Below THEATRE FROM THE BACK READY  
FOR PERFORMANCE

*The Stage Manager sees that all properties are in their appointed  
places*

## Chapter Two



### THE PUPPETS

Now at last we can proceed to something a little more interesting and discuss who is going to appear on this five-foot stage of ours. Mechanically speaking, the larger the puppet the easier it ought to be to manipulate it accurately. Small accidental gestures are less noticeable, and the intentional ones are more susceptible to refinement and elaboration. In practice this is not quite so true. Until great dexterity is acquired by the puppeteer, refinement and elaboration are just as well not attempted.

Moreover, a great deal more is expected by the audience of a large puppet than of a small one. The quality of illusion possessed by the marionette theatre is such that after a few moments, the eye of the spectator is content to refer the apparent diminutiveness of the puppet to its distance rather than to its actual lack of size, and in consequence accepts without complaint a certain blurring of the effects. The most important result is that in the case of dialogue, the eye is not dissatisfied with the absence of mouth movements—no one in the gallery of a theatre has ever seen an actor's lips move. The use of a large puppet throws away this advantage.

A fifteen-inch puppet will do anything in reason; it can be clearly seen by the audience in quite a large hall, and (an important consideration) it is not so heavy as to tire the puppeteer's arms at full stretch. And a fifteen-inch puppet on a five-foot stage has the same relative size as a six-foot actor on a twenty-four foot stage, and a twenty-four foot stage was big enough for Shakespeare. Besides, a proscenium arch three feet high (which is mechanically the best height to prevent a seated audience looking up under it) suits a fifteen-inch puppet. He seems in the right setting under it.

So we will work to a basis of a standard height of fifteen inches. That does not prevent us from having big puppets and little puppets, male puppets and female puppets, adult puppets and child puppets—fifteen inches is only an average measure, and all the following remarks only apply to a standard puppet who is just as much an abstraction as the standard man of the economists. When you come to construct a puppet and to test it out in its natural habitat of the footlights, you will find that ordinary human proportions do not quite apply. Any artist's handbook of anatomy will give you the relative

proportions of head to height, of arms to body and so on, but experiment will soon convince you that it is inadvisable to mould your puppets on this Procrustean standard. Definitely, the head must be a little larger than in the human body, the arms a little longer, the legs a very little shorter, the hands a good deal larger. Similarly the body must be a shade plumper—a puppet of a chest measurement proportionate to that of the human body appears on the stage as a little slender. Why this should be I cannot explain, and I am quite content to leave it to the psychologists and the artists; moreover, as it is purely a matter of taste, I shall not quarrel with you if you disagree with me and plump for puppets of quite another set of proportions. It is worth while remembering that the Greeks, with their use of masks and buskins in the drama, apparently were similarly troubled by the distorting effect of the stage upon human proportions.

There is more still in this question of the proportions of puppets. We may as well take it for granted that it is quite impossible for a puppet to appear exactly like a human being. And if he did, he would tend to be dull. Yet we laugh at a child or a monkey because he is like a human adult, not because he is unlike. There is an element of incongruity in hearing a child say something of portentously adult seriousness, or in seeing a chimpanzee pour out tea just like a lady. In the same way there is incongruity in a puppet betraying in his speech the weaknesses to which humanity is liable, or human absurdities in his dress. To my mind (you need not think so if you do not want to) there must be somewhere in the puppet, both in his appearance and in his performance, an element of caricature. There must be a blend of likeness and unlikeness to humanity, and it is upon the quality of this blend, and upon the seasoning with which it is served up, that the nature of your show (which does not necessarily imply its artistic merit) will depend. Goodness and badness, of course, are far more intangible and indefinable qualities.

And now let us dispense with these æsthetics and try and be practical, and debate the eternally interesting question of joints. Skilled professional puppeteers frequently use puppets whose joints are of the universal kind and which can bend in every direction. This calls for a great deal of skill in manipulation, and invites disaster in an unpractised hand. There is only tragedy in the sight of a puppet bending his arm backwards at the elbow until his forearm is at right angles to his upper arm. The advantages to be derived from a universally jointed puppet are far outweighed by its disadvantages, as far as a beginner (and even an amateur of experience) is concerned.

If a puppet is so jointed that he can only bend as a human can bend, it stands to reason that he can only take up attitudes possible to a human. Do what you will with him, get into any muddle you like, and the figure on the

stage is still doing nothing intrinsically impossible. This seems to be in opposition to what I have just written about the necessity for caricature, but the beginner need not worry. The caricature will be there involuntarily until he learns to put it there voluntarily.

So we have to turn our attention to making our puppets with human joints. The ankle, for instance, must be so hinged that the foot can only be extended until it is nearly in a line with the leg and no farther. To explain how to make a joint of this sort would call for pages of description, which would be quite unnecessary to a carpenter and still would not be of any use to a man who was not. I think the photographs which are included in this book are descriptive enough. It is necessary to add that there is no need to make special arrangements in a puppet for those human joint movements which are of small amplitude. For instance, a human can turn his toes out and in, and he can rotate his thigh a trifle at the hip. You will find that as soon as your puppet gets flexible he can do the same, even though he has simple hinges there; the natural wear of the wood will permit it.

The knee is a very important joint indeed. It is absolutely vital that it should bend readily, and yet that it will not allow any reverse bending—that the leg will come up into a straight line with the thigh and no farther. If this is not the case you will find yourself occasionally in terrible difficulties when you walk your puppet or try to make him kneel down—he will kneel like the hind legs of a horse instead of like the front ones. You must give your puppet's knees a good long hinge and a very definite stop—the length of the hinge being necessary to prevent lateral bending, as otherwise your puppets will tend towards knock knees or bow legs, and may fluctuate from one to the other in a nightmare manner.

The hip joint, as I have said, is a simple hinge as well; the thighs end in tongues which are slipped up into grooves in the pelvis, and a pin is run through the lot. Here a stop is necessary to prevent the thighs from bending back on the pelvis. The pelvis is a compromise, because the human back is possessed of I don't know how many joints, each of them capable of only a little play. Life is far too short to make puppets in the same way. Joint the thighs on the pelvis, the pelvis on the trunk so that the possible flexion is just about a right angle; joint the trunk to the neck and the neck to the head, and you will find it works quite well and realistically—the clothing conceals how the total of flexion is concentrated at only a few points instead of being distributed over a great number.

The pelvis, then, is that portion of the puppet's body between his waist and his hip joints, and it is quite separate from his trunk except for the double hinge joint—just like a wasp, in fact. If the top surface of the pelvis is quite flat

and applied close to the flat under-surface of the trunk, no movement is possible, despite the hinge (two tongues in grooves and a pin run through, like the hips). But, by carefully paring away the wood from the front edge, bending forward becomes possible, and this paring should be continued, as already said, until it is possible to bend the two nearly to a right angle forwards, while no bending back remains possible.

Very generally puppeteers make their puppets without a solid pelvis, but use instead a section of sock fastened at one end to the trunk and at the other end to the thighs. For the life of me I can find no advantage in this, unless the puppet is destined for a contortionist act. The wobbliness of the legs which results is most unnerving to the puppeteer; and you have only to experience marionette-stage-fright once to appreciate the enormous comfort to be derived from the knowledge that you can sit your puppet down on a chair or on the floor realistically and certainly and without any possibility of error. A puppet with a solid pelvis can be sat down on the stage and kept in a natural position thereafter with hardly any attention—an unrelieved blessing at moments when complex manipulation is necessary, as the puppet-playwright should remember.

The shoulder joint is a difficult one to construct satisfactorily. The method we have decided for in the end is shown in one of the photographs. A screw eye is inserted in the ends of the upper arms. Then the front of the point of the shoulder on each side is cut away, leaving at the back the area corresponding to the shoulder blade. A piece of wire is then threaded through the two screw eyes on the arms, and is laid across the puppet's chest. The ends are firmly fixed in the puppet's armpits, and the wire is countersunk over the puppet's breastbone, after the screw eyes of the arms have been slid along until they are free to move about on the two portions of the wire over the depressed areas where the wood has been cut away. This joint fulfils its purpose in allowing natural movements and preventing unnatural ones, but it is not perfection. It makes clothes a little difficult to fit, and occasionally an arm raised at full stretch above the head does not drop naturally at the end of the gesture—you have to shake the puppet a bit sometimes to get it down.

But it is the best shoulder joint I have been able to invent. Ball-and-socket joints connected by elastic, as in a doll, definitely do not work—at least, not for me. They may for other people, but not for me. If they are tight they stick, and if they are loose they wobble unreliably all over the place, so that the puppet without turning a hair can point straight out behind him—and will, too, if you give him half a chance. He can put his right hand behind his back and scratch his left ear. The pin and loop variety of shoulder joint (seen in a primitive form in lead soldiers with movable arms) will not give all the natural

movements and permits some unnatural ones. I cannot help but think that the best shoulder joint is the one I have described—each puppet being experimented with until his particular joints work satisfactorily.

Elbow joints, of course, are simple hinge joints like the knee, of the Dutch-doll type with a stop to prevent back bending, and wrist joints, if you ever find them necessary, are (unless for some special purpose) best made in the same fashion—but wrist joints are on the whole an unnecessary refinement. You may need them if you design your puppet to do some very special trick, but otherwise you can manage perfectly well without them.

A puppet's neck in general consists of an inch and a half of dowel wood. One end of this is countersunk for half an inch into the puppet's body, and the joint there consists of two screw eyes, one in the neck and one in the body, hooked through each other. Getting those screw eyes into position is a perfectly maddening operation, but it can be done with care and patience and brute force. Incidentally, as the whole weight of the puppet hangs on these neck joints it is just as well to use the longest screw eyes you can find and see that they are screwed well home. The joint connecting the head to the neck is of the same type, and is similarly countersunk into a groove half an inch deep in the base of the skull, a little behind and in between the two halves of the jaw bone. Countersinking these two joints serves the double purpose both of keeping them out of sight and of restricting the movement they permit.

When you are making these joints you must remember that they differ in action from all the others, in that they have a heavy weight below them and no joints above them. The head must be so connected to the neck that when the puppet is hung up by the head, *from the points where the head strings will be inserted*, the body hangs from it in a natural standing position. A minute difference in the place in the skull where the screw eye is inserted will make a good deal of difference to the stance of the puppet, and to the mood he is supposed to convey—but fortunately this variation is balanced by the fact that the point of insertion of the head strings can be varied over a pretty considerable area, so that anything save gross errors in the making of the neck joints can be redressed subsequently.

And so we turn aside with relief from these grim anatomical facts to discuss matters that cannot be so casually dismissed. We have talked lightly so far about the head and the skull and the jawbones. But before you take in hand any making of joints it is as well to have your head all ready to receive your body; and—there is no shirking the matter—you have to make your head. It is only by the rarest conjunction of circumstances that you can find in a shop or in the nursery a head which will do. My ballet girls have dolls' heads, but that is solely because they only have to display the amount of intelligence expected

of ballet girls.

No, you must make your head; or else you must do as I did and find someone to make it for you. G. made all mine. Miraculously, he found within himself a quite unsuspected ability to carve and model; and, without in the least trying to belittle his achievements, I have come to suspect that similar abilities lurk undreamed of in lots of people. In that case the sooner they are found and employed, the better.

You must first of all decide what part in your show the puppet is going to play—rope dancer or conjurer or heavy father or what not—and then you take your gouges and your chisels, and your block of wood (beech is a good all-round material for carving, but wood carvers soon develop individual tastes and preferences), and go right at it. If you are wise, you will not say beforehand who it is you are making, as what started out as a clown may be converted by a slip of the chisel into a fairy queen.

Seriously, though, there is another way to go to work besides carving. Hacking a block of wood into the rough shape of a head and face is within anybody's capacity, and the details can be filled in by modelling with—I must take a deep breath before I write the words for the first time—plastic wood. Plastic wood is the stuff which makes the puppeteer's life bearable. It has fifty uses in a marionette theatre, and there is no need for me to list them down, because you will discover them all for yourself as soon as you start to make your theatre. When you model with it you must remember that it is a quick-drying stuff, and, naturally, dries on the outside first. If you apply it too thickly a thin skin of solid wood forms over the inner puddingy mass, interfering very seriously with the modelling. It is better to apply the stuff layer by layer, allowing time for each layer to dry off a good deal before applying the next.

You can build up your puppets' faces with plastic wood quite easily if you will only try, and then a generous use of oil paint will complete the effect. You must always remember that your puppets are not designed to be admired in drawing-rooms, or played with in the nursery. They are meant for the stage, and to be seen in the glare of theatrical lighting. They have got to be tuppence coloured, in other words. Plastic wood and paint between them make much better hair for puppets, as a general rule, than any real hair or tow—moustaches and beards and bobs and shingles can all be made perfectly easily in this way, and incidentally they are far less likely than the real thing to get caught up by a thread and so stand upright, defying all laws of gravity, during a performance. The coils of plastic wood as squeezed direct from the tube will make the coils of a woman's hair when it is supposed to be long and "up" without any retouching save with paint.

The puppets' hands can be carved from wood if you like, or you can model

them direct out of plastic wood, but in this latter case you will find that a solid central “armature” of wire or match-stick is of great assistance, preventing the hands from drooping in the process of setting. And before making the hands you must have a clear idea in your head as to what the puppet is intended to do on the stage, for the hands are nearly as important as the face as regards acting—as, of course, you realise without my telling you. You have to visualise to yourself what the hands of that puppet would most naturally be doing during his act—they may be spread wide and flat if he is doing some tense balancing act, or doubled into fists if he is a strong man, or held in the ordinary relaxed position if he is just acting.

For, generally speaking, a puppet comes into this world with one special mission in life. He does not play many parts. If our flesh and blood actors had to undergo a surgical operation to fit them for the next part they had to play (I quite agree that a lot of them would be all the better for it, though) they would stick to the same sort of part even more markedly than at present. The same with puppets. Once he is dressed and threaded for one particular part it is better not to interfere with him—if you have got another part you want him to play it is less trouble to make another puppet to play it. I had the idea when I started my theatre that it would be practicable to change a puppet’s clothes during a performance, so that he might be, say, a policeman before the entr’acte and an angel afterwards. But it cannot be done. Most emphatically, it cannot be done. Threading and unthreading a puppet is a long job; dressing and undressing him is another; and both call for a cool head and steady fingers and unlimited time and plenty of light—and you won’t find any of those behind the scenes in a marionette theatre on a first night.

All this, of course, does not preclude the use of the same body in different parts *in different programmes*. Most puppets only need standard workaday bodies—and, as a matter of fact, it is trouble-saving (though expensive) when you have constructed one good one to get a cabinet-maker to duplicate it a few times—and when you have exploited your first programme to the utmost you can give your puppets new heads and hands, new clothes and new threads, to correspond with their new parts.

I think I have already said that the puppet’s limbs are made of dowel wood. His trunk and pelvis can be made of blocks of ordinary white deal, unless you choose to employ some more durable but slightly more expensive material. You can roughly carve them into shape; any additions which may be necessary (and your female puppets will need them, perhaps, if you want them to have genuine figures) can be made of plastic wood and stuck on, just as calves can be added to the legs. But padding—bits of old material wound round and tightly nailed on—is frequently more convenient. Sleeves and trousers so

conceal the shapes of the limbs beneath them, that it is hardly necessary to go to much trouble to shape the limbs. And, of course, if your puppets (your ballet, for instance, or your strong man) wear neither trousers nor skirt it is not necessary to make stockings for them. You paint those on—it is cheaper and more effective, and less trouble.

Incidentally, it is worth remarking that with a bare leg it is not necessary to disguise the hinge knee joint. In the case of Bingo, the Boy Balancer, I went at first to no end of trouble with his knees—covering them with bits of thin rubber sheet and then painting the whole surface. But the human eye is very willing to be deceived. It expects to see a knee if the joint there is functioning just as a knee joint should. After a while I risked putting Bingo on without any camouflage to his knees, because the bits of rubber were a constant nuisance, and I have never (although I have frequently asked about it, tactfully) found anyone in the audience who has noticed his Dutch-doll knees, or who could describe them after the performance with any trace of exactitude. The human knee cap shows a certain amount of movement in action, and the eye of the audience gladly accepts the movement of the hinge joint as being the movement it expects. That is a principle to remember when planning a production.

Now that your puppet is completed, it is essential to see that he works. This is the time when you come to appreciate the merit of having given him only human joints. Toss him on the floor, or sit him up in a chair and then tip the chair up. You will find that every attitude he takes up is a human one—so much so that his resemblance to life is striking and fascinating. At the same time every one of his joints must be as loose and as supple as it possibly can be. When he is performing on the stage (as you will very soon find when you make your first experiments in manipulation) one half of his movements are the result merely of the pull of gravity, and as his limbs are not very heavy there must only be the minimum of friction to impede them.

The very first time I stood a puppet up and let him fall down called up a half-forgotten memory in my mind; I remembered an occasion a dozen years ago when I was in a den of iniquity at the back of the Vieux Port in Marseilles. Two Catalan fishermen there began to fight—a real honest-to-goodness duel with knives, long ones, held point upwards, thumb towards the blade as a knife should be. They were circling cautiously round each other, feet wide apart, ready to dash in or spring aside, when one of the onlookers beside the bar took hold of a bottle and brought it down with all his strength on the top of the head of one of the duellists as he circled past him. That fisherman simply crumpled up. All his joints went limp together, and he crumpled up in concertina fashion on to the floor, ending up in a heap, face downwards.

The puppet I was experimenting with reproduced the action with most vivid and startling exactitude: the collapse, the fall, the final attitude, were all identical. For a moment or two as I stared at the tumbled figure memories simply flooded into my mind. I lived again through the wild minutes that followed—the sudden battle royal, the equally sudden scattering as the alarm was given, and the wild flight in pitch darkness over what seemed at the time to be at least a thousand brick walls, each ten feet high, with the police agents' whistles shrilling all round, and one or two revolvers popping off to urge me on.

Your puppets must do that. They must collapse completely and utterly when unsupported. When sat in a chair they must naturally fall into an attitude indicative of the utmost dejection, like a man whose children have all died and whose wife has run off with a soldier, and whose speculations have all gone wrong, and who has just lost his job, and who is not feeling very well. Any good puppet will look just like that if put unsupported in a chair. The floppier your puppet is, the handier he will be under control. Naturally, as has been pointed out, this floppiness is accentuated by weight. Make his limbs and his trunk heavy, and this heaviness will overbear the friction at the joints. That is a very good principle, but remember that you will be manipulating your puppet at arm's length for ten minutes at a stretch sometimes, and that on those occasions you will curse the weight of the thing for at least nine of those ten minutes. Nothing heavier than oak is really necessary for puppets, and even oak is a bit too heavy. Limbs weighted with lead, and similar extensions of the principle, are not specially helpful except in stray particular instances.



GOD REST YOU SIRs

*All the threads which work a puppet are connected to one or two pieces of wood*

## Chapter Three



### MANIPULATION

Now that I come to think of it, I have written all these pages and pages about puppets and their joints and their faces without stopping even once to debate the point as to what kind of puppets one should use. To my mind, of course, the point has nothing to debate about it. There is only one kind of marionette worth bothering with, and that is the kind I have been describing. All the other kinds, glove puppets and stick puppets and shadow puppets, are beneath consideration—with a half-hearted sort of exception in favour of shadow puppets. Glove puppets are of the Punch-and-Judy variety, heads with frocks attached which you wear on your hands and fingers; they are so limited in scope that I can hardly bring myself to discuss them. You can never have more than two characters on the stage at once, they must always face each other, and they cannot walk. Stick puppets are Punch-and-Judy glorified. You use the same sort of theatre, but you hold your puppets up on sticks over your head, and by the employment of infinite resource and labour you can arrange some sort of poor show with them. Shadow puppets, of course, work behind a screen on which their shadows are thrown. They have possibilities—indeed, the best recommendation I can give them is that the Forester Marionette Theatre is experimenting with them at present in order to include a shadow show in its programme. But even shadow puppets have not a tenth of the richness and variety and potentiality of the real marionettes which work with strings. Please let us agree on that point, before it is too late.

You have to learn to work string marionettes, for all that. Sometimes you come across a gifted person like G., who (in addition to being carver and modeller and emergency carpenter) has right from the start sufficient ability to work a puppet well enough for public exhibition, but such examples are rare, and even they benefit by practice. The ordinary average person has to devote quite a number of hours to rehearsal before he can manage simple movements with certainty. I believe that in the Italian marionette theatre the puppeteers serve long apprenticeships, and are not permitted to handle controls until eight years after they had begun by dusting the properties, but for the sort of show we are considering that sort of apprenticeship is quite unnecessary—indeed, I doubt if it is necessary at all.

In our own case we started operations at the end of October, and we made the theatre and the puppets, and designed the lighting and the scenery, and wrote our lines and arranged our programme, and rehearsed, and we gave our first professional performance the following February—a performance which resulted in a re-booking, so which could not have been utterly bad. There are several influences which can be brought to bear on speeding up the production of the first programme. The main one is that if the marionette playwright and producer is (as, of course, he ought to be) a puppeteer himself, and one of the cast, he can write the lines and arrange the business so as to fit the capacities of his cast, giving them nothing to do which they cannot do, and accentuating their good points and concealing their bad ones.

That does not imply in the least that his lines will be bad ones. No author was ever the worse for restrictions and conventions; any author worth his salt, if he cannot say a thing one way, can find another way to say it. Having to write to suit a given set of circumstances will only sharpen his wits without in the least harming his work. The novels of the last twenty years, which include so many that would have involved a police prosecution had they been published a little earlier, are not noticeably better than those of the great Edwardians who had to be careful to avoid direct mention of lavatories. As a very positive example, D. H. Lawrence once decided to say “to hell with the censorship” and wrote *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, without any regard at all for the conventions which had previously chafed him so sorely. But *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is not D. H. Lawrence’s best book, not by any manner of means—indeed, it is so bad that the expurgated edition subsequently published in England is just as good as the unexpurgated one which cluttered the Paris bookshops. Conventions and restrictions do an author no harm at all; no convention, indeed, can be as hampering as the initial fact that every author has to convey his ideas by the aid of print, divided into pages at least, if not into chapters and paragraphs. So in the same way the man who writes for marionettes need feel no distress at knowing that Jane can get her puppets to wave their right arms and not their left, or that Henry can only get his puppets to nod their heads by dint of lifting their feet from the floor.

It is only by an effort that I can manage to recall that before D. H. Lawrence came into this book I was writing about the circumstances which go to make the early production of a show easy. The first is, as I have said, that the playwright can write his lines to suit his cast. The other is that there are various foolproof turns which can be put on, which the merest novice can work without fear of failure. I shall be describing some of these in later chapters, and as far as I can see there are dozens more which are only waiting to be invented. Three or four of these trick turns, properly staged, go a long way towards

filling out the ordinary variety programme. They are very effective, and are peculiarly characteristic of the special quality of the marionette theatre.

These two factors between them do much to hasten production, but all the same, they do not save you from having to learn, sooner or later, how to manipulate a puppet. Presumably it would be as well to discover first what are the means employed in the manipulation.

Everyone knows that a puppet is worked by means of threads, but very few people, apparently, have ever heard of the “control.” You will find, when you are running your show, that outsiders will say to you in wonder, “And do you work them yourself?” and will accompany this question, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, with a gesture as if they were playing a tall piano, or perhaps a flute. People have the idea that you loop those threads on your fingertips. Well, you don’t. For one thing, your fingers have not sufficient amplitude of movement, and for another, you haven’t got enough of them. All the threads which work a puppet are connected to one or two pieces of wood, of various shapes, and you control your puppet mostly by swaying these pieces of wood about.

As with every marionette accessory, the shape and style of the control is largely influenced by what the marionette has to do. For instance, if your puppet has to do a lot of bowing—if he is destined to be an announcer, say—it is highly convenient to have a control so adjusted that one single movement of it makes him bow. As it happens, the simple and most usual sort of control achieves this. It is a good control to practise with, and is useful in a good many ordinary cases; and I recommend very strongly indeed that you use it until you find yourself desiring something more complex.

The body control is a wooden Latin cross—bits of lath serve very well—of which the long limb is a foot long and the short one nine inches. One thread is taken down from the lower end of the cross to the small of the puppet’s back, just above his upper pelvic joint. Two other threads run each from one end of the crosspiece to the sides of the puppet’s head in the immediate neighbourhood of his ears—the exact spot in the head being decided (as was pointed out in the chapter on joints) by the nature of the neck joints. These threads are carefully adjusted relatively until they are of such a length that the puppet hangs, when suspended from the cross held horizontally, in a normal upright position; and of course their general length should be such that when the control is held six inches below the arm-rest of the “castle” the puppet’s feet are just resting on the stage.

You will find that just by manipulating this cross with its three threads you can do a great deal—and with surprising ease, although you need not let the uninitiated guess that. It is best to put a strap on the back of the control into

which you slip your hand, and to practise from the start with your hand in it—you will need your fingers soon enough, and if you once form a habit of holding the control with your fingers you will find it a difficult one to break. So you hold up the puppet on his three threads with your hand through the strap and the cross held horizontal, aeroplane-wise. His feet are just touching the floor. Depress the front of the cross, keeping its tail just where it was. The puppet's head droops forward. So do his shoulders. His arms swing forward, hanging straight down (it is now that you begin to appreciate the virtue of those loose joints you were so careful to make). The lift of the forward-drooping body on the lower half, via the upper pelvic joint, tends to raise the feet from the floor; you counter that by a minute bodily lowering of the cross, and you will, of course, find that the legs incline slightly backward from below upwards. In other words, the puppet is bowing quite nicely, and his whole attitude is one which the normal figure adopts. You are employing a mechanism which uses the action of gravity on a suspended body in exactly the same directions as gravity acts upon a body supported on the floor.

Now stand him up again with the control horizontal. Incline the control to one side, like a banking aeroplane. He tilts his head over; he is now suspended only by the upper side of his head and by his body thread, and you must learn to keep the tension on these two threads just sufficient to stop him from swaying as the weight comes off the other thread. Incline the control in the opposite direction, and the head tilts to the other side. Repeat this very slightly and quickly, and the puppet's head is moving a little from side to side, and when you look at him you suddenly realise that a great many people when talking move their heads in just the same fashion.

Incidentally, these operations are best conducted with the puppet's feet on a piece of carpet. Just so much of the puppet's weight is allowed to rest on the floor without making his knees bend as to contrive that the friction between feet and carpet keeps his feet still; you have to rely upon your own delicacy of touch to prevent body sway. Turning a puppet threaded in this fashion is a more difficult operation. You must be very careful to keep the tension on all three threads quite unchanged while turning the control; you must avoid dragging him round by his ears or twitching him round by his waist. If all three threads play their part equally the appearance of either fault is prevented; naturally, two supplementary threads from the crosspiece of the control to the tops of the shoulders are a great help in turning a puppet. But they are a complication; they make head movements more difficult; and it is quite easy to do without them—and the fewer threads the better, for obvious reasons.

Solely by slight movements of the hand slipped through the strap of the control you will learn soon enough to reproduce in the puppet all the ordinary

trunk and head movements. You will find two accessories useful; in fact, almost essential. One is a stool (or, alternatively, three or four superimposed volumes of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*) and the other is a cheval-glass. Standing on the stool raises you to the same height above the floor as the castle bench will raise you above the stage, and the cheval-glass enables you to see just what your puppet is up to. It is his appearance to the eye more or less on a level with him which counts, not his appearance from above.

Next, you want to work his arms. Opinions vary very considerably among puppeteers as to the best point of attachment of the arm threads. Some say loop them round the wrists. Some say attach them to the middle of the back of the forearm, some swear by the inner edge of the forearm—I am one of them. The other ends of the threads are fastened to the tip of the top of the cross, and opinions vary just as much as to how this should be done. You can use one single thread, attached to one arm, brought up and passed through two small screw eyes, and then taken down and fastened to the other arm. Then a finger passed through the bight between the eyes will work both arms simultaneously. Or you can connect each arm separately to a separate screw eye. Or you can use a horseshoe of thin wire pivoted on the end of the control, and attach the two threads to this. Then by lifting the horseshoe with one finger you can lift both arms while the two arm threads are held sufficiently far apart for a flustered person to find either thread with ease if only one arm is to be used. I think the whole point is of less importance than at first appears.

The novice leaves his arm threads quite slack, so that incautious movements of the control leave the arms unaffected, but it is possible to tauten up the arm threads and to manage the arms for all simultaneous movements simply by inclining the control, leaving the body and head unaffected—but for the ordinary workaday puppet this is not often necessary, and it is a difficult thing to learn to do. It is quite sufficient to learn to work the arms with the fingers of either hand—the occupied hand or the free one. Naturally, it is easier to use the free one, but a later paragraph will show that there is frequently no free hand at all.

In practising your arm gesticulations, try and remember that they are intended for the stage. There must be no meanness about them, no miserly economy of movement. A delicate gesture in a drawing-room may convey a subtlety of meaning; in a marionette on the stage it merely leaves the audience in doubt as to what was intended—in fact, it makes the audience suspect that the movement was not intended at all. So it is usually best when practising gestures with a marionette to know what he is intended to be saying and doing, and to run through his part each time, making the action suit the word.

This is not so much the case in the matter of walking. You simply cannot

practise walking a puppet too much. It is by far the hardest thing to do with a puppet, and it is also the most important, and the action most universally in demand. Curiously, professional puppeteers of high standing often fail in this matter of walking—it is a rarity to see a marionette walking naturally on the stage. This is the more surprising in that a puppet walking well is just as interesting and as exciting as a puppet on a tight-rope, to all save those with a puerile weakness for the spectacular. It is perfectly possible to make a puppet walk well if you only practise a little and think a good deal—mark you it may be a slow walk, and possibly a mannerised walk, and only a highly skilled puppeteer could make a puppet hurry; but a walk which will serve for any ordinary stage purpose is within anyone's capacity.

To begin with, it is necessary to have threads which will move the legs; and if you are only going to use one thread to each limb those threads must be attached to the feet. The other ends are attached to either end of a simple control six or seven inches long. Try first with the body control in the left hand. Then you hold the foot control in the right, while with the left hand you slide the marionette slowly and evenly over the stage, feet just touching. Bringing the foot strings up taut, with your hands well apart, you will find that by rocking the foot control regularly with the right hand you can move the legs in a manner faintly suggestive of walking. It will look perfectly hopeless at first, but remember that you are quite capable of acquiring with practice a very high degree of manual dexterity, even if you look upon yourself as a rather clumsy fellow. A person typewriting at any ordinary speed is coordinating his movements to a far more complicated rhythm than one walking a puppet. Eating with a knife and fork is a more difficult job, for that matter, and no one thinks twice about that after the age of five or so.

The essence of a good walking technique lies just as much in the faintest possible rising and falling of the body at each stride which, when achieved, quite doubles the naturalness of the walk. The two hands must work exactly together. And the rate of stride must be adjusted for effect. Presumably a human being fifteen inches high would take about as many steps to the minute as a trotting fox-terrier, but no human puppeteer could work a puppet as fast as that—and (what is more important) to the audience it would look quite absurd, because the audience's eye is inclined to treat the puppet as being the normal six feet or so tall. A man walking slowly into a room (I went to no end of trouble to time this on unconscious people) may take as few as forty steps to the minute. Your puppet may take as few as thirty and not look incongruous. You have to exercise your own judgment in this respect, and rely on your own taste. In any case, ten steps will bring your puppet into the middle of the stage from the wings. Practise until you can with certainty get your puppet to take

ten natural steps in twenty seconds, and you will be able to play any part on the marionette stage—and you will be able, too, to do something quite a number of professionals have neglected to learn to do.

Incidentally, please try to learn simultaneously to walk the puppet in either direction, to your left as well as to your right. Any actor is hampered in his performance if he can only make his entrance from, say, the prompt side. Learning this, of course, involves learning to walk the puppet with the body control in either hand, and to rock the foot control with the left hand as well as the right. It is far easier to teach each hand a little in turn, than to acquire good technique in one direction and then have to go back and start all over again in the other direction. This does not mean to say that you will ever be able to make your puppet walk on to the stage, turn round, and walk off again the way he came on. That makes very nearly an impossible demand on the puppeteer. To make a puppet face the right when the body control is on the right hand can just be done—it is uncomfortable, but possible. But to walk him calls either for such contortions on the part of the puppeteer, or for a changing of controls from one hand to the other, as almost to necessitate the reflection of these goings on in the antics of the wretched puppet down on the stage.

We have not yet examined all the possibilities of this walking business. So far we have considered a puppet controlled as regards his legs by threads to his feet. This method of control gives the marionette a peculiar stiff-legged gait—the typical walk of a marionette, in fact, as alluded to in all sorts of passages in English literature. If you attach the foot threads too far down towards the toes, too, the puppet walks with his toes turned up in an inhuman fashion; if you attach them up on his insteps he drags his feet as in extreme old age. Expert puppeteers can make the least of these faults—G., by his delicacy of touch, is unbelievably clever in evading mechanical difficulties. But this way round reminds one of Paschendaele—human flesh and blood and nerves are subjected to demands which should never have been on them. There are better ways out of the difficulty.

Consider how a man walks. He bends his right knee slightly, brings forward his right leg (his body following after) and then transfers his weight to his right foot, straightening the leg. Then his left leg with its knee bent passes his right, straightening again as the weight comes upon it. We want to be able to bend our puppet's knees as well as to bring their feet forward. Clearly a thread to the thigh as well as one to the foot is called for.

The method evolved in the end, after seemingly endless debate, was to use an H-shaped foot control. To the top of each vertical arm ran the threads from the thighs, half an inch above the knee, and to the bottom of each long arm ran the threads from the feet. A certain delicacy of touch is necessary, because the

operator has to work one leg with one end of the control without allowing the other end to affect the other leg in the slightest, and then to change his attention instantly to the other leg and the other control. First you roll your foot control, so that the right thigh string becomes tense, and the right knee is drawn forward (and at the same time the body control allows the body to follow). Then you bring the right foot string up tight, too, so that the leg straightens. You plant the right foot firmly on the ground, and immediately you rock and roll the foot control so as to bend the left knee, following it with the left foot. So by a double rolling motion of the foot control in two planes, exactly balanced by a minutely undulating progression of the body control, all the obvious points about a human walk can be quite satisfactorily produced.

It may sound terribly complicated, but it is not. Admittedly, it is not easy, but it is by far the hardest thing for a puppeteer to learn, and well repays practice. Once you can get your puppet to make his ten steps with certainty and elegance you will feel an enormous superiority over those lesser breeds who struggle along with toe strings and whose puppets cannot walk even well enough to satisfy the nursery. Moreover, you will discover another thing. That is, that all the practice you have put in at walking has borne a double fruit; that your hands and fingers have learned other lessons simultaneously, so that the delicacy of touch which they have acquired during these tedious walking lessons enable them to carry out other marionette jobs with far more accuracy and far less practice. A puppeteer who can walk his marionette properly is quite three-quarters of a complete puppeteer. Please, I beg of you, endure the little drudgery involved, and learn to walk your puppet, with both hands.

Another very decided advantage conferred by having double leg strings is that the control over the legs is very much enhanced. By their aid, for instance, it is much easier to make a puppet kneel down—without double leg strings it is almost impossible to make a puppet kneel on one knee. And no marionette could ever make a proposal of marriage except by going down on one knee—remember what we decided about the element of caricature on the marionette stage. A marionette does human things in an exaggeratedly human way; where it would be slightly fantastic for a man to go down on one knee to propose marriage it is the obvious and natural thing for a puppet to do so. A good proposal of marriage, as Oscar Wilde said, will redeem any play from dullness—or if Oscar Wilde did not say that, he ought to have done. Double leg strings make possible this proposal, just as they make walking possible, as well as half a dozen other gestures, such as crossing the legs when seated. They repay a hundredfold the bother and risk involved in having another couple of strings in the apparatus.

The foot control has on it a small hook, and the tip of the body control has

a small eye, so that you can hang the foot control up when your puppet is safely settled after his walk, seated in a chair most likely, or maybe making a speech. This gives you a hand free to work his arm strings, which is undoubtedly more convenient than doing it with the fingers of the hand holding the body control—although you must always be ready to do this if called upon. The leg strings are easily long enough to hang quite slack when the foot control is hung up, because, while the body strings are always vertical, the leg strings are taken out at an angle to work the legs.

Incidentally, I ought to have mentioned long ago that all the strings which have been mentioned up to the present are made of carpet thread, which you can buy at any haberdashers, although what (despite its name) it is used for apart from marionettes I simply cannot imagine. The very strongest is best for those situations where the thread is subject to strain, as with body and head strings. A thinner and less noticeable sort will do for arms and legs, and as for the colour, you need—well, we had better leave that question to be thrashed out when we come to the long and tedious chapter dealing with stage lighting.

The threads are attached to the puppet by means of the smallest screw eyes you can buy. If the point of attachment is at a clothed portion of the body, the thread is taken through the material before tying it to the screw eye, which is therefore concealed. The head screws present a little more difficulty; if you are lucky you can conceal them in the hair or behind or in the ears, but if the jointing of the puppet makes it imperative that the screw eyes should be somewhere where they can be seen, the only thing to do is to put them there and paint them over—it is surprising how unnoticeable you can make them.

I will throw out a suggestion to the marionette playwright that some day he should write a part for a satyr or a minotaur, or Mephistopheles, or some other character with horns. These horns would be very useful to fasten the threads to, and, because of the leverage they would offer, the puppeteer might find possible surprising things in the nature of head gestures.

This brings us to the consideration of methods of manipulation different from the ordinary workaday one (the General Service type, Mark 1, as the Army would say) which we have just described. The first complication to be dealt with is the female skirt, which is a quite unmitigated nuisance—I am aware that I am not the first to have found it so. You can use your double leg strings on a puppet in female dress if you like; it is quite easy to pass the thigh strings through small brass eyelets in the skirt so that they do not catch on the material. But that means that you have to walk your puppet and handle that control without seeing the puppet's legs, and that is infernally difficult—not to a blind man, perhaps, but decidedly so to the puppeteer accustomed to the use of his eyes. If you can manage it, you are well out of the difficulty. Otherwise

you are reduced to merely using toe strings (which are not too bad, because the skirt conceals the paralysis of the knees). Most puppeteers dispense with the leg control altogether, and “float” the female puppet on to the stage. That is all very well in minor instances. There are certain female costumes which conceal the whole of the lower extremities, but only the most pronounced of them—hooped skirts sweeping the floor—conceal the action of the feet. A modern long evening frock does not. Besides, there are (and have been) precious few women who have ever been able to float into a room like a legless female marionette. A *grande précieuse* might have done it, or a marquise of the rococo period, and, just possibly, a duchess of the Victorian age. Persons of ordinary human clay tend to allow the action of their legs to modify the rigidity of the upper halves of them. Besides, it is a nuisance to the playwright to have to confine his selection of female characters to *précieuses* and marquises and Victorian duchesses. He can evade the difficulty, all the same, by setting his female characters so that they are not obliged to walk—in a chair, or in bed, for that matter, or in a swing or a bath, or standing up to sing a song or make a speech, or he can make them drunk to explain their faulty leg action, or he can put them on skates or on stilts, or he can make them young enough to have their dresses above their knees, or they could perhaps be in bathing costumes or beach pyjamas, or he can have them walking about behind a bar or a counter where their legs do not show, or he can give them the whim to crawl about on their hands and knees—the playwright worth his salt will always be able to wriggle out of this infernal petticoat problem.

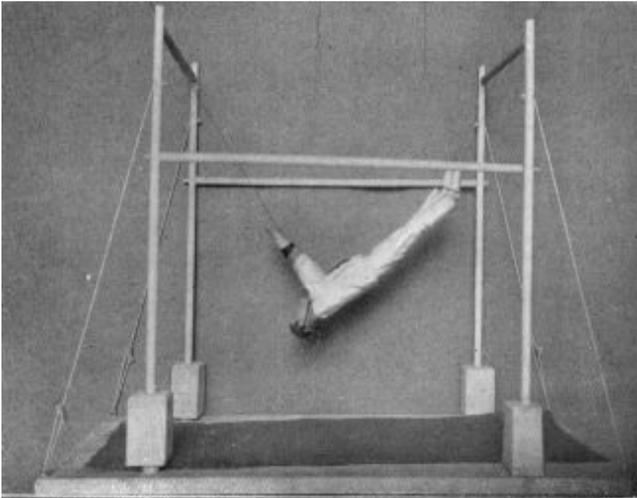
Puppeteers as they grow more experienced tend to introduce their own personal variations into the constructions of the controls they handle. Some like to use their body controls nearly vertical, like an aeroplane standing on its tail, and adjust the lengths of the threads accordingly. This is convenient, as taking up less room, when the puppet is hung up by its control (off stage or on), but I have always a lingering suspicion that it is an affectation—perhaps because I do not like it myself—and how they retain their control I cannot imagine. The method has the disadvantage that an understudy cannot readily take over the working of the puppets if he is not accustomed to the controls used—in this respect rigid standardisation is highly desirable. But puppeteers like to have their little fads and fancies.

Or it is frequently found that in his particular part a puppet has to make frequent use of some special gesture, and in this case the control may be modified so as to make this gesture easy and certain. A puppet who has to yawn, for instance, may have an additional thread from his hand, into his open mouth, and out through the back of his head up to the body control. A twitch of this thread will then bring his hand up to his mouth to stifle his yawn every

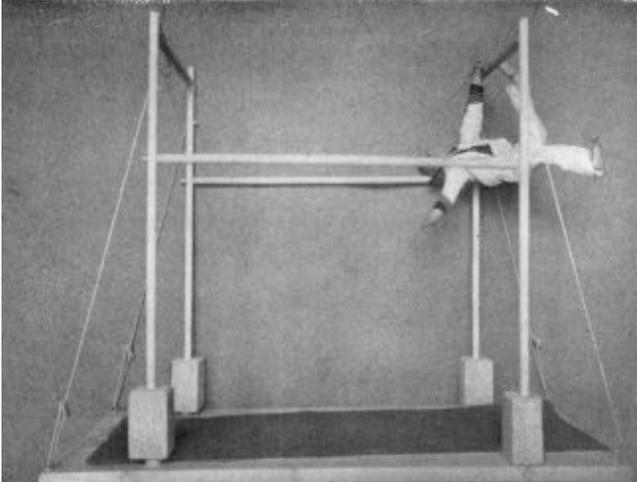
single time, with no possible chance of anything going wrong.

This class of device is very common, and is frequently effective. Thus if a puppet has to pick an object up—a ball, say—a thread is fastened to the ball, passed through a hole in the puppet's hand, and looped with a good deal of slack over a hook in the body control. When the time comes the puppet stoops and puts his hand to the ball, the slack in the ball thread is taken in, and the thread made taut by another loop previously tied in the right place in the thread. Then when the puppet stands up again the ball is in his hand—and the thread has only to be unhooked for him to drop it again.

You can make a puppet, literally, do anything whatever on the stage if you exert your ingenuity. He can smoke a pipe if you have a thin tube ending at his mouth and passing back through the back of his coat and then through the scenery behind to where an assistant is ready to blow smoke through from a cigarette—you may think the feat effective enough to be worth all the necessary rehearsal and preparation, although I don't. An extra thread here or an extra thread there will enable a male puppet to blow his nose or a female puppet to lose a vital garment at the psychological moment. I really think it is time we started a fresh chapter and discussed some of these special acts.



*Above BERTIE SWINGING ACROSS  
He sails gracefully through the air to hang by his toes*



*Below BERTIE STRIKING AN ATTITUDE  
The puppet who cannot go wrong*

## Chapter Four



### BERTIE ET CETERA

It is greatly profitable, and almost invariably artistic, to wring advantage out of the disadvantages which confront you. When you are batting at cricket against a bowler with an enormous break, it gives pleasure to everyone except the bowler when you avoid hitting against the break and allow the turning of the ball to add speed to your stroke. When you are wrestling you take advantage of your opponent's exertion of his strength to induce him to do rather more than he intended to do. If you have to pass over slippery ice, you put on skates and make the slipperiness of the ice help you along.

So it is with puppets. You have to have strings to hold the things up—you would gladly dispense with strings if it were possible, because they are a nuisance and a complication, but seeing that the strings are and must be there, for heaven's sake let us make use of them and wring every possible benefit out of them. Moreover, strings are not quite the flighty, frivolous things the uninitiated spectator takes them to be. They are fixed (if you want them to be) at both ends. One end is under control; the other end (as is a *sine qua non* with strings) necessarily is attached to a point of great interest. You can make far better use of your strings than the audience dreams is possible, so that you start with a very decided advantage. A good deal of marionette work is dependent for its results upon skill in manipulation, and the audience takes it for granted that all the results are similarly dependent upon manual skill; so that any solid certainties can be exploited with peculiar profit and very little trouble. This may appear all very highbrow and theoretical, but it really is not. The point to remember is that it is very easy to devise means by which the puppet's strings enable him to carry out some apparently complicated action with definite certainty every single time he tries.

When my vaudeville programme was actually in process of rehearsal, and dates were definitely fixed for public performances, it came as a shock to me when I found that the programme was, without doubt, ten minutes too short. A whole new turn had to be devised. It had to be different from the others. It had to be such that it took little time to make and not much longer to rehearse. And, as it would be one of ten turns, it must not be bulky behind the scenes, nor call for special scenery, nor call for a very long time to get ready at each

performance. Looking round the theatre for inspiration, my eye fell upon Bertie.

He was a little-boy puppet, beautifully made, in a beautiful white sailor-suit; and he was destined for a tiny part in the little play which constituted one of the turns. It would not be at all difficult to make quickly another more simple puppet to play his little part. Bertie was mine, therefore. Now what could I make a little-boy puppet in a white sailor-suit do? In those clothes it must be something spectacular against a black background. Trapeze? Flying rings? Something of that sort, clearly. Ideas began to germinate, and I began to make amateurish sketches on envelope backs. In five minutes I was quite decided. Rushing out of the rehearsal I precipitated myself into my car, and drove to where my cabinet-maker lives—he greeted me with a tolerant smile, having already executed some fifty or so quite inane commissions for me. He only took half an hour to make what I wanted, and five minutes later I was back in the hubbub of the rehearsal. With Bertie and a reel of carpet thread and a packet of screw eyes I had the turn ready in a quarter of an hour; I commandeered the stage, sent the puppeteers round to the front to act as audience, and made Bertie perform quite adequately—not nearly as well as he did later, when Kathleen took him over and G. had simplified his mechanical arrangements, but well enough for everyone to be impressed.

Bertie is about the best example I know of the puppet who cannot go wrong. His apparatus consists of a couple of horizontal bars (which fold down for transport), each of them raised, by solid uprights, eighteen inches above a heavy piece of board two feet seven inches long. The horizontal bars are twenty inches apart, and Bertie, by the way, is a foot tall. Into each of the horizontal bars are inserted two tiny screw eyes, two inches apart, and symmetrical about the centre of the bars, into the uppermost surface of which they are screwed. Bertie has a pair of threads tied to *each* wrist, and a pair of threads tied to screw eyes in the tip of *each* toe. That is all.

The whole apparatus, with Bertie flat on his back between his bars, is placed on the stage so that the bars are end on to the audience and Bertie sideways on. At his head end a thread from each of his wrists is passed through the corresponding screw eyes, and handed up to the operator. That makes one pair. Then the other threads from his wrists are passed up direct, making another pair. Then a pair from his toes, and the last two threads from his toes are passed through the two screw eyes in the other bar and are handed up, to make a fourth pair. Nowadays we keep these four pairs of threads wound up on little billets of wood and strung on a lath, so that all that has to be done is to hand the lath up to the operator, who ties it with a bit of string to the arm-rest, so as to have all his four pairs of threads distinct and ready for use.

For the purpose of this description, we will have to call the threads which do not pass through the screw eyes the “free” threads and the other ones the “fixed” threads. Take hold of the free hand-threads. Tightening and loosening these threads makes Bertie, as he lies down, raise and lower his arms as if doing physical exercises. Pulling them farther drags him to his feet, arms raised—a little working of the free foot threads will make the action more naturalistic. Then you make him hop until he is directly under the bar at his head end. By holding both the free and the fixed hand threads you can get him exactly under quite easily and quite positively. You let him sag a little, as though gathering himself for a spring, and then you pull sharply on the fixed hand threads. Up he goes with a jerk. Thanks to the pull of the threads, his hands are up against the bar, and can go no farther, and thanks to his loose joints his body sways for a second exactly like the body of a man who has just jumped and hung on to a bar above his head.

You keep his fixed hand threads taut with one hand, and turn the attention of your other hand to his free foot threads. By working these you can make Bertie raise his legs and drop them, and swing himself like a pendulum, as a man will when hanging on a bar. Then a longer pull, and a slight relaxation of the hand threads, will bring him right over into a hand-stand on the bar. No human being can do this, I fancy, but it always looks as if a man ought to be able to, and, as I have said, a puppet’s business is to caricature humanity, not to imitate it. Holding him up like this with taut free foot threads and taut fixed hand threads, you can make him drop and raise either leg in turn by a slight relaxation of its particular thread. Now drop him so that he hangs by his hands again. You can drop and replace each hand in turn, and then, bringing his feet up to the bar with the free strings you can slack off his hand strings so that he appears to be hanging by his feet.

By this time the audience is convinced that Bertie is quite free; all his limbs, singly and in pairs, have been shown hanging loose. Bring him back so that he hangs by his hands, and take hold of his fixed foot strings. One or two gentle pulls set him swinging pendulum-wise again. Release his hand strings, draw smoothly on his fixed foot strings, and he sails gracefully through the air to hang by his toes from the other bar. That never fails to produce a gasp from the audience; in a human it would be a very difficult but not quite impossible feat. Bertie, thanks to his strings passing through the screw eyes, does it with certainty every time. Similarly, a smooth pull on his fixed hand strings brings him sailing back to catch the other bar and swing from it again. Send him back once more so that he hangs from his feet, and encourage him to do more gymnastics there, bringing his hands up to his feet, and so on. Then you can end up with three more leaps from bar to bar, so that the last one finds him

hanging by his hands, and then drop him gracefully to his toes into a standing position as the curtain falls.

As soon as Kathleen saw this first performance of Bertie, she demanded—or rather, she took—complete charge of him. Kathleen is a gymnast herself, and she would trust no one else to do Bertie's puppeteering, not even Bertie's inventor, despite the fact that he was also the owner of the show and the producer and (least important) her husband. We found a nice swiny waltz on a gramophone record, and after a couple of rehearsals Kathleen had his feats so nicely timed that with each change of the *motif* of the music she changed his action, and finally dropped to his feet with the concluding bars; Kathleen's performance with Bertie was, in fact, an astonishing reproduction of a typical vaudeville gymnastic turn—except, of course, that not even a vaudeville gymnast could do half the things Bertie does with such certitude and without putting a finger wrong.

I want to lay stress on the fact that because of the human nature of his joints every pose Bertie adopts, whether sailing through the air or hanging by his feet, is necessarily a natural one. He can do nothing wrong in that way; so vividly lifelike is he that the effect of his superhuman agility is far more striking. I think his is the most popular turn in my vaudeville show. Over and over again, standing in my cramped little wing beside the stage, have I heard the quick intake of breath from the audience as he sails across. You want a little showmanship to make the most of him, of course. His gymnastics on the bars are not merely interesting in themselves, but they have the effect of making the audience think that he is not attached to the bars in any way, so that those onlookers who retain at the back of their minds the lingering recollection that he is only a marionette are still impressed—more so, perhaps—by his exactitude in making his swing.

If Bertie were quite free, provided only with ordinary marionette strings, I do not believe that the most expert puppeteer in the world could swing him across over and over again from bar to bar without making a mistake, but the critical among the audience credit the puppeteer with this feat. The simple devices of attaching two strings to one point, one set for one action and another set for another, and of securing strings so that a pull upon them *necessitates* a certain result, do not occur to the ordinary audience's mind.

The other point I want to emphasise is the simplicity of the whole affair. The puppeteer has only four pairs of strings to handle; each pair can be kept quite distinct from the others, and only two pairs are in use at the same time, while the other two pairs can be entirely disregarded. There is no elaborate apparatus, no inconvenient stage set, no need for prolonged or regular rehearsal. The act is an example of the strict application of means to a single

end. Bertie cannot walk, he cannot drink a cup of tea or turn somersaults or do anything except his own turn; it is because of that that no one ever feels the need that he should. He is complete in himself. His act is the best example I know of the marionette vaudeville turn of the spectacular sort, dependent for its merit on its appeal to the eye. But, of course, there are dozens more such turns, as good or a lot better, only waiting for you to invent them.

Bingo, the Boy Balancer, on the other hand, is not quite so foolproof and calls for a certain amount of rehearsal—not a great deal, really—to make the most of him. In principle he is entirely foolproof—it is when you have to make a ten-minute turn out of him that you are compelled to add stunts which take a little practice. Try and visualise for a moment a man balancing a billiard cue vertically on his nose. All the weight of his body, his feet, his centre of gravity, are kept anxiously exactly underneath the billiard cue. If the billiard cue sways he sways too. Each painful movement is not so much initiated by himself as by the cue.

Bingo has a thread from the tip of his nose up to his body control, and by bringing that thread up taut all his weight is dependent from the tip of his nose, his other threads hanging slack. Now—here is the secret—on that thread is threaded the stick he is balancing; actually it is a section of thin cane stolen from Kathleen's garden and painted in the best gaudy vaudeville style. For further refinement we thread a big ball on as well, to rest on the top of the cane. When his nose-thread is up taut, it stands to reason that all Bingo's weight tends to hang under his nose. His head is thrown back, his stomach comes forward, his feet are exactly under the cane. Move the control over his head an inch or two; the thread—and the cane—inclines in that direction for a second, and then instantly comes back to the vertical as Bingo lurches underneath it again. All his wobbles are inevitably referred by the eye to the necessity for keeping the stick balanced; the parallel is exact, because the system mechanically reproduces the state of affairs prevailing when a man really is balancing a stick on his nose; the only difference is that gravity is being counteracted by a pull on a thread instead of by a push on the floor.

Bingo is G.'s special charge. He made him, lovingly, adding layer after layer of plastic wood to build up his nose so as to give it the size necessary to produce the effect of caricature and the solidity necessary to retain the screw eye which has to bear all Bingo's weight. He carved and moulded his face so as to give it just that complete idiocy of expression expected of a man who earns his living balancing a stick on his nose. He designed his costume of green blazer and white shorts, and during rehearsal he perfected the method of control so as to achieve the maximum of simplicity.

Attached to his body control Bingo has the usual five threads—one to his

back, one to each side of his head, one to each hand. There is also a hook for the attachment of the nose thread when necessary; and he has a foot control with a thread to each toe—there is no need at all for double leg threads, as no one expects a natural gait from a man balancing on his nose a five-foot stick and on the top of that a ball two feet in diameter.

When the curtain rises and the music starts Bingo is revealed standing normally facing the audience; G., up on the castle, is holding his body control in his left hand, and in his right the foot control and the end of the nose thread and, ready threaded, the ball and the stick. Bingo bows. Then G. pulls the nose thread taut. Back goes Bingo's head. Moreover, his arm threads are taut so that a slight inclination of the body control brings his arms up towards horizontal, where they sway life-like. There is a tense pause. "Whoop-la," says a thick voice. Then down from above, like an arrow, falls the stick, and with marvellous skill Bingo catches it exactly on the tip of his nose. He tenses himself again. Down falls a huge ball, and Bingo catches that, too, balancing it on the end of the stick. It is a colossal feat; he has to wobble to hold it steady, but soon he gains complete control—as soon, that is to say, as G. has looped the nose string on to its hook on the body control. Gingerly he sets out to walk across the stage, but there is a crisis at nearly every stride as the stick wobbles, and the ball wobbles, and Bingo lurches to keep things balanced, and his hands sway feverishly from side to side—all which effects G. is producing by a single shake of the body control, just as anybody else could.

G. handles those controls wonderfully. With the aid of the single foot control he gets Bingo to walk, to dance a few shaky steps, to go down in the splits. There is a little see-saw awaiting Bingo—the stage manager has to see, before the curtain goes up, that it is in the right place and sloping the right way; omission on her part once compelled Bingo to do some fantastic stunts to push it into position. Very shakily Bingo ascends the see-saw. When he reaches the point of balance so that the see-saw inclines the other way the stick nearly escapes him, but he recovers himself, rocks on the see-saw, and then toboggans down the slope. Next there is a rocking-chair. He seats himself in it gingerly and, success going to his head, he throws himself carelessly back so that the chair tips over backwards.

But by a miracle the stick still rests on his nose. Keeping his crouching body under it, he rises inch by inch into a standing position again as G. raises the body control, until as the last bars of the music are heard he is once more upright. Then he shakes his head and down falls stick and ball as G. unhooks the nose thread and lets the end fall down on to the stage. The curtain drops in time to prevent the audience from seeing the stage manager picking it up again.

All this is simplicity refined by dexterity of manipulation. A mere novice

could handle Bingo well enough to make a short, amusing turn with him, in which mistakes were impossible, and I dare say the novice could devise with other properties sufficient elaboration for a long turn in which good manipulation was unnecessary; but G. is such a good puppeteer that he can work his difficult stunts on the see-saw and the rocking-chair without turning a hair and without once, in a whole series of public performances, ever making a mistake. He nearly gives the producer heart failure instead.

But (as I must once more repeat, to the limits of tedium) the essence of the act is the employment of a thread on useful work, compelling it to contribute directly to the performance instead of indirectly via its action on a limb; and in addition making use of the peculiar merit of a thread in being a fixed and certain object in a world where most things call for coaxing and for delicate handling.

## Chapter Five



### BUTTERFLIES AND ANGELS

Butterflies (marionette butterflies) are rather jolly things of rather limited application and interest. Of all marionette turns they are the easiest to handle, even if (as I suspect) I have already said the same thing about Bertie and his Horizontal Bars. You cut the two wings of a butterfly separately out of three-ply, any size which appeals to you. We use butterflies about five inches long, but butterflies two feet long are just as easy. You roughly carve out its body from a cylinder of wood and stick the wings to the body with hinges of adhesive surgical plaster. (By the way, surgical plaster and plastic wood are the two raw materials most in demand in a marionette theatre; the applications of both are beyond all counting.) You can, if you like, make antennæ for the thing out of beads and wire.

Next, you stick threads to the head and tail of the body, at such points that the butterfly is balanced horizontally when suspended by them, and you join these threads into an inverted Y whose arms are about eighteen inches long. Then you stick a thread to the middle of each wing, once more selecting the points of balance so that the butterfly is suspended from them in a horizontal attitude. You tie these two threads into a Y, too, with arms some inches longer than the other Y. Now you are left with two threads, the stems of each Y; one thread is attached to the body and the other to the wings. Tie the body thread to the tip of your thumb and the wing thread to the tip of your forefinger—or you can save yourself a lot of trouble by stitching the threads into their corresponding positions in an old glove.

If you allow the butterfly to hang from your hand, holding your forefinger above your thumb, you will find that now you can give the butterfly quite a natural action. Drop your thumb and the wings close; approximate your thumb to your forefinger and the wings open. Swing your hand about while you do this, and the butterfly swoops and flutters most satisfactorily. It looks very well for two minutes, but if you are to make a real turn out of it you have to use a little showmanship; although, seeing how little handling and attention a butterfly calls for and how little room, you can quite well save this up for a momentary and effective appearance on a stage crowded with other puppets and properties.

I used a pair (or should it be a couple or a brace?) of butterflies, however, as a separate turn in a vaudeville show. It is the sort of act which lends itself very easily to symbolism and mysticism if you want to indulge in that sort of thing—I don't; I prefer my butterflies to fly round their stage without having their antics submitted to a Freudian interpretation, and I should hate to be asked after the performance if the silver butterfly has an Œdipus complex, or if the other one acts like that because of something unpleasant it saw behind the stables when it was only a caterpillar.

The turn has so little "content," to use a highbrow expression, that it has to be very carefully dressed. We use a golden-yellow-flowered backcloth of rather lovely material bought at an extravagant price from Liberty's, and we have banks of moss and masses of Woolworth artificial flowers (which are startlingly effective in footlights), and we make great play with changing the colours of the lighting and so on as the turn proceeds. Our butterflies are covered with the handsome leadfoil which can be found nowadays wrapped round chocolate biscuits; the under side of the wings are, in one butterfly, plain gold, and in the other one, plain silver, while the upper surfaces are a riot of fine colour—Kathleen had to throw away all her reputation at the stores for good housekeeping by, when ordering chocolate biscuits, admitting that she did not care a hoot what the biscuits were like as long as their foils offered an attractive variety of colour. This leadfoil, carefully stuck on, has the advantage that it will flash every now and then in the footlights, so that by the time the audience is thoroughly bored with watching two silly butterflies flying round and round, it still remains interested in watching for the flash and in observing the effect of the play of a variegated lighting upon the colouring.

You have to pick your incidental music with care, too. There are at least two compositions of Grieg which accord very well with fluttering butterflies—but Grieg is played, for one reason or another, such a lot at drawing-room shows of different kinds that I refused point-blank to allow a single note of Grieg to be heard at mine. The puppeteer who is responsible for the butterflies should choose the gramophone record which takes his fancy and familiarise himself with it as closely as possible; it is easy enough then to adapt the flutterings of your butterflies to the music, taking the risk lest the sentimentalists should try to read a spiritual interpretation into them. Perhaps the butterflies look at their best lying flat on their stomachs on the stage with their wings gently rising and falling as though breathing—quite truthfully, this is a most effective attitude, and one of much beauty—and one might, for instance, end the turn as the music dies away with the butterflies dropping off to sleep like this on a gradually darkening stage.

But my gifts, such as they are, do not tend that way. Yours well may do so;

you may have an aptitude or a genius for constructing performances of great symbolical beauty. I am a realist and a man of base metal. I end my butterfly turn on a ludicrous note by causing one of the butterflies to pick up (as though by accident) one of the big artificial asters and to fly round in an endeavour to shake it off. Not being a humorist, I would rather cause one laugh than all the tears and all the arguments in the world.

This butterfly mechanism is one capable of extensive application. You need not use butterflies, of course; you can use birds if you like, although hardly mosquitoes, as no one could bring thumb and finger together a sufficient number of times per second to imitate the mosquito's flight. You can apply it to the ears of animals or the blacksmith's bellows. But when it comes to angels or fairies you are up against a difficulty, because the principle involves employing the pull of gravity to return the wings to an open position. An angel's wings are vertical and not horizontal—unless you can succeed (I cannot) in making your angel fly belly downward and still look angelic. To make an angel flap its wings when it is flying upright you have to start by boring a hole clean through its chest from front to back. The wings themselves (my experience has been that three-ply has solid advantages which outweigh the meretricious charm of gauze or feathers) are kept apart by a very weak spring, one end of which is stuck into the middle of the back of each wing. For the spring I use a section of the special kind of hair curler Kathleen uses; it must be the weakest spring which will suffice to keep the wings open. Then you fasten a thread to the middle of the back of each wing as well, close to where the spring is inserted, and unite the two threads. Finally, you pass a thread through the hole in the angel's chest and fasten it to the other threads at the point of union. A pull on this thread closes the wings; let it go and the spring opens them again. The reason for the weakness of the spring is that you have to overcome its strength with the angel suspended in the air, and too strong a spring calls for a pull of such strength as to make the angel wobbly in its flight. The wing-controlling thread is brought up to a body control of the usual type, passed through a hole in it, and held in place by being tied to a button. Then, when the angel has to fly, you just take hold of the button and pull it and let it go gently and repeatedly, and when the angel has come to earth you can leave the wing thread alone and forget all about it.

It is as well not to be too flippant on this subject of flight. Marionettes can fly and not lose their appearance of reality, even in a hard-boiled show, and this is an attribute of high potential value. You cannot put flying actors on the human stage unless you are producing an absurdity, but you can do so on the marionette stage. It is not even necessary to use wings—a cloak suitably spread has a fine dramatic effect, and in this case your actor can fly head first

and stomach downwards without provoking even the beginnings of a smile; but the system of threading the puppet so as to spread his cloak and to get him into this position in space is a little complex. I will leave the working of it out to you as your first exercise in the designing of a control.

The marionette stage offers very great opportunity for plays making use of the supernatural; the repertoire of my company includes a perfectly horrible little ten-minute play, based on an incident in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The use of threads makes all things possible on the marionette stage; boxes will open at the word of command without a finger being laid on them; furniture will shift creepily about; characters can hang suspended in the air. Your puppet can have any type or colour of face and head. Monsters can wear human clothes. Heads or limbs can become detached. Disarticulated bones can come together and form a complete skeleton—this is one of the classic devices of the marionette stage. The dramatist can do whatever he likes with marionettes, and he always has the very decided advantage that the audience at a marionette show is far more tolerant and sympathetic towards the use of stage (or stagey) devices than exactly the same audience would be at a West-End theatre. If he is wise he will exploit this state of mind as far as ever he dare, especially as (I am afraid this book is degenerating into an intellectual disquisition rather than a compendium of practical hints) the exploiting of the audience's mood, induced or inherent, is the principal function of the dramatist.

Angels and vampires and insects are all quite possible actors on the marionette stage; so, too, are animals and reptiles. I do not use them myself and I never have, although I cannot explain why, except merely by saying I do not like marionette animals. Lots of people do like them, however, and very probably my shows lose by their absence. All I can say if you intend to use them is just to implore you to make good use of them. In more than one professional show I have seen perfectly splendid animals simply wasted because they were not shown off properly. It is no use constructing the most life-like dog or the most preposterous horse if you concentrate on the construction and do not bear in mind the fact that they are going to act before a presumably unmechanical audience which knows nothing of marionettes, and which will remain unmoved in the presence of the most marvellous technical achievements unless they are properly presented. An audience soon loses interest in what a puppet *is*, but with a little encouragement it will retain its interest in what a puppet *does*.

As I have never made practical use of animal puppets I cannot pretend to be able to give any hints on their construction or manipulation. Planning the controls for them must be rather fun; presumably it is necessary so to joint and balance the limbs that simple rocking movements of the main control cause the

legs to go through the movements of walking or running. It has always been in my mind that a dog puppet would be benefited by having a thread to the corner of the upper lip—a gentle pull on this would give him a realistic snarl. But I simply cannot at present devise a good mechanism for wagging his tail.

On the other hand, sea lions, with their uncanny ability to balance balls on their noses, would offer a great opportunity for the employment of the same sort of device as is used by Bingo the Boy Balancer, and their awkward shuffle could easily be produced (so I imagine, but all these things depend on experiment) by a puppeteer in the wing to which the sea lion is facing—a thread to each front flipper, lying along the stage and pulled alternately, ought to be quite effective. That would mean, of course, that you would have two puppeteers (the other one being up in the castle attending to the nose string, and so on) responsible for one puppet. I have done that in my show occasionally, but it calls for intensive rehearsal as a rule.

## Chapter Six



### THE BALLET

There is still one great marionette principle which we have left untouched so far, and that is a most important one. Marionettes can do various things better than human actors, but their superiority is displayed at its best in the matter of keeping time. You can (if your taste runs to the spectacular) have a dozen, twenty, a hundred puppets on the stage at once, and all of them doing the same thing at exactly the same time—not, as on the human stage, to the nearest tenth or twentieth of a second, but at exactly the same time. Nor does this achievement depend upon the intensive rehearsal and constant drilling of a dozen or twenty or a hundred puppeteers; it depends on the casual practice of one single puppeteer. He pulls one string and every puppet on the stage raises one limb; he lets it go again and every limb drops. The exactness of the timing is peculiarly effective. The timing is more exact than the Guards on parade presenting arms; it is certainly more exact than anything that can be achieved by the most perfectly trained ballet. No ballet on earth makes all its gestures so exactly simultaneously that the eye is not conscious of some slight irregularity. When it makes a simultaneous leap the members of the ballet do not quite leap to exactly the same height—there may be a quarter of an inch difference here and there perhaps, and similarly, if it strides forward, all the members do not take exactly the same length of stride.

The ordinary ballet-goer is not conscious of these slight irregularities until he sees a marionette ballet at work. The difference is slight, but intensely noticeable. The ballet-goer admiring the synchronisation of a human ballet is like a man after a good shave stroking his cheeks and telling himself complacently that his face is as smooth as a baby's bottom—but he has only to stroke a baby's bottom at the same time to realise that his face is nothing like as smooth, really. The irregularities, measured in hundredths of an inch, are minute, but they are very definitely and noticeably there.

I am not trying to prove that mechanical exactitude of timing would be an improvement in a ballet. I don't think it would be at all. But it is a very new and exciting thing to see occasionally, especially when it is helped out by having every member of the ballet exactly like every other member—same height, same face, same colouring, in fact much more alike than anything the

mind has ever imagined before. What helps all this even more is the fact that the marionette stage is small enough to be entirely viewed simultaneously by the eye of the spectator. A member of the audience at a human ballet tends to see not more than one or two dancers at once, and is only vaguely conscious of the others. But he sees the entire marionette stage and ballet at a glance, and if it is properly presented to him, and he has been got into the right mood by one or two good turns just before, he is unconscious of this difference; he is only conscious of a new and rather thrilling spectacle.

The marionette ballet, then, depends on the fact that it is possible to work a whole series of limbs by the pull of one string. It sounds very simple, and so it is if you make it so; but if you start elaborating on the theme you find that the technical difficulties increase by geometrical progression while the improvements only increase by arithmetical progression. Take an example. Two puppets stand side by side. There are threads to each of their left toes. These join a yard above their heads and are continued as a single thread to the puppeteer's hand. One pull, and both legs rise together. Now add two more puppets to the row, making four. The two inner ones stand in the same relation to the puppeteer as did the previous pair. But the two outside ones are not quite directly in front of him. The threads from their toes necessarily incline inwards at an angle up to the point of junction. This means that the pull of the thread on the toe not only raises the leg, but tends to pull it across and inwards, so that if the hip joint is loose the leg tends to follow the pull, and if the hip joint is tight some of the pull is dissipated on friction and the leg acts more stiffly. The more puppets you put in the row, the more marked becomes this inward inclination of the foot strings and the more marked its effect on the action of the limb.

You can evade the difficulty if you want to. Each thread can be taken up vertically to a frame held by the operator, and conducted by a pulley round the corner to the central point where it joins the others. But that, as I said at the start, is an increase in the technical complexity out of proportion to the gain in elaboration on the stage. In practice you will find that three puppets will work satisfactorily to the pull of a single string, while four will not. So that with a maximum of six puppets in a line, the left foot strings of the three of the left wing and of the three of the right wing can join together, reducing the total number to attend to to two. (Those last few words when read aloud sound like a trumpet solo.) These two are then passed over pulleys inserted into a flat control (as long as four puppets are wide) and joined in the middle to a boot button. Pulling the button then does the trick. You will also find that it is more convenient, as regards repairs and storage, not to knot each set of three together, but to use a small ring, an inch in diameter, to which you tie each of

the three strings and also the fourth string which comes up to the control. With nine puppets in a row there is still need only for two pulleys—the string from the middle three puppets comes up through a hole in the control direct to the button.

So far so good. We have our left legs all working as one, and at first glance it seems as if there is no reason why a similar mechanism should not work the right legs. You will have to do a bit of visualising to appreciate now the difficulty you will encounter if you try it. Let us call the puppets in one set of three A, B, C. Now clearly the string from Miss C's right toe is going to cross the string from Miss B's left toe somewhere or other; and either one string or the other must be in front. So that either when Miss B kicks with her left leg, or Miss C with her right leg, the tightening of the thread will affect the other thread, and Miss A will be in a similar relationship to Miss B, too—and you will find in practice, unexpected though it might be theoretically, that Miss A's strings will affect Miss C's strings as well.

The only thing to do is to adopt a system for keeping the strings well apart. You can bring all the left-foot strings vertically up to one horizontal rod, and all the right-foot strings forward and upward to another horizontal rod some distance farther in front of the puppeteer. The puppeteer then has a large H-shaped control. The left-foot rod is suspended by two threads passed over pulleys inserted in the control at points near the angle of the cross-bar, and the right-foot rod is suspended by two threads passed over pulleys inserted in the control right at the tips. Each pair of threads unite at either end of a thin rod, which is held by the operator, and then raising the far end of the rod makes all the right legs kick, and raising the near end makes all the left legs kick, and you have achieved your end at last—at the cost (as I threatened) of very considerable mechanical complexity. All those threads are liable to sudden entanglements, and the control is a clumsy and awkward thing to handle; getting the ballet on to the stage ready for their turn is a long and nerve-racking business, and going through their turn is more nerve-racking still. But still, you can at least try it now. And if you want to work their arms and their heads in similar fashion you can work out how to do it for yourself.

So far we have only described the limb controls; we have made no mention of Mesdames A and B and C's vile bodies. Clearly they must be joined together, because if you have each one swinging independently, suspended merely by threads, you are going to run enormous risks in the matter of muddles and lack of synchronisation. Far and away the best thing to do is to join them rigidly to each other. It is easy enough—run a stiff wire or a thin rod of wood across the smalls of their backs and staple or screw it tightly to their trunks. Your wardrobe mistress, who will subsequently have the job of

dressing them, will have to devise a system of loopholes in their bodices circumventing this wire—it presents no particular difficulty. As the individual puppets are as close side by side as is possible, not more than an eighth of an inch or so of this wire will be visible to the audience between each pair of puppets, and they will never notice it.

The matter of the suspension of the ballet to the control calls for a bolder decision. You can hang them by threads if you like, and you can go through a creditable performance that way. But it is irksome. Twisting the control tends to lift the ballet off its feet by the torsion of the threads, instead of rotating the ballet as you intended. The response to impulses is not as spontaneous and as sympathetic as you would like it to be. It is far better to suspend the ballet by rigid iron wires—rods would be a better word. These, rising up one at each end of the row from the connecting bar, are going to be visible to the audience. You—and the audience—have got to put up with that. You can minimise the result by painting your rods the exact colour of the back-cloth, but even then you find that high lights make the rods visible. In actual practice you will find that the ballet occupies the audience's attention to the exclusion of the mechanism, and if that does not appear likely, you can cover the uprights with rambler roses, put in a cross-bar similarly adorned, and base the action of the ballet on the assumption that they are carrying a floral arch.

The manipulation of the ballet calls for a good deal of thought and planning, even if it does not call for assiduous practice. By bolting your girls together you commit yourself irrevocably to the fact that they are always side by side, and can never follow my leader. In fact, they are just in the same condition as the troupes you can see in any touring revue, who link their arms round each other's waists and come on to keep the audience amused while the scenery is being changed under cover of the curtain behind them. It is comforting to know that your ballet will be a whole lot better than that.

First of all, you must choose your music—something which goes with a swing, if possible, with a definite rhythm and marked changes of *motif*; and, having got it thoroughly into your head, you must sketch out a time-table in accordance with it—just as Bertie does his stunts on the horizontal bars in regular and rhythmic rotation. Your puppets, of course, all have good human joints which are quite loose. When you jerk the control about in time to the music the puppets all jerk too (this sounds childish, and probably is childish, but it goes to make a good show) and furthermore, as they are all identical, they all jerk exactly in time. If the audience only saw one puppet doing this it would think it puerile, and would visualise the puppeteer's simple process too clearly to enjoy anything, but a whole series of puppets keeping exact time is far too pleasing to the eye for this state of affairs to prevail; moreover, as every

attitude and pose and movement can be exactly reproduced in the human body, the mind of the onlooker prefers to assume that they are the result of a conscious effort—one puppet might be going through those contortions because she was being strangled, say, but when six puppets are going through *exactly* the same contortions at *exactly* the same time, the mind jumps the gap and decides that they are voluntary, rehearsed and intentional. It is an irresistible conclusion.

Then you must start to work in your high kick. The puppets' hip joints must be a little freer than those of puppets who do not dance; they must be able to bring their legs up to the vertical without any effort at all—in other words, without the rest of their bodies reacting to the pull. You will find that when you want to move your ballet bodily sideways you can do so quite naturally by sidling them on the toe and heel of one foot with a high kick from the other. You can add to your effects by removing the carpet from the stage and making your ballet dance on bare boards (or bare three-ply). As the connection between puppets and control is rigid, you can dispense with the friction between the puppets' feet and the floor without fear of slipping, and the rhythmical tapping of the row of wooden feet is decidedly pleasing.

A novice who thinks out his performance can give quite an entertaining little dance with his ballet, but to give a really good, outstanding show calls for a high degree of skill, and much practice—practice, moreover, which is of no aid in developing your skill in other manipulations. The delicacy of touch necessary for good handling of a rigid control is of quite a different nature from that needed with thread suspension, while the united weight of a row of six or nine puppets is serious—you have to train your arms to get used to it.

In point of fact—this is a terrible confession to make after this long discussion—these large, elaborate ballets are only worth constructing and rehearsing if you are desperately interested. In the case of my own company we explored the possibilities of elaboration, and in the end we discarded elaboration in favour of simplicity. We cut down the number of our puppets from nine to three. We threaded only one set of legs, leaving the others to dangle free. We changed our grown women in ballet dresses for little girls in frocks. We simplified manipulations to the utmost possible degree. And when we had done all that we had created the turn which is still the most popular in our repertoire.

The control we use for our three little girls is a flat bar, to the ends of which are attached the stiff wires descending to the ballet. On the upper surface is a round knob by which the operator holds it—the advantage of a round knob is that the operator can spin the whole ballet round if he wants to. Protecting from the front of the control is a flat piece of wood four inches long,

pierced with a hole, through which passes the single thread. The upper end of the thread is retained by a boot button; the lower end is attached to a ring, to which also is attached the three threads rising from the little girls' left toes. That is all. The puppeteer takes the knob in one hand and the boot button in the other; he waves the knob about and he jerks the button, and the ballet goes through a performance which has always been successful.

With the stiff controls and a small and handy ballet the puppeteer has a great deal of influence over the action of the legs, whether threaded or not. He can bring the girls down to a kneeling position, on either knee or both. He can make them bow. True, the girls can only kick with their left legs, but by planning their steps with due attention to the music he can carry that off without anyone in the audience being aware of the deficiency. Dropping the puppets on their right knees with their left legs out in front of them, a twitch of the thread sets their left heels tapping joyously. The act is enormously helped in this case by the dolls' heads which the puppets wear. They are so young and their unchanging expression is unconsciously attributed by the audience to a brave determination on their part to go through their act without a mistake; and when the audience is in this frame of mind the fact that not one of the little girls ever gets out of step is held mightily in their favour. They skip forward and they skip back, they sidle to the right and they sidle to the left. They twirl dizzily round, with their six little feet all tapping exactly in time. They can kick prodigiously if they want to, as effortlessly as the loosest-limbed star in the whole of the Russian Ballet. And when they finally sink down in a supremely modest little curtsey everyone has grown very fond of them. They are really a very jolly turn.

This Ballet of the Three Good Little Girls is one end of the scale in the application of the principle of synchronised motion. There is no limit at the other end, except that set by the size of the stage. You can have your ballet as elaborate and as mechanical as you will; and if you are mechanically minded on the one hand, or a devotee of the ballet on the other, you are probably already sketching out in your mind improvements on our modest turn. The elaboration which I have been experimenting with is a show of Javanese belly dancers—if there are no belly dancers in Java there ought to be. This consists of half a dozen puppets on a concealed frame, who make no attempt to walk about. Their arms and their legs are synchronised, being worked by four threads in charge of a puppeteer up in the castle. But the actual belly dancing is left to two operators in the wings, who actuate horizontal threads strung laterally through the puppets' bodies and heads. Trunk-bending sideways (as a handbook on Swedish drill would describe it) with appropriate arm and leg raising can then be easily arranged, along with the *danse du ventre* which is the

central feature of the show in more ways than one. Little tinkling bells in the puppets' hands ought to help the effect, but I have not yet succeeded in fitting them in with European gramophone music.

When you start disposing your ballet in Indian file instead of side by side you come up against further interesting potentialities. A column of policemen or soldiers (or convicts doing the lock-step, for that matter) will keep exact time with very little trouble, as you can link all the legs of the same side together with an invisible wire and then can concentrate solely upon the business of making the leader walk naturally. Link the right hands together and synchronise them with the left legs, and vice versa, and you can have your ballet marching with a mechanical precision which would put the Guards to shame. We use a section of policemen in this style in our children's play. They provide an effective two-minutes' interlude, with their stiff knees and their ponderous stride, but somehow I have never found time to explore all their possibilities. I will leave the idea with you to improve upon.

But please do not be led into thinking, by the light-hearted manner in which I have described the way you can jig your ballet up and down, just pulling one string, that dancing on the marionette stage is always an easy and effective turn. There is a great temptation, when you have a puppet on the stage and convenient music playing, to fill in awkward gaps in the turn by jiggling the puppet up and down and thinking it is dancing. Believe me, it is not. I have seen several good programmes spoiled by that sort of thing. A puppet shaken about by its threads goes through just about the same contortions whatever sort of puppet it is, and if an audience sees eight or ten puppets in turn going through exactly the same meaningless contortions, it is apt to get a bit bored—I have been, I know.

There has got to be some point to the dance and a little planning of the steps helps to achieve this end; moreover, careful handling of the foot control at the same time can make the puppet appear as if he is acting in a purposeful manner and is not just the victim of an unseen but easily guessed at human being who is not quite sure of what he ought to be doing. A few good lines, or a bit more business (whatever may be the strain they put on your powers of invention), are usually worth far more than any bit of dancing, unless the latter is planned and worked into the substance of the turn to aid in its development.

The most fascinating dance to attempt with a puppet, in my opinion, is a sailor's hornpipe. It is extraordinarily difficult to do, but it is well worth trying. You have to acquire a delicacy of touch and a quickness of hand which you will be proud of later on. If you use an H-shaped foot control (which I recommend, but you may easily find something else of your own devising suits you better) you will find that as you grow more expert, a larger control is more

convenient; it enables you to make a sharper distinction between thigh and leg movements, and the increased leverage means that a smaller movement of the control is necessary to produce a pronounced movement of the limb—that is desirable because the interval of time between a movement of one leg and a movement of the other is much smaller than in walking.

However, compensation is to be found in the fact that you can go through the dance much slower than the human sailor does and still keep it effective. You cannot slow it down to slow motion-picture speed, but you can approach that with safety. And as if you use a gramophone you cannot slow the running down to this tempo, you have to learn to think in half time to the music—some people do that more easily than others.

You will find more trouble with the arms than with the legs—in fact, although I have seen professionals contrive a complete hornpipe in very good style, no member of my company can do it; we have to make use only of parts of the dance. I think the line on which the problem ought to be attacked is by devising some kind of automatic synchronisation between legs and arms—presumably by attaching the arm threads to the foot control, so that when the arms come up in the rope-hauling gesture, the thighs and legs go through their action automatically. The possibilities this opens up of getting into a colossal muddle are simply immense, but they are worth risking, I think. But if ever I work the idea out satisfactorily I shall rehearse the turn a very large number of times before I present it to any audience other than one of small children.

## Chapter Seven



### THE DRAMA

So far we have discussed only the exotic turns—Bertie on his Horizontal Bars, and Bingo, the Boy Balancer, and the Ballet, and the Butterflies. (It will be apparent that a great part of the puppeteer’s vocabulary begins with B—you have only to attend a difficult marionette rehearsal to discover that for yourself.) We have yet to discuss what Bingo would scathingly describe as “the legitimate.”

Here we come up against the spoken word, which has not affected us at all up to now. The most elaborate marionette productions—those of the Italian company, for instance—employ one set of people to say the lines and sing the songs, while quite another set operates the puppets. On the other hand, in the majority of small English professional shows, the puppeteer says his lines while working his puppet. In my show we avoid that wherever possible. The best advice I can give you is to try both ways, and see which suits the genius of your company best.

At first sight it seems obvious that the performance benefits if the puppeteer says the words his puppet is supposed to be saying. He can fit his gestures to his lines; he can synchronise exactly; and if he finds his puppet in an unexpected difficulty he can redraft his lines to suit the new situation. Actually, I do not think these arguments are worth anything at all. The puppeteer’s activity does not necessarily coincide with the words or gestures of his puppet.

Supposing the puppet has to say: “I’m blowed if I do,” at the same time making an emphatic gesture with his fist. Now when he says it he raises his hand slowly while he says: “I’m” and brings it down sharply on “blowed.” While the puppeteer is saying “I’m” he is actively engaged in drawing on the arm thread of his puppet. When he is saying the emphatic word “blowed,” he is doing nothing at all, but merely allowing the puppet’s arm to fall of its own weight. It is terribly easy, even after prolonged practice, to mix up your emphasis and the puppet’s emphasis, so that either the puppet does the wrong thing quickly or you say the wrong word sharply. And there is no knowing what the excitement of the moment may do to you. Even at the fiftieth performance you can find yourself personally pounding on the arm-rest when

you say “blowed,” with the result that the wretched puppet below you is leaping madly about—far more madly than the tenseness of the situation justifies.

I do not believe a puppeteer can manipulate his puppet with the necessary calm detachment if he has to say his words at the same time. He is liable to devote too much of his mind to the one and let the other go hang; especially is he liable, absorbed as he is in manipulation, to forget his lines altogether and dry up. That means prompting and whispering behind the scenes (always a sign of a bad production) and a jerky action on the part of the puppet when the puppeteer finally remembers what it is he ought to be saying. And as for the argument that a puppeteer can extemporise words to gloss over a difficulty——! Try to imagine yourself hurrying a puppet on to the stage with some vital piece of news, and then finding that a foot string is looped round a chair so that the chair follows him about, while his knee is up to his chin. You will be far too occupied with the problem of freeing the thread ever to think for a moment of anything to say.

Under the other system you evade all sorts of complications. It is quite possible that your best manipulator of your leading lady or your precocious juvenile is a bearded man with a voice down in his boots. He cannot possibly say his puppet’s lines, and you are faced (if you insist on having your puppeteers speaking) with the unpleasant necessity of handing over that puppet to inferior manipulation. If you employ readers they have their lines constantly in front of them, so that they can never dry up, and are saved the bother of memorising their parts. Moreover, reader and puppeteer can play up to each other in a fashion hard to appreciate without experience. You cannot lay down any hard and fast rule as to which sets the pace and which conforms to it—no comparison such as that with the relations between soloist and accompanist applies. A mutual give and take soon becomes apparent. The reader, with his eyes on the puppet, becomes rapidly able to tell when the puppeteer is finding his business difficult, and slows up or quickens his pace to help him through; while at the same time the puppeteer soon grows familiar with the reader’s interpretation of the part and adapts his performance to it.

Naturally, accidents occur sometimes. I have known a puppet throw back his head and writhe in silent mirth, while the laugh which ought to have accompanied the gesture followed a second or two later when he had got back upright again, just as I once saw Mrs. Patrick Campbell turn sharply away from her piano (was it in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*? I am not sure) and say, pettishly, that she could not play to-night—while the piano went on playing, thanks to a forgetful pianist in the wing. But there is no necessity for accidents, and a little care and attention on the part of the cast can do away with them

completely.

It is a little more difficult for the reader when the exigencies of the production give him two parts to read in alternate speeches—with a Yorkshire dialect, say, for the one, and a Cockney dialect for the other. It can be done (and if it can, it always means an enormous relief for the management, who are saved having to find another voice), but at the same time no one who has not tried it can appreciate the ease with which the wretched speaker can slip into the wrong dialect by mistake. Notice the point which I have made regarding the relief afforded to the management if a speaker can take two parts at once. It really is an enormous relief; to have two readers who can do that practically means that all the main body of the dialogue is provided for in an average programme—any odd bits which they cannot contrive between them can be quite safely and without trouble left to the puppeteers, engaged or free. And it is simply amazing what a man can do (it is not nearly so amazing in the case of a woman) if he tries. More about that—ever so much more—later on.

I have already remarked that what a puppet does is far more important, as soon as his first appearance is over, than what he is. His lines, and his intelligent rendering of them, are what really count. Incidentally, it is worth while remembering that the audience's attention is devoted, as a general rule, to the character who is speaking; the others are not so closely observed. Hence it is practicable and useful, if there are not enough readers to manage all the parts, for the puppeteer who manipulates puppet A to say the lines belonging to puppet B and vice versa. It works very well, really, odd though it may at first appear.

You will also find, the moment that you begin to rehearse, that it is very important, as a general rule, to say your lines slowly. A puppet's gestures—curiously, considering his small size—are a good deal slower than a human's, and to keep in time with him calls for considerable restraint at exciting moments. This is all to the good, however, because the speaker, whoever it is, is behind a screen—and if it is the puppeteer himself he will have his head down and may be tying himself into knots. The finest gestures are wasted if the accompanying words are unintelligible. You and your readers must cultivate the very best sort of voice production—the kind that makes every word distinct and audible. There is a peculiarly penetrating tone which can be acquired—I am terribly sorry that I simply cannot tell you how it is done, but some part of the secret lies in visualising, while you are behind the screen, the auditorium outside and throwing your voice at the back row.

There is much less difficulty than might be expected for the audience to know which puppet is speaking. The sounds, it appears to me, all issue from the proscenium arch, no matter where the speaker may be in the theatre, and as

the arch is only five feet wide, the audience has no trouble in unconsciously attributing the voice to the puppet who is gesticulating. At the same time, it is as well to make as many concessions as possible to the prevailing state of affairs. If you have a male and a female character on the stage, you may just as well have your male voice speaking from the wing on the side where the male character will spend most of his time, and so on. And as the readers will have other jobs to do, in the way of scene shifting and so on, the playwright will do well to arrange to bring his characters on to the stage on the sides which suit the voices awaiting them; because (as will be emphasised very strongly indeed in the chapter on production) it is just as well for these stage hands to have a definite routine of duty which keeps them in one place—behind the scenes in a marionette theatre is a congested area.

There are only very wide limits to the kind of play you can put on. First and foremost, I should like to say very definitely that you must have a play. Your audience will expect to see marionettes acting parts, and however good your variety turns, the audience will experience a sense of disappointment if there is not at least one play in the programme. This once granted, you can make what you like of the play. Your audience will be very tolerant of fantasy and extravagance—in fact, that is what they expect, but at the same time my experience has always been that they will not tolerate a play which lasts more than ten minutes or so. If you want to devote more time than that to the drama, then you must write two plays. Ten-minute plays depend very much for their point on their point, so to speak. You have got to think out a good curtain and work up to it. There is not the least objection to your stealing someone else's idea. A visit to a good revue will probably give you two or three ideas, and if you set about writing them up for the marionette stage—as distinct from the human stage—nobody will mind even if they have been to the same revue and know what the point is which is coming. The treatment, as well as the *décor* and the atmosphere, will be entirely fresh.

You can quite easily adapt the action to leave the audience in no doubt about who is speaking—this is harking back to the topic of a preceding paragraph, but the point is worth making again. In one playlet which my company produced we employed the device of putting the lady in a rocking-chair. By doing that we killed any number of birds with a single stone. To start with, we had the lady sitting down, so that the infernal leg strings difficulty was side-stepped. Next, as the period of the play was Victorian, the rocking-chair helped to date it properly (we made it of gilt with red plush upholstery—you will probably notice it in some of the photographs). Next, a thread carried up from the chair to the arm-rest enabled the puppeteer to rock the chair when necessary. Every time the lady had to speak she sat up and stopped rocking, so

that the audience naturally expected her to speak. And there is the additional point that if a character is sitting down she is not expected to move about, so that she can be kept still at one end of the stage close to her voice and out of the way of the other puppeteers.

Tricks and stunts are of doubtful value. Something like ninety-nine per cent of your audience will not have the remotest notion as to how a puppet is worked, so that unless your stunt is of the kind which simply leaves them breathless, it will be practically wasted. You can have your puppets smoking or picking things up or doing any of the difficult things, but the audience will not be nearly intrigued enough to compensate for the trouble and difficulty and complication these stunts cause. It is actually better only to make use of marionette devices if the action of the play demands them, and to avoid them wherever possible—or rather, to save them up and use them in special turns wherein you can show them off at their best advantage, and where they do not interfere with the proper production of the drama which you are producing.

On the other hand, the appearance of your puppets can be as bizarre as you like. If it appears desirable to you that their faces should be green or blue or yellow, so much the better. You can make them that colour and nobody will quarrel with you as long as your general colour scheme is not unfortunate. Costumes bearing no historical relationship to reality are perfectly permissible—dress your puppets in whatever clothes fall in best with their figures and their parts. You are absolutely free in that respect—far freer than is the person designing costumes for the human stage, even in the most fantastic of revues. And what is more, you are free of the committees which seem to decide the planning of a human revue. With a marionette show one man can envisage everything at once—dialogue, characters, costumes, scenery, lighting and all, and can in consequence present a single-handed work of art (most works of art are single-handed jobs) without calling in the assistance of producers and scenic artists and lighting experts. Napoleon once said that one bad general was worth more than two good ones. This is as true about the stage as about military affairs. Calling in the help of other people in nearly every case distorts the final result. And when you have an audience as prepared to be receptive as is the ordinary marionette audience, it is a pity to waste your opportunity.

With a five-foot stage (and a five-foot bench) it is not easy to have more than three puppeteers at work at once, and even three is rather a crowd. This tends to limit the number of puppets you can profitably display simultaneously. A puppeteer can work two puppets at once if he is really skilled; if the parts to be played permit him to hang up his controls on hooks on the arm-rest so as to leave his hands and fingers quite free, it is considerably easier, but then the playwright must either start with those two characters on

the stage or bring them in one after the other, and allow in his construction for the first one to be hung up and left idle while the second is being brought in. If you want a puppet to make a very brief entrance you can profitably remember that it is possible to put him on from the wings on a horizontal bit of stiff wire—this saves a fearful lot of trouble sometimes. You will see in this book a photograph of a stage set for a play with a little boy puppet put on with a wire. He cannot act at all, of course, and each time when he speaks he has to receive a little shaking to show that he is alive, but he serves his purpose adequately enough, all the same. So that theoretically the maximum number of active puppets (apart from mere stage properties) which can be presented at one time on the stage is eight—six controlled by three puppeteers, and two put in from the wings. But take my advice and do not attempt any such thing unless you are prepared to perform miracles in the matter of behind the scenes organisation, and to suffer the ineffable tedium of prolonged rehearsal. Don't write a play (or don't allow your playwright to write a play) which calls for the simultaneous appearance of more than five puppets, and, if you value your nerves, keep down the number of times a puppeteer has to abandon one puppet to take charge of another to the very barest minimum—don't do it at all if you can help it.

You will notice that I have given no formula for the making of a play, apart from suggesting that you should steal a few ideas from current drama. Everything about the play depends on the central idea, and ideas (as is only too well realised by a man whose living depends solely on the continual obtaining of ideas) are not only hard to come by, but demand each its own highly individualised treatment. I myself am very partial to the use of verse on the marionette stage, and in my own opinion I think that the heroic couplet is the best adapted of all forms of English composition for marionette lines; they are necessarily a little stilted; they make a succession of points, each one calling for a pause, and each one driven well home; and they can readily be given a faint flavour of artificiality and caricature which suits their speakers. A double ballade would be the ideal form for a long marionette speech, I am inclined to suggest on second thoughts, but I have never been able in my life to complete a double ballade. The last rhyme or two beats me every time—but I expect your mind is more agile. And anyway, no one who writes could ever wish for a better medium than English prose.



PROSCENIUM AND STAGE

*A good proposal of marriage will redeem any play from dullness*

## Chapter Eight



### LIGHTING

It is all very well heading this chapter lightheartedly “Lighting,” but before we can start to discuss simple and mundane gadgets like switches and brackets we have got to work out first a question which goes right down to the very fundamentals of the art of the marionette theatre—the question of whether or not the threads should be visible. The Lilliputian Big-Endian squabble was nothing compared to this; and I really think that the bitterness of feeling between Great Britain and Germany in a certain violent argument of twenty years ago was sweetness itself compared with the enmity that prevails between the advocates of visibility and those of invisibility.

I think myself that those people who use visible strings (they are a poor lot of folk, but I suppose I have to grant them some sort of ability to think) argue firstly that since the audience knows that a puppet is worked by threads, no useful purpose is served by keeping the threads invisible. They may go on to say that a certain piquant effect results from the strings being apparent—it makes an odd and not unpleasing contrast to see a puppet going through human motions by the aid of threads. Lastly, they probably will admit that they haven’t thought about it very much, that it is far too much trouble to try to make the strings invisible, and that if they were to try they would find it impossible anyway. All of which points I am prepared to combat to my last drop of blood as long as personal violence does not come into the argument.

I will always maintain that the less seen of the threads the better, and that in a good many cases it is both possible and necessary to have them absolutely invisible. To begin with, it adds (in my opinion) to the beauty of the performance to see the puppets going through their acts apparently of their own volition and without human guidance—I do not think that the opposite argument (maintaining the effectiveness of the contrast between pseudo human activities and inhuman threads) has any truth. It is only a matter of taste, but at least in this case I have a low opinion of the taste of those who differ from me.

I cannot for the life of me see the point of doing a trick turn like, for example, Bertie on the horizontal bars, which depends for some of its effect on the mystifying of the audience, and while doing it, give the whole show away by allowing your strings to be seen. In other cases—for example, Bingo, the

Boy Balancer—where the string is used to play a definite part in the act, very decided harm is done by any obviousness about the string. There is no thrill in seeing a man balance a billiard cue on his nose if you know it is held up from the top. It is making an unfair demand on your audience to ask them to think to themselves what a marvellous act it would be if the string were not there; clearly it is far better to prevent them from even wondering if there is a string there at all.

Won't you please agree with me that invisibility is just as important a quality in a marionette theatre as indivisibility? Forswear all heresy and come into the fold of the true believers in concealed strings.

Invisibility in a thread is the result of a combination of qualities and of a combination of circumstances. Clearly, the first essential is that the thread must not be in too violent a contrast in colour with its background. You will find that sometimes a slight difference in colour or shade is a help to concealment—it is worth making experiments with all your strings and backgrounds. In our theatre we have found that the best colour of thread to use against a certain fawn background is a grey—fortunately you can buy carpet thread in a large number of shades. Against a sheeny black surface, like satin, a dull black is necessary.

All this, of course, is all very well against a self-coloured background. But a patterned or bicolour background is actually a help. Thin vertical stripes in the background help to distract the eye from the threads. If your background is divided horizontally into two colours, you must experiment with your threads to find which colour is most invisible against each, and then dye your thread in two portions of corresponding length—this is a very effective device indeed. You deal with a flowered or patterned background by dyeing your threads dazzle fashion—winding them round bits of stick and dipping them blobbily into little dishes of different dyes. Parti-coloured threads are unexpected by the average audience. They have never met them before and are consequently very ready not to recognise their existence. In addition, you can help matters if you wish by draping your backcloth instead of pinning it out smooth. The vertical folds are as effective (more so in some circumstances) as vertical stripes in drawing attention away from the threads.

Yet you can do all this conscientiously and still find that one optical phenomenon is going to beat you. This is the high light. All your threads are going to be far thicker than the strands of a spider's web, and yet a spider's web is seen easily enough in the sunlight, because the glistening surface catches the light. You must deal with the surface first and then with the light. I cannot help interjecting an apology here for dealing with apparently so trivial and so obscure a subject as high lights on threads, but it is a most important

subject. The thread you buy in shops is loaded with dressing, which gives it a smooth glossy surface, and the quickest way to get rid of the dressing is to submit your thread to a prolonged immersion in hot water. Then take a length of your thread in both hands, loop it round a post, and keeping a fair strain on it, allow it to slip backwards and forwards a few times. That helps to break up the surface of the thread. Lastly, when you have used your threads in rehearsal for a week or two you will find that they have been frayed out a little and given a woolly surface which will do most of all to preventing the formation of high lights.

Most of all, that is to say, except for proper arrangement of the lighting, which brings us at last to the subject we started to write about. The essence of lighting which gives invisibility to threads is diffusion; as I cannot give a physicist's definition of diffused light, please do not expect one. We all of us know what diffused light is, even if we cannot define it scientifically. Personally I cannot for the life of me understand why a thread should be invisible when it is lit by light reflected off a surface, and yet should be visible in direct light. But there it is. It is a fact which we have to accept.

So that we have to light our stage in such a manner that the puppets are brightly illuminated, while no direct light falls on the threads over their heads; it is worth while noticing that a thread which is visible over a small part of its length does not interfere with the atmosphere we are trying to build up—it is only when the audience can see the whole thread from the puppet's limb all the way up to the flies that the effect is spoiled. Fortunately, therefore, there is no need to take elaborate precautions to conceal the ends of the threads from the puppet's head-level down to their attachment, although it is well worth doing to a small extent.

Naturally, we want as much light on the stage as this combination of conditions will permit; I myself make use of a total of 320 watts, and I have found that ample for performances in a hall of any size whatever. At the same time my taste inclines towards aiming at illuminating the puppets from all round, and not simply from the front. I have a feeling that an atmosphere of *solidity* is created by this means, and that that atmosphere is desirable. You may quite easily disagree with me about this, and evolve your own system of lighting. Please do so if you wish; the method of lighting is one of the factors which help to give individuality to a show; it is even possible that individuality is worth more than string-invisibility—possible, but I think not probable.

Along the top of the proscenium arch (the stage side, of course, not the auditorium side) I use two long strip lights, each of 100 watts. These strip lights are the ones used to illuminate shop windows. You can buy them along with a long trough-like shade in any length, but unfortunately I cannot tell you

where (I will admit how I came by mine later on). The trough-shaped shade rests closely above the long lamps. When you turn on the lamps you will see on the backcloth a sharp line of light and shade marking the edge of the shadow of the shade. (I apologise for using an expression like “the shadow of a shade” in a technical handbook, but actually it has more justification than it has when used as a cliché by rehashers of history.) By rotating the shade round the lamp you can find a position in which all the direct light is thrown down on to the stage; if the shadow edge on the backcloth is about four inches above the stage you can be sure of illuminating your puppets up to the tops of their heads and no farther. If you think you have light to spare from these strip lights, you can cover them over with a strip of thin cloth stretched from side to side of the trough. This cuts down the amount of light, but prevents direct light from falling on threads incautiously held too far from the backcloth.

The footlights are two 60-watt lamps placed at the side, not at the front of the stage. We use frosted bulbs; we surround them each with a wire cage and tie each cage up in a bag of white cotton. This diffuses the light sufficiently to keep the threads invisible, while at the same time it lights the puppets satisfactorily. Each bulb is at the mid point of an edge of the stage, practically at the same distance from the audience as the puppet normally stands. In consequence the puppet is lighted from above and from below, from the front and from each side; there is not a shadow anywhere to be seen, and the effect of solidity for which I hanker is obtained. I may remark in parenthesis that nowadays, with gas-filled lamps which heat up until they are too hot to touch, encasing them in cotton bags raises a serious problem in fire prevention, because at the end of an hour or two the bags begin to scorch. Someone has to remember to shift the bags round a bit occasionally so as to present a fresh surface to the heat—nor is he likely to forget his duty, because he will be reminded of it by the smell of scorching material. But what portable casing can be used which is fireproof I cannot suggest. Probably you can name the ideal substance without a second thought—it has escaped me so far.

To vary your lighting effects a useful accessory is a rheostat, put in the main circuit and fixed beside the switchboard. By this means you can make your stage gradually darker or lighter—noiselessly, too, which is an advantage, as the sound of switches clicking on and off from the wings is distracting to the audience. Colour effects naturally are got by draping the lamps with coloured materials. I have been intolerably lazy, and have never worked out a good method of varying the colour of the top strip-lamps. They are so inaccessible from the wings that unless the act drop is down no one dare try to drape them for fear of the drapery slipping off in the process and tumbling down on to the stage. When I am using colour effects I drape the top light before the act

begins, and start the act without turning it on. Then, having rung all the necessary changes on the side lamps, I bring the top one into use, and for a final variation, to end up with a maximum of light, I can just reach across from the wing without being seen by the audience and whisk away the bit of material placed over the top light. With two or three bits of coloured material and a rheostat you can ring quite a lot of changes on your lighting scheme.

The circuit employed is a simple one. You bring a wire from a source of power to your rheostat, and from there you plug straight in to your main switchboard. In my theatre rheostat and switchboard are hung securely at bench level to an upright of the arm-rest, so that the stage manager can sit with one hand on the switches and the other on the curtain cords. Three switches on the switchboard control the stage lighting—one each for the side-lights and one for the top. A fourth switch controls the current in a wire conducted outside the theatre again to a big standard lamp in the auditorium. If the room in which you are giving your performance is not too large, this gives sufficient light to the audience between the turns; if you are performing in a big hall you have to have an assistant or confederate at the lighting switches by the door, obeying the signals conveyed by the standard, on when the standard is on, and vice versa. But it is far more satisfactory if you can arrange it always to have the auditorium lighting completely under the control of the stage manager.

You may find you need a fifth switch on your switchboard, controlling a light hung to the arm-rest so as to light up behind the scenes when the curtain is dropped, but my advice is to avoid this if you can and make your wretched company manage with the light which leaks into the theatre through and above the proscenium from the auditorium. Lights flickering about in the theatre, even between the turns, do not help to keep the audience in the state of illusion which is so desirable.

My switchboard is a cigar box; on the back are screwed the switches and plugs. It is hung on the arm-rest by insertion into a rectangular loop of flat iron strip which is kept permanently attached to the upright. When the stage is set up the lamp bulbs are put into their sockets, the connecting wires are carried (if necessary under the stage) to the switchboard and plugged in, the long, permanent wire is carried out and connected to the source of power, and the lighting is ready.

Please do not give me any credit for these arrangements. They were all done for me. When I was first planning the theatre I mentioned to my friend, Mr. A., that I was worried about how to arrange the lighting.

“Well,” said the friend. “My brother-in-law, Mr. B., is an electric lighting expert. And he is very interested in model theatres, as it happens. You ought to get into touch with him.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I should like to.”

And of course before I could do anything about it, Mr. A. went out of London, and I could not get hold of him, anyway. In desperation (it is amazing how bold a marionette theatre will make the most retiring of novelists—a lioness defending her young is timid compared with me and my theatre) I looked up Mr. B. in the telephone directory—and I cannot explain either how I came to remember his name after one casual mention of it. There were lots of Mr. B.’s. I made a selection of the most likely ones and began to call them up one by one.

“I beg your pardon for butting in like this,” I started in each case, “but are you Mr. A.’s brother-in-law?”

I received all sorts of replies before at last I heard the blessed words:

“Well, yes, worst luck.”

“Well, my name’s Forester.”

“How delightful for you.”

“A. suggested that you were just the man to talk to about the lighting of my marionette theatre.”

“Why, yes,” said Mr. B. in quite a different tone. By a miracle, Mr. A. had not exaggerated when he described Mr. B. as interested in miniature theatres. They were his special hobby, and electrical engineering was his profession. Mr. B. came to my house and looked over my theatre. He asked me how I wanted it lit, and I did my best to tell him—not having any very clear idea at that time myself. Mr. B. took measurements. Two or three days later he turned up again with a big bag of the kind of tools whose names I only know vaguely and in whose use I am quite inexperienced, and a mile or two of wire and a lot of fittings and oddments. He sat down there and then on my drawing-room floor, and made a complete lighting apparatus for the theatre. He installed it and tried it out; it worked far better than anything I could have made in a fortnight, but it did not satisfy him. It did not illuminate quite in the way I had described. So Mr. B. opened his tool-bag again and made another set—the one I use to this day. Then he drank several bottles of beer, waved away my thanks, but accepted a heartfelt invitation to consider himself a permanent member of the free list of the theatre, and departed.

I can at least take this opportunity of expressing my thanks and admiration. Mr. B. is a very wonderful man.

And while I am confessing this sort of thing I may as well go on and own up to how my theatre was built. It was Stanley Rogers who did that. Stanley writes books about the sea—first class ones—and he paints pictures, but at the same time he is a man of his hands, as might perhaps be expected of a man

who has knocked about in sail as he has. I am very intimately acquainted with another writer who has written one or two books (among others) about the sea, who is not one-tenth, not one-hundredth part as capable as Stanley Rogers.

When I wanted my theatre I described to him in broad outline the sort of thing I envisaged—just as it is described in Chapter 1—and Stanley made drawings (I cannot draw a line) and asked me if that were the sort of thing I wanted, and he suggested ways of getting round difficulties, and he designed joints and he worked out methods of keeping the thing portable, until at last he was able to give me a list of the materials he wanted. So one sunny day I drove up to his studio with my car laden with masses of timber and with long battens of wood (the future vertical members) bristling out through the sunshine roof. We did a couple of hours' work on the thing that afternoon—at least, I worked for two hours and accomplished about ten minutes' work—while Stanley worked for two hours and accomplished two weeks' work. At the end of that time Stanley said, pityingly, that he didn't think it worth while for me to be wasting my time with him. He thought he could manage quite well with the rest of the job by himself. And he telephoned to me next morning to come and take my theatre away as it was finished and cluttering up his studio and he wanted to start real work again.

So really, in the case of my theatre, Stanley built it and Mr. B. lighted it and G. made the puppets and M. dressed them and Kathleen made the scenery and the curtains and kept us fed during months of upheaval, and apparently there is no credit left to me at all. But there is. I asked them to do it. There are precious few people in the world with the nerve to do that. Lots of people can make things, but not everyone can get their making done for them.

A good many pages ago we were discussing the lighting of a marionette theatre, before we drifted away into a digression on the fascinating subject of my manifold excellencies. You can buy practically everything necessary for lighting the theatre, with the exception of the long strip lamps and the rheostat, at Woolworth's, and, except for all the lamps, you can use all the apparatus on any voltage which is convenient. Your side-lamps you can borrow on the spot if you have to perform in a district supplied with current at a different tension from what you are accustomed to, but I am sorry to say that is not the case with the strip lights. When you accept engagements in distant parts you will have to find out what is the local voltage, and you will have to buy strip lamps to suit that voltage and take them with you. It is a pity—especially (as I have already admitted) that I don't know even yet where you buy those lamps—the three that Mr. B. bought for me (only two are used at once in my theatre) have endured all through these years of performances, to say nothing of all the buffetings of transport and innumerable buildings and demolitions of the

theatre—and it has never yet happened to us to have to give a performance in a place with a voltage radically different from that prevailing in my house. Anyway, I have not the least thought that the use of strip lamps is essential. You will probably design and make use of a system of lighting more effective than mine, more transportable and universal in its application. In the case of my theatre, Mr. B. was seriously handicapped by having to work on suggestions originally formulated by me.

## Chapter Nine



### PRODUCTION

With the commencement of this chapter we begin to approach the real business of the marionette theatre. The number of things one has to learn in this connection is astonishingly large; fortunately it is equally astonishing how quickly you learn them when you come up against them in person.

What people learn first of all, and more quickly and thoroughly than anything else, is that a marionette strung ready for the stage is a very tricky thing to handle. If you give a marionette the least, littlest, tiniest bit of a chance it will get itself into a horrible tangle. Quite an ordinary average tangle will call for the efforts of two people for twenty minutes to get itself disentangled, and at the end of that twenty minutes those two people will be on the point of screaming as the result of their lacerated nerves. A tangled puppet is the most maddening and infuriating object in the world, and if your puppet gets really badly tangled, the only thing to do is to cut off every thread at the points of attachment, both to puppet and controls, and then re-thread the thing afresh.

Please do not think that I am exaggerating in all this. It is honest, sober truth. You probably will find it hard to realise what a muddle a dozen bits of thread can get into, and you may doubt what I am saying, but if that is the case you have only to make your first puppet and get it into a muddle to find out that if anything I am understating the case. And the result of this primary condition is that all arrangements for rehearsal and performance have to be made while bearing in mind the essential importance of never exposing your puppets to the chance of getting tangled. If it happens during rehearsal-time, the rehearsal is going to be wasted while the whole company painfully disentangles things; if it happens during a performance, the puppet involved can definitely be ruled out from the remainder of the programme.

But I do not want to frighten you about all this; merely to warn you. When my company began handling marionettes they spent quite half their time for the first week or two disentangling threads; nowadays we can go through a dozen performances, each involving the packing and unpacking of the whole equipment, without a single tangle. Handled with caution, a marionette is safe enough. The guiding principle naturally is to keep all the threads taut. Hold it up always by the control, without allowing the puppet to trail on the ground,

and the moment you have done with it, hang it up to a hook (puppet clear of the ground still, of course) by the strap on the upper surface of the control.

With the routine we have evolved the first step in the preparation of the theatre for a performance is to stretch a rope about five feet high and six feet long from two convenient points close behind the castle. This rope or some similar device is essential to the smooth running of the performance; if you have nowhere to which to attach it you must make something, fixing hooks into the wall if necessary. On this rope you hang loosely some double hooks—as many as you have puppets, and on these hooks you hang your puppets in whatever order you have found most suitable. The general effect of all these puppets swinging in a row is strikingly reminiscent of a passage in *Bluebeard*, and in consequence the bit of the stage behind the castle with the puppets ready for performance is always called among us “Bluebeard’s Chamber.”

When, standing on the bench, you reach behind you for a puppet, and coax it round the wings and on to the stage, you will come to appreciate the absolute necessity of having no obstruction whatever between the castle part of the theatre and the stage part—a point I omitted to make in my description of the theatre. The puppet is swinging from its control by its threads, which are some five feet long; if, during the heat of a performance, you have any protruding knobs or rods likely to catch in the threads during the journey from Bluebeard’s Chamber to the stage, you can bet safely everything you possess that they will catch, every time, with a horrible jangling and creaking of joints, and holding up of the action of the play, and with a risk that the performance may be not merely interrupted, but suspended. The two “voices” crouching in the wings must, of course, help to ease the puppet round in this perilous journey. And if your puppets are likely to touch the floor with their feet when they are hung up in Bluebeard’s Chamber, they must rest on a piece of carpet; otherwise they will swing and scrape and rattle on the floor when you hang them up again.

When you have learned to handle your puppets and have a clear idea of what kind of programme you are going to present, and your theatre is ready, it is only then, and not till then, that you can really decide how many people you are going to employ in your theatre—or rather, how many you are going to have behind the scenes during a performance. If it is really necessary, of course, you can have a succession of people coming in and going out when their part is done—but this should be avoided if their comings and goings are evident to the audience, because of the injury it does to the quality of illusion. Besides, the smaller your company the easier is your problem of transport; the easier it is to feed them during the whirl of rehearsals; the less chance is there of things going wrong. We managed all our first long run of performances with

a company of four, and except for occasions when we have been training an understudy (bringing our numbers up to six) we have never had more than five—and five, by the way, is a crowd when the theatre is set up in a small drawing-room to leave room for an audience of twenty.

For those initial performances of ours all the manipulation of threaded puppets was done by G. and Kathleen. On the left-hand side sat M. She was the only female voice we needed; she worked the curtains and she worked the lights and she put a puppet on with a wire in one act. In the opposite wing to hers was my station. I had the general supervision of everything. In addition I was responsible for the gramophone; I said all the words M. didn't say (I used three voices altogether in that programme) and put puppets on with wire and attended in one act to the variation of the colours of the lamp on my side. Four people doing a marionette performance are all comfortably busy without being too rushed. Less than that number, unless the performance is very unambitious or unless they are old hands, will find themselves hectically occupied the whole time—which is not very bad for them, but, of course, increases the chances of things going wrong and tends to slow up the production until they are rehearsed to perfection—we did our four-person performance with three once or twice in an emergency, but it was an exhausting business. But you may plan your performance and your behind-the-scenes arrangements better than I did; I know of one or two professional theatres which are adequately run with a company of only two, and if you were very ingenious you might easily put on quite a good show all by yourself—it would involve having all the light-switches, curtain cords and so on, brought to a convenient spot up on the castle.

One point on which I should like to express my opinion very strongly—you may decide otherwise—is that the behind-the-scenes arrangements must be just as carefully planned and rehearsed as the turns themselves. Your audience does not come to see individual turns. It comes to be kept interested for an hour; it may, of course, come to scoff, and in that case you must see that it remains to be amused. Things might be different if audiences were as accustomed to marionettes as to music halls or revues, but they are not. You will probably find that nineteen people at least (more probably nineteen and seven-eighths) out of twenty in your audience have never seen parlour marionettes at all, and only vaguely heard of them. In that case they do not say to each other “Let's go and see Bingo, the Boy Balancer, at Forester's Theatre to-night,” nor “I hear there's a good tight-rope act at Brown's marionettes. What about going and having a look at it?” They say “Let's go and see Brown's marionettes,” or “Forester's sent us an invitation to these marionettes of his, curse it. I don't want to go, but we've refused the last three times. We'd

better go and get it over.”

So they come to see the whole show, which naturally, scene shifting and curtain raising help to make or mar just as much as the turns. Moreover, generally speaking, you start with a receptive and kindly audience, which is liable to fall instantly under the spell of the spectacle before them—but long waits, squeaking curtains, human noises behind the scenes, will break that spell as sure as a gun. The spell is fragile and artificial, and a few errors will change your audience from a being single-minded in its friendliness into a group of carping critics. They won't enjoy themselves nearly as much, and *a fortiori* you will not, either.

Because of this you must make your arrangements work like clockwork. The firm foundation, of course, of a good production, is thoughtful planning of the programme. Everything else being equal, you want to catch your audience's admiration at the start, and then, if you can hold it for the rest of the evening, so much the better, but you must end up with a real good turn which will remain fresh in their minds so that there is at any rate the chance that they will come away under the delusion that they have been enjoying themselves the whole time. So you lay out your sequence of turns in an order of merit corresponding to this scheme; but at the same time you want to preserve some sort of artistic continuity if you can. I can only leave it to your taste to guide you in this respect. You do not want to follow one turn with another which will clash too violently with it; the ideal is a smooth and steady transition from one development to another.

That, as I say, is the ideal. Harsh reality may call a different tune. You may think that turns A, B, and C should be put on in that order, but when you come to work out your practical arrangements you find that A and C both need a carpet on the stage and a grey backcloth, while turn B wants bare boards and a black backcloth. From the point of view of the stage manager some other order would be better—B, A, C or A, C, B, so as to eliminate one entire change of scenery. Or one particular turn may call for a fairly long time for preparation—there is apparatus to be set up or it is presented by a puppet whose controls need a good deal of attention before his appearance. In this case there is something to be gained by making this turn the first one after the interval.

All your decisions in these matters are naturally compromises. At first your unaided judgment, helped later on by your experience, must decide to how great an extent artistic demands must yield to expediency—always remembering that you can frequently sidestep art and give wings to expediency by a slight change in your stage arrangements. Your puppets are not variety stars, thank God. If you want to make them use a different backcloth you can do so easily enough and they will never utter a word of protest, nor break their

contract, nor sulk.

So when your turns are more or less ready and your theatre is more or less ready, you had better start making out a draft scheme of your finished programme and divert your company from its prevailing flurry of spasmodic rehearsal into the strait and regular path of rehearsing the full programme. The best analogy I can make is to compare the situation with which you are faced with what the manager of the Coliseum would do if he had George Robey as a scene shifter as well as appearing as a turn, and Grace Moore due to sing songs at 9.15 and to hook up Gracie Field's dress at the back at 9.30, while Harry Lauder's walking stick, which he carries on to the stage at 9.50, is wanted by the big drummer in the orchestra at 9.47. On top of all this the manager discovers that all scene shifting must be done in three-quarter darkness and without a word being even whispered. Probably the manager would retire into an asylum, but if he did not, he would find the best thing he could do would be to rehearse his whole programme so as to make sure everyone was in the right place at the right time.

Everyone must come to learn all their jobs perfectly thoroughly, so that there are no shufflings or whisperings behind the scenes, no unnecessary delays, no hitches at all, and furthermore, they must learn them more thoroughly still, so that when the inevitable attack of first-night hysteria comes over them their bodies and their tongues continue to function automatically and carry them through what would otherwise be an appalling hiatus. So that instead of people practising their own individual turns as the mood takes them, the whole company together runs through the complete programme—although it does not interfere in the least with the drill if a turn which needs extra rehearsal is repeated once or twice before passing on to the next. Does this sound deadly dull? Perhaps it does, when written about like this. But in practice it is nothing of the sort. Believe me. An evening of marionette rehearsal is no more dull than an evening on the Somme, say, in July, 1916—a little less dangerous and a little more exhausting.

With or without your permission, I want to hark back to something I discussed a page or two back. This is the point that the audience comes to see the whole show, not a succession of items. Because of this, and also because a performance in a drawing-room is intimate and friendly, you want to make your show a consistent article. Put it this way. If a painting of the Death of Nelson were commissioned in Heaven for some reason or other, and Rubens was given the job of painting the figure of Nelson, while Raphael painted Hardy, and Correggio was allotted a stray midshipman, and Rembrandt did the hull of the *Victory*, and Michelangelo the rigging, the picture, despite the genius of the men who painted it, would be a horrid bad piece of work unless

someone previously had spent some time on composition and could persuade his artists to fall in with his scheme—possibly in Heaven someone could be found who could do it. However bad the organiser, the picture would be better as a result of his efforts than if all the artists began to fill in their allotted space without reference to the drawing and colour schemes of the others.

The same with your show. A marionette performance is like a picture and unlike a vaudeville show in that the eye and the mind tend to see the whole thing as a complete whole—or would like to if they were given a chance. You want to bind the whole thing together into a single work of art, so that it has a personality and an atmosphere of its own. I have already suggested one means of doing this, namely, by planning a suitable succession of turns. Besides, even though four of you may all have contributed to the construction of the programme, you will have worked in such close association, and by the time of the first night you will have shared so many joys and sorrows together that it will have its individual flavour all the same.

But in our show (and a good many others, for that matter) we accentuate the unity and solidity of the performance by the use of the old device of the compère, the announcer of the turns. We use the same puppet to make each announcement. We are careful to give him as much of a distinct personality of his own as we can—he has strongly marked features (Punch, in the oldest puppet show in the world, has strongly marked features for the same reasons as our compère has) painted a delicate blue-green shade that is quite inhuman and yet is not repulsive; he is dressed in clothes which have no distinct place in the history of costume, and yet by their formal black and white colour tend to suggest modern dress clothes or court dress, and by their bizarrerie of cut remind the audience that the performance it is to see is not an aping of a human performance. The constant appearance and reappearance of this puppet (we used a fairy policeman instead in our children's show) tends to link up each turn with the next and to make the performance a complete whole.

Besides, his announcements are in the same form as the prologue he has already spoken—each is an heroic couplet, and he winds up the show with an epilogue in heroic couplets, too. It helps to give unity. There are all sorts of other devices which you could employ if you wished to (do you remember how Laurel and Hardy always appeared in their films heralded by the same bit of music?). It is amusing to invent them, and the benefit to the show is enormous. In the vaudeville show which we elaborated most we gave our compère a turn all to himself, too, at the end of the first half of the programme, and composed of heroic couplets as well.

This helped me out in the elaboration of another idea which I was using as an underlying *motif* in this particular show—a *motif* which you may appreciate

if you go to the trouble to read the prologue and epilogue which begin and end this book. This *motif* was the difference and the similarity between puppets and humans—a thin enough *motif* in a good many respects, but one which has always fascinated me. Audiences (and I myself as well) are usually pleased by a hint that the wooden puppets they are watching may perhaps be endowed with souls and sensibility—most of us preserve some traces of our primitive animism. Our little compère was made to appear making advances to a lovely little doll seated in a chair (as a matter of fact, she was a Liberty tea cosy and perfectly delicious). He was apparently taking advantage of a momentary lapse of attention on the part of his great lord living up aloft, and came tiptoeing on to the stage where his lady friend was revealed already seated. Kneeling, he began to make impassioned advances—whether honourable or not did not appear. But as he spoke he was struck by her deathlike stillness (it was striking curiously enough—the contrast between the feverish animation of the gesticulating puppet and the rigid immobility of the beautiful little doll was strangely effective) and on proceeding to close examination, he discovered that her strings were missing—cut off, presumably by the relentless great gods of the bench above, so that she was as dead as a puppet well could be. The poor little compère broke down at this. Firstly, raising his arms to the invisible gods up above the flies, he asked for a similar death, and then, when no answer was vouchsafed he began to rave and rant in revolt against human tyranny. But in the very middle of a sentence apparently his master awoke. The puppet, protesting for a moment wildly, was dragged up the stage and put in his usual announcing attitude. He was made to dance, grotesquely, and to bow, and finally he was made to wind up his speech with a couplet obviously forced on him by his master:

A puppet's heart can break, as you have seen.  
It isn't hard to mend—with seccotine.

People liked that turn, despite (or perhaps because of) its sentimental touch. It was specially valuable to us because it made use, for a whole turn, of a puppet which was already in use for a good many minutes of the show, which meant not merely an economy of puppets, but also tended to give a unity to the performance, as hinting that all the puppets appearing were members of the same family.

The question as to the length of the performance you are going to give is once more a very vexed one, and you may discover an answer to it quite different from the one I found. In my experience no audience will tolerate a marionette show lasting more than an hour and a half or so, with two hours as the absolute maximum. Longer than that makes them restless, however good the programme. The length of the individual turns is variable, naturally. I have

already laid it down in a rather arbitrary manner that no play or sketch should play for a longer time than a quarter of an hour; and I myself think that seven minutes would be a safer bet. Individual turns are quite safe as long as the performer is either doing something fresh or is repeating some particular stunt which is specially dazzling or which links in its repetition new aspects of the turn.

In nearly every case you are up against the fact that you must adjust the length of the turn to the incidental music—that is, if you do as I did and employ a gramophone. The turn has to last during the playing of one or two records—it is a pity that even the longest gramophone record does not last quite as long as one usually wants. Two records may be a shade too long, and there is the infernal question of changing over. The wretched gramophone man (I speak from experience) in the midst of his other duties, has to keep the gramophone wound up, and at exactly the right moment, without wasting time, he must lift the needle, turn or change the record, and put the needle on again—all this in semi-darkness. Moreover, the action of the turn has to be planned exactly so that a break occurs at the point where the first record runs out, and a pose has to be held or business devised to cover the gap while the record is changed. It can be done, but it calls for inventiveness and for drill; incidentally, the gramophone man is well advised to stick bits of plaster on the centres of his records in a kind of Braille code, so that by a touch of his fingers he can find the record he wants in the dark.

At first sight it appears far more attractive to make your own music. Then you can have it as long or as short as you like, you are not bound to any definite length, you can choose any music that fits in with your ideas, and all the limitations of the gramophone are swept away. This may be all perfectly true; I have never tried to employ a musician in my company. I fancy that dulcimer music would make a perfect accompaniment to marionettes—so would a musical box, for that matter, but if you use one you would be up against limitations far straiter than a gramophone's. On the other hand, most musical instruments take up more room than does a gramophone, and I rather suspect that you could not entirely replace gramophone music, so that you would have your wings encumbered with a gramophone in addition to the instrument. On top of all this I think (I cannot say for certain, as I have pointed out) that a musician would be more unreliable than a gramophone, especially if (as I have no doubt would be bound to occur) the musician has other jobs thrust upon him in addition to making music. He would probably find himself having to vary the lights with his left hand while playing the Moonlight Sonata with his right.

Not only this, but there is the question of rehearsals. As soon as a

manipulator has progressed beyond the most elementary stage of practice he will need his accompaniment to be constantly played while practising. He may need bits of it repeated over and over again in a way which would drive any self-respecting musician insane; and the musician cannot, of course, be relied upon to be always in attendance just when he is wanted, while anyone can work a gramophone. Most important of all, in any but the most fortunate company, the musician, when fully rehearsed, would be absolutely irreplaceable, and any absence on his part would make the show impossible—which is not a desirable state of affairs. You want, if you can, to make your company interchangeable, so that in an emergency anyone can take anyone else's job—not to do it quite as well, of course, but well enough to enable the show to proceed in case of illness. With my first show I had five members to my company. Any one of these could be absent without any noticeable harm resulting, and we could struggle through somehow with two out of the five away.

So that while the producer can allow his company to practise as much as they like their individual turns in their own time, with stool and cheval glass, he will, if he is wise, call for rehearsal after rehearsal of the whole show under rigid public performance conditions. If he anticipates doing many shows away from home he will include in the rehearsal the erection and taking down of the theatre, because in nine shows out of ten away from home you will only be allowed a short time for preparation and dismantling, and you do not want to start your performance rushed and exhausted—still less do you want to have your curtain rise postponed by unexpected hitches.

It is quite easy to work out a programme and time-table of theatre erection. Start by hanging your cord in your Bluebeard's Chamber on which to suspend the puppets. Then the women take the puppets from their box, and unwind their threads from the controls on which they have been wound up out of harm's way, and hang up the puppets, while the men are putting together bench and castle. Then the women can move on and start pinning on the backcloths in the order laid down by the producer while the men make the stage ready. After that the men put up the proscenium front, and the women pin the curtains over this while the men put in the act drop-curtains, and the lighting arrangements. The theatre is ready now. The stage manager sees to it that all the properties to be used are in their appointed places close to his hand, where he can find them in the dark; he sees that the curtains are working properly and that the lights are ready. Meanwhile, the puppeteers examine their puppets to make sure they are in working order, and the odd man gets the gramophone wound up, the records arranged in their correct order, and sees that his words (if he does not know them by heart) are all to hand. At your first

attempt you may find that all this will take an hour and a half or so—even if you do not manage to entangle one or two puppets so badly as to call for re-threading. But you can cut that time down with very little practice; and in the end you will be able to reduce it so that, starting with closed boxes, you can have the theatre ready and the first turn waiting on the stage ready for the curtain in less than twenty minutes. There is nothing like method and practice.

Now you are ready to perform. Most probably your producer is one of the company. If he is not, he can sit in front and conduct the rehearsals from the best place, but otherwise he must be behind the scenes, going through his duties with the rest of the company. He will then have to use his imagination and his powers of visualisation to see to it that the performance is being conducted to suit an audience sitting in front. And he can be helped in this by the usual invaluable mirrors placed so as to reflect what passes on the stage up to his eye, wherever he happens to be.

Not a word is to be spoken (nor whispered, nor even breathed), nor is any sound to be made—the whole company must be in stockinged feet or in rubber-soled shoes. In the glimmering light behind the scenes everyone looks at the producer's upraised hand. The puppeteers for the first turn have their puppets ready to come on; the gramophonist has his hand on the needle of the gramophone. The producer drops his hand. At once the gramophonist starts his machine and the overture makes itself heard. Everyone can relax for the three minutes in which it is playing, but as the piece nears its end everyone looks up again. The gramophonist has kept the machine wound during the playing of the overture; as it stops, he changes records and needles like lightning, and stares up again at the producer. He drops his hand again. The needle comes down on the moving record. The stage manager switches on the stage lights, switches off the house lights. The puppets begin their antics and the curtain rises.

There is no relaxation for anyone during any turn. The gramophonist must be attentive to his instrument, as well as saying his words. The stage manager must be ready with his curtain and lights. And he has, too, to stand by with his "hook"—a long piece of stiff black wire bent at a right angle for half an inch from the end. If a thread gets caught up in a joint or in the scenery—as happens sometimes—he may be able (he is the best judge) to slip his hook on to the stage and disentangle it. He stands a much better chance of doing this if he is watching the show closely from the beginning, so that he is able to nip trouble in the bud without having to search a long time for the source of it. If he cannot disentangle he shakes his head, and the producer then makes the only noise permitted behind the scenes. He snaps his fingers. Then the curtain must be dropped, while the gramophonist has to exercise his judgment whether to break the music off short by lifting the needle or to allow the music to end

naturally.

But we must not assume there is going to be an accident. In this case we must take it for granted that the turn goes through without a hitch. At the closing words (or the closing movement) the stage manager looks up at the producer. At the drop of his hand he draws the curtain, switches on the auditorium light, and switches off the stage light.

The change-over to the next turn must be made with all possible rapidity (and, of course, in complete silence). The puppeteers edge their puppets off the stage; if anyone is appointed to help he will do so—it will nearly always be found best to have a regular system of one-way traffic between turns; puppets off the stage on the right, on to the stage on the left. The stage manager and the gramophonist change the backcloth and scenery if necessary. The new puppets are got on and the puppeteers stand ready. The gramophonist gets his new music ready while he can. The producer looks round to see that all is complete; everyone is waiting on him; he drops his hand and everyone attends to their job—stage lights on, house lights off, music, curtain, in that order as always.

There are various duties which must be fitted in one with another. It may be impossible to change a backcloth while some particular puppet is still on the stage. In that case the stage hands must do some other job (they probably will not have to look far for one) while the puppeteer is getting his man off the stage; or the butterfly puppeteer whose turn comes next may need help in getting his string straight, and someone must make it his business to be on hand with that help at the moment it is wanted.

If there is an interval in the programme you can be quite certain that it will not be a period of relaxation for the company, because no producer is going to waste a valuable interval in doing nothing; he will save up his interval for an occasion when the next turn is one which calls for a considerable time to prepare for the stage. Perhaps I cannot do better than to illustrate all this from my notes made for my first variety performance.

1. Overture. First half of Bolero, by Ravel. Black backcloth. Carpet. Black wings. K. ready with compère. Overture ends. Stage lights up. House lights down. Curtain up.

2. Prologue. Spoken by C. S. F. while winding gramophone and changing record. (I had to use the voices of men and of angels in very difficult situations, but the audience was kind.) G. ready with Bingo. Curtain down. Curtain up. Announcement of Bingo by compère. Curtain down. House lights up. Stage lights down. Compère off. Bingo on in G.'s hands. Chair and see-saw on stage in chalked places on carpet. Music ("Policeman's Holiday"). Stage lights up. House lights down. Curtain.

3. Bingo. K. ready with compère. Bingo drops stick and ball at end of music. Curtain down. C. S. F. catches stick and ball and hands to G. K. brings on compère. G. takes off Bingo. Curtain up. Announcement of drama. Curtain down. House lights up. Stage lights down. K. takes off compère. C. S. F. and M. change to pink backcloth. Chair on stage with thread to arm-rest. Pink wings. Pink gauze over lights. K. and G. bring on Papa and Mama. M. settles Mama in chair. C. S. F. gets Son ready. Stage lights up. House lights down. Curtain up.

4. Drama begins, spoken by C. S. F. and M., while C. S. F. winds gramophone and changes record to "The Keys of My Heart." C. S. F. brings on Son. Curtain down. C. S. F. takes off Son. Curtain up. Papa announces duet. Curtain down. G. and K. change places. Chair off. Music. Curtain up.

5. Duet finishes. Curtain down. House lights up. Stage lights down. C. S. F. helps K. and G. off with puppets. G., C. S. F., and M. change to black backcloth and black wings. Take pink off lights. K. brings on compère helped by G. Stage lights up. House lights down. Curtain up. Announcement of Monologue. Curtain down. M. puts on chair with doll while K. takes compère to wings. Curtain up.

6. Monologue, spoken by C. S. F. while winding gramophone and changing record. Curtain down. Off chair and doll. Curtain up. Announcement of interval followed by Bertie. Curtain down. House lights up. Stage lights down.

7. Interval. Music (second half of Ravel's Bolero). K. takes compère off. M. and C. S. F. replace carpet by gold cloth. G. and C. S. F. lift Bertie on to stage. All four help to unroll his strings and fix them to arm-rest. Music stops. C. winds gramophone and changes record to Valse Septembre, Godin. Stage lights up. House lights down. Curtain. Music.

8. Bertie, worked by K. Music stops. Curtain down. M., G. and C. S. F. get Bertie off. K. gets compère ready. M. helps on. Curtain up. C. S. F. announces Butterflies while winding gramophone. G. is getting butterflies ready. Curtain down, house lights up, stage lights down. M. and C. S. F. change backcloth to gold. Get lighting gauzes ready. G. brings on butterflies, helped by K. M. puts on flowers. Music—"Mignon" Overture, Berlin State Opera. Half-lights on. House lights off. Curtain up.

9. G. works butterflies. M. and C. S. F. work lights. Music stops. Curtain down. House lights up. Stage lights down. G. gets butterflies off stage helped by K. M. and C. take off floorcloth and change backcloth to black. C. S. F. winds gramophone and changes record. K. brings on compère, helped by M. and G. is bringing ballet up into the wings, R. Stage lights up. House lights

down. Curtain up. Announcement of ballet. Curtain down. K. takes compère to wings, L. G. brings on ballet, R. Music (“March of the Little Wooden Soldiers”). Curtain up.

10. Ballet. Curtain down. House lights up. Stage lights down. G. takes off ballet, R. K. brings on compère, L. C. S. F. puts chair on stage and settles compère in it. Stage lights up. House lights down. Curtain up.

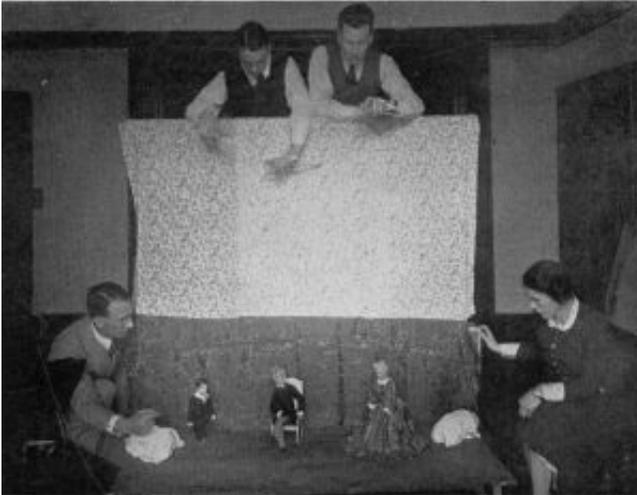
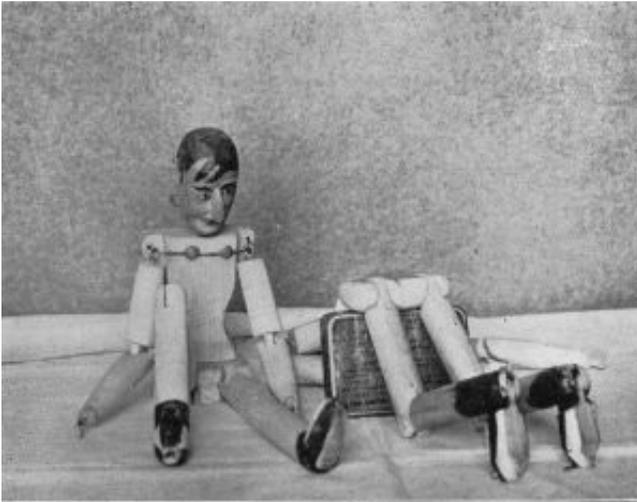
11. Epilogue, spoken by C. S. F. Curtain. House lights up. Stage lights down.

You run through your programme at every rehearsal in the way I have described so tediously. To the audience the effect conveyed by the rapidity with which turn succeeds turn, and the complete silence prevailing between turns, the silent way in which the curtain slides open and shut, is very mesmeric. It leaves them open to receive the big effect with which it is always advisable to end your programme—flick the curtain open once more and show your announcing puppet on the stage with his hands held on each side by puppeteers leaning out from the wings over the stage. It is the only time human agency has been evidenced on the stage. The mesmeric effect of the performance has been such that the audience has grown to attribute human stature to the puppets and full size to the theatre. The sight of human beings crouching on to the stage is very effective indeed—it gives them the appearance of giants. I may add that even to a producer, hardened in dealing with marionettes, this illusion still persists. I have noticed it more than once after an evening of sitting in front of the stage, conducting rehearsals, when someone unexpectedly puts out a hand from the wings to rectify some error.

And when the rehearsal is finished the chances are that you will take down your theatre again, and this you do in the opposite way you put it up; you start from the front and work backwards. You strip the curtains from the front framework—all hands can help with this—and while the men dismantle the framework the women fold and put away the curtains. Similarly, while the men dismantle the castle the women fold and put away the backcloths. This leaves Bluebeard’s Chamber free, so that everyone can take the puppet he favours and prepare it for packing—winding each thread up on the limbs of the control until only an inch or two is left, and then laying puppet and control carefully in the box and covering it with a sheet of newspaper before putting the next one in. You can cut down the time necessary to pack everything up easily to a quarter of an hour if you have the right scheme prepared.

And when everything is finished, when you have transported and built your theatre, given your performance and packed your theatre and carried it home again, you can fall into an arm-chair and call it a day. You will feel more tired even than after those occasions when the long days have tempted you into

rashly playing three whole rounds of golf.

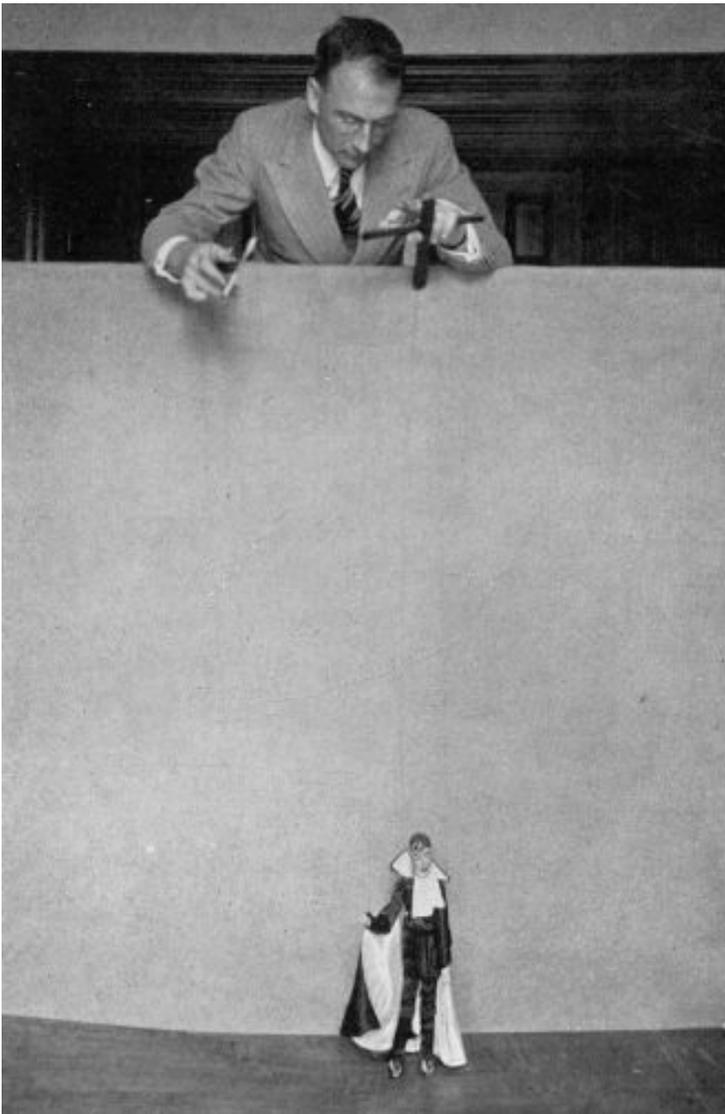


*Above* JOINTS

*Every attitude he takes up is a human one*

*Below* STAGE WITHOUT PROSCENIUM

*No shuffling or whispering behind the scenes*



GOOD EVENING HUMANS  
*Learn to work the arms with the fingers of either hand*

## Chapter Ten



### IN CONCLUSION

We had a lucky break for the start of our professional career, but we did a good deal of work before that lucky break came. The future I had sketched out at the beginning of the whole business was to spend November and December in quiet preparation; January, February and March in rehearsals; and to give a whole string of amateur performances to invited audiences early in April. I am fortunate in having so many friends that I could rely on filling a small auditorium several times over—although how many friends I should have left after the performances was a matter more in doubt.

Stanley Rogers made my theatre, and Mr. B. made my lighting set, as I have described. G. slaved away at making models for experimental purposes, and when we were satisfied we had them duplicated by a cabinet maker, while G. went on to carve and paint heads for them, and M. made dresses for them and Kathleen made the scenery and kept us fed, and while I went round (as everyone never failed to point out) with my hands in my pockets and cheered them on. We started rehearsals as scheduled, amazingly enough, so my cheering on must have been quite effective.

Rehearsals were proceeding, as rehearsals always do, with the accent on the hearse. Sandy and the children were the main bits of grit in the works. Sandy is Kathleen's cat, a vast ginger Persian tom, with a grim determination to be left out of nothing. He loved marionettes—his feelings toward them cannot be expressed in other words. At first during the rehearsals he would merely stalk into the room and stare, but soon he wanted to play a more active part. He began sneaking up to the puppets hanging in Bluebeard's chamber and patting them. The state of the threads of a marionette after Sandy had for a few minutes been demonstrating his affection can be easily imagined.

That meant that Sandy had to be barred from rehearsals, and Sandy hates being barred from anything. At the first hint of marionettes—at G.'s or M.'s arrival, or at the latest when the theatre was being assembled, Sandy would come running. He would leave his food, his hunting expeditions after starlings, his numerous affairs with the other sex, he would leave anything and come galloping with tail erect to besiege the drawing-room door and to sneak in sooner or later during one of the inevitable comings or goings always

associated with rehearsals. Then he would dive under the stage and defy all efforts to get him out, and, waiting his opportunity when everyone was heatedly busy, he would steal out and play Old Harry in Bluebeard's Chamber and would generally succeed in getting back under the stage without being caught. Rehearsal after rehearsal was interrupted by the need to dismantle half the theatre so as to lift up the stage and get Sandy out. Finally, we had to make it a rule that no rehearsal should begin without Sandy having been first hunted down and locked up securely in some bedroom, with the windows all shut.

The children were not as deliberately obstructive. They had to be allowed in occasionally to rehearsals, because otherwise they would not have seen anything of their parents at all; besides, we were already sneakily anxious for an audience, and they constituted a conveniently handy one. And they were undoubtedly appreciative. George would stand with eyes like stars before the stage, saying: "More, mummie, more, mummie," indefinitely, while John, in big-brother fashion, would say: "Did you see what he did, George? It was like this——" and would proceed to imitate as best he could the caperings of Bingo with his stick and ball. In some ways they were a marvellous audience—they were perfectly ready to accept Daddy's voice when they heard it as the authentic voice of the puppet on the stage, and they never failed to laugh when it was expected of them, even at the hundred and fiftieth repetition.

But it was a situation that had its disadvantages. It was not easy to run through the rehearsal of "What every boy should know" (our drama) with George saying: "More, mummie," a hundred times a minute. And John was like Louis of Bavaria, who was so enchanted by the spectacle of real rain on the stage that he called for more rain and more rain until the stage was swamped—John's special favourite was the ballet, and he demanded repetition of the ballet unceasingly. And then later on in each afternoon all work had to be suspended while Mummie put George to bed and Daddy put John to bed—in each case this was supposed to be a rare treat and yet usually occurred on the average about five times a week. Usually after that Daddy had to change all his clothes because he was wet to the skin as a result of John's dashing imitation (while in his bath) of Bertie's somersaults upon the horizontal bars.

Then there was the telephone. I never realised how often I was rung up on the telephone until we started rehearsals and found myself interrupted apparently every quarter of an hour to answer the wretched thing. Quite soon I had to lay down definite rules that I was not to be called to answer the telephone during rehearsals. There was a time when those rules were broken, too. The parlour-maid came knocking at the drawing-room door, picked her way over the inconceivable muddle on the floor, and addressed me hoarsely in the wing where I was trying to work out a difficult piece of organisation.

“Wanted on the telephone, sir,” she said.

“Is it the King speaking from Buckingham Palace?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, didn’t I say I was not to be interrupted except to speak to the King in person? Perhaps it’s the Queen?”

“No, sir. It’s Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer speaking on the transatlantic telephone from Hollywood.”

However, rehearsals crept slowly along. With the perfection of Bertie’s mechanism we had our first programme complete. Kathleen and G. had learned to make a puppet walk—the former by dogged perseverance, the latter by sheer inborn genius. I always said I could do it and carefully avoided having to prove it. The performance had been speeded up until we ran through the programme in an hour and ten minutes, where previously an hour and a half had been our minimum. We could just contrive, too, to run through the turns without too much bustle or too many hitches at the back. In fact, it was a show which would promise well in a few weeks’ time.

We actually started to sketch out to ourselves the audiences we would invite. We would begin, we decided, by a performance before relations only. That would be the safest start we could make. You see, we simply could not tell whether the show was any good or not. No one had seen it except John and George and their nurse. There was a chance that we would be able to tell from our audience of relations if the show were worth giving to a wider audience. If it were not, then we decided that G. and Kathleen would both have to go sick so that we could postpone indefinitely any further production without looking too silly.

For, of course, the news had leaked out that we were engaged upon work with a marionette theatre. Four people cannot spend all their spare time for four months upon a project calling for a good deal of outside assistance without people getting to hear about it. When we were asked about it we did our best to be noncommittal and not appear in the least excited, but it is hard not to be excited about a thing which has occupied every waking thought for months, and, besides, I had to make adequate excuses to infuriated publishers and editors for the non-delivery of stories which had been lightheartedly promised in the sane days before marionettes began and which had not been touched since.

So everybody knew that we were starting a marionette theatre. Then one day my telephone rang while I was not engaged in rehearsals (I must have been asleep, I fancy, because sleep and rehearsals were all I did at that time). A voice of an acquaintance addressed me when I answered.

“Is it true,” said the voice, “that you have a marionette theatre, Mr. Forester?”

“Yes,” I said, sullenly.

“And they say you can pack it up and carry it anywhere?”

“That’s right,” I said, although so far the longest journey it had made was between the cellar and my drawing-room.

“Well, Mr. Forester,” said the voice, “I’m responsible for the entertainment at the golf club dinner next Thursday. I was wondering if you would come and give us a show. On professional terms, of course.”

This was Monday. We had planned to give our first performance in three weeks’ time, and then only to relations. It was perfectly horrible to have to make this choice. On the one hand there was the fear of failure; the fear of something going wrong, the fear lest the lines I had written were not in the least funny; the fear lest the spectacles I had planned should not be at all spectacular. On the other hand, here was a ready-made audience, official recognition of our existence, a fee! We should make two and a half guineas each out of it (if I had worked as hard as that at my own profession and made less than two and a half thousand I should have been sorely aggrieved). The temptation to skip the amateur stage of development and to plunge straightway into professionalism was overwhelming.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

After that I had to call G. and M. on the telephone, and Kathleen from the nursery, and announce rehearsals for Monday afternoon and Monday evening, and Tuesday afternoon and Tuesday evening, and Wednesday afternoon and Wednesday evening, ready for a performance on Thursday.

We ran through the whole performance twice at each rehearsal. I had said a long time ago that we ought to be so well drilled that we should be able to do the thing in our sleep. It appeared as if this ideal would be the more necessary, as we were all so exhausted on Wednesday night that we should be asleep, anyway, on Thursday. But when Thursday came there was no question of our being asleep.

I had thought I was case-hardened to excitement. I had lived through the first nights of *Payment Deferred* and *Nurse Cavell*, and of a couple of premières of my films. I had known what it was to read the first review of the first novel I had ever published. I have shot rapids in an unseaworthy motor-boat, I have survived a forced landing in an aeroplane. I once had to stand up and read a play of mine to an audience of five hundred women, and had discovered, when half-way through the first act, that the printed copy supplied to me by the management had not had its pages cut. I have sat in the corner of

the boxing-ring waiting to start a bout against a holy terror who was going to pound me into a jelly. But I have never known such a sick feeling of fright down in the pit of my stomach as on that Thursday. A hunting man once confided to me that as the years went on he not merely could eat no breakfast on hunt mornings, but no dinner the night before. I was worse than that. Besides not being able to eat I was all day long on the very point of doing the exact opposite.

We went through the preparations in a mood of ghastly unreality—experiencing the same feeling of insane inevitability that a poor devil must feel going through the ceremonial of the condemned cell. We packed the motor-cars with our belongings. I drove one, with the most exaggerated care, while feeling at the same time that a real good smash—a sandwiching between two trams, say—would be a godsend. G., who drove the other, says he felt just the same. We arrived at the golf club and carried in our things. In the adjoining room we could hear the riot of the dinner beginning. There was just an hour before our curtain was due to rise. G. and I began to put the theatre together, talking in hoarse whispers as though we were engaged in some act of sacrilege. Kathleen and M. began unpacking. Slowly the theatre arose and screened us from those forbidding rows of chairs in front. With trembling fingers we pressed home drawing pins and made electrical connections. It cheered us not at all that nothing was broken, that the lamps all came on at the touch of the switches, that no puppet was irredeemably entangled. We should have welcomed some hitch which would have made the show impossible. The row of puppets swinging on their rope in Bluebeard's Chamber seemed a fatuous set of instruments with which to keep five hundred men and women amused for an hour. I found myself praying that the dinner now being eaten would be so heavy that the audience would fall asleep in their chairs and forget all about us.

We got everything ready. In my wing I had the gramophone wound and the records laid out in their correct order—I went over them feverishly a dozen times to make sure. My different series of lines were pinned up in their right places. Over in her wing M. was reckoning up her properties; the chair and the see-saw and the flowers and the coloured cloths for the lights, and seeing that curtain and switches worked smoothly, and all the time she was mouthing over to herself the words that Mama had to say. Kathleen was feverishly reading over the cryptic words which conveyed to her the sequence of Bertie's movements on the horizontal bars. G. was drinking whisky and soda with every symptom of thirst and grinning sickly at us whenever we caught his eye.

Then we heard people beginning to troop into the room from dinner. There was a scuffling and a moving of chairs. I peered out through the curtains in the

same sort of way as an early Christian must have looked out through the bars at the lions in the arena of the Colosseum. People were accumulating in the rows of chairs, hundreds of them. Yet at the same time there was a long, sickly interval before everyone had drifted in from dinner to the hall. Vague figures appeared behind the scenes and asked me if we were ready. I said yes, hoarsely, because it was clearly impossible to say no. Then outside our theatre we heard someone stand up and announce that for the evening's entertainment the club had by a special effort succeeded in retaining the services of Mr. C. S. Forester's marionettes, one of the finest shows of its kind, and all the rest of it. As the speech began to draw to a close I looked round at my shaking company. M. settled herself on her stool, one hand on the switchboard and one on the curtain cords. Kathleen unhooked the compère and swung him up on the stage. Automatically M. reached out and settled him into his correct standing position. That was a comfort, anyway, to see that she could do things automatically. G. reached over for Bingo and held him ready for the next turn. I raised my hand, ready to make the signal for the start.

Do you know, I had to hold my hand up for about five minutes, and those five minutes were more like hours than any other minutes I have ever known? The person who was making the speech had the usual defect of speech-makers, and did not know when to leave off. He droned on and on eternally, while I stood with my hand raised, while M. sat with her hands at switches and cords, and while Kathleen held the compère ready for his opening show, and while G. clasped Bingo's control in one perspiring hand and his stick and ball in the other, and while we all four of us felt our last remains of nerve and courage draining out of our boots.

The speech ended at last. I had to brace myself to pay attention to the end of the applause which followed, to make sure by guesswork that nobody else was just standing up to make another speech, and then to nod at my company. I swallowed hard as I dropped my hand. M.'s fingers ran like lightning over the switches, just as they had run so often before. Stage lights up. House lights down. Then the curtains ran smoothly open, and there was no further chance of drawing back.

Marvel of marvels, Kathleen was getting the compère to bow quite naturally—as good a bow as ever I had seen him make. I gulped again and lifted up my voice towards the curtain in front of me. I tried to visualise the distant back rows of the audience and to address them, but with the blood pulsing in my ears it seemed to me as if my voice was only a squeak. The words came with an effort.

Good evening, humans. Ere my people play  
I have a chance to say my little say—

Those words as I said them seemed more banal and pointless than even they had seemed in rehearsal, which is saying a lot. There was nothing for it but to go through with it, though. A heaven-sent reminder came to me and checked my wild impulse to gabble the words out as quickly as possible and get them over. Out of the tail of my eye I saw the good little compère working valiantly to keep pace with me, and Kathleen's white face as she leaned over the arm-rest, her lips moving silently as she mouthed the words in time with me, and her fingers twittering as she played with the threads controlling the gestures. I managed to put the brake on in time to give the compère a chance to make a fine sweeping gesture, opening his arms to display his clothes, as he uttered the couplet:

And as with you upon the mortal earth  
A puppet's clothes decide a puppet's worth.

Another colossal effort recalled to me, just in time, the need to insert the couplet written in for this special occasion:

This ushers in a new artistic age  
Our first appearance upon any stage.

Looking out from the wing into the yawning blackness beyond the footlights was not much help. I could see nothing and hear nothing. I might have been addressing a city of the dead. And then, like pæans of heavenly music, came the first laugh as I finished the couplet:

The words we say are said for us. No less  
Are your opinions moulded by the Press.

That laugh was to us like a drink of water to someone dying in the desert. It taught me a lot—it made me realise that there really was some truth in the statements made by actors—to which I had always turned an unsympathetic ear—that the audience can affect profoundly the actor's performance.

For a moment, however, that laugh was almost our undoing. Never in rehearsals had I had to regulate my speed to fit in with some outside influence. I had the sense to stop speaking until the laugh died away, and then for one horrible moment I had not the smallest idea what I ought to say next. I could not remember the next couplet, and then to my horror I found I could not remember which was the couplet I had just said. For a tenth of a second I had all the sensations of a drowning man. But the script was in my hand. A beneficent providence directed my eye to the place where I had left off. I gulped again and went on:

We think we rule our fates, but do your kings  
Know more than us about who pulls *their* strings?

The prologue ended, and the compère ducked in his little final bow, and while I stood gasping the first applause we had ever heard came crashing up at

us. Automatically I had signalled for the curtain, and when I signalled for it to rise again the applause was renewed so that I had to wait before the compère could make his announcement of the next turn. That audience must have had a very good dinner indeed.

I helped the compère off the stage and G. swung on Bingo. Things went like clockwork. M. slid the chair and the see-saw on to the stage, and I remembered to reach over and put them on the chalk marks on the carpet indicating their exact position. The gramophone began to roar out "The Policeman's Holiday" as I signalled for the curtain, and Bingo's turn began.

During the progress of this turn I had nothing to do except keep the gramophone fully wound. There was time to look round me, to see M. crouching on her stool ready with her hook in case of an accident, and G.'s set face peering over the arm-rest as he handled Bingo. At that moment I certainly could not foresee the time that would come when G. would be able to look away from his work and give me a wink and a grin, and when M. and I would converse freely across the stage from wing to wing by the aid of the deaf and dumb alphabet. All I could do on this occasion was to unclench my clenched hands a little and wriggle my neck in its constricting collar.

As our nervousness melted away under the genial warmth of laughs and applause we found everything fresh and new. Up to that moment we had no idea of what would be the relative popularity of the different turns, and, of course, just as in the real theatre, we could not guess at what would cause a laugh and what would not. We were caught surprised several times by unexpected laughs, and at the same time stunts and lines which I had confidently expected to amuse were received in silence. We were settling down comfortably when some quite unauthorised person turned up behind the scenes (where he had no right whatever to be) and said:

"Can you raise your stage? There are some people at the back who can't see."

We keep a shotgun as part of our theatrical equipment nowadays for people like that, but for a space the remark threw us out of our stride. It made us stop and think what we were doing instead of going through it like automatons, but fortunately the interval came along and we plunged into the feverish business of getting Bertie's strings straightened out and attached to the arm-rest—at that time G. had not devised the simple apparatus which we use now—and as that meant about three minutes of desperate activity for all of us, we went back swiftly into the mazy condition from which we had been so rudely summoned.

Kathleen went through Bertie's turn like a somnambulist, and with all a somnambulist's uncanny ability to avoid pitfalls. G.'s fluttering of the

butterflies to the accompaniment of M.'s and my changing of the lights, brought applause, and then the ballet brought forth a real storm of clapping and laughter—it was the first time I had realised how popular that turn was going to be. By the time the epilogue came along we were all nearly happy.

At the end there was that awful moment (even now I have not grown hardened to it) when we had to make up our minds whether to emerge from the theatre into the public gaze or not. I still am strongly of the opinion that it is better not to do so, but sometimes—when, for instance, the only way out of the room is through the audience—it is necessary. We came out blushing and blinking on that evening, and we still do. After an hour's work in a marionette theatre, in a half-light and at a high pitch of concentration, this subsequent appearance is very trying. You never know what to say or what to do with your hands. But still we survived the experience, and when the hall had cleared we whipped the theatre down and packed it away in the cars and drove off. And I cannot remember any occasion when I have been so tired—no army experience, even, can compare with the combination of nervous and physical exhaustion which follows one's first professional appearance with a marionette theatre. There is nothing like it, either, for keeping one's figure down. Kathleen and M. both say that marionettes take pounds off them and keep them off.

A week or two afterwards we gave a succession of amateur performances. They were only child's play after our first experience. It was not very long before we were hard-bitten veterans. In the very middle of a turn we could exchange glances and shrugs in the half-light, expressive of our opinion of the present audience.

Truth to tell, we have frequently found audiences of friends—and, much more specially, of relations—far more “sticky” than audiences which have paid good money to see us. Relations seem to have the idea that it is impolite to laugh at things they find amusing. They go to endless trouble to maintain a decorous silence which is simply maddening to the puppeteers. It is not at all a bad tip to insert in the middle of the front row a kindly individual with a hearty guffaw, and to tell him privately before the show starts that you beg him to laugh at the top of his voice whenever he feels the least inclination to do so. He will give a lead in this fashion to the others, and everybody will enjoy themselves far more than if he were not there. That is all you need do—there is no need to go to the length of training and rehearsing a clique, although you might try that too if you think it is worth while.

We had our children's performance, much to the delight of John Forester. He had found in the preceding weeks that his glowing tales of Daddy's real theatre, where little girls danced and men did amazing feats on horizontal bars,

where exotic butterflies as big as your two hands fluttered in time to music and men balanced sticks on their noses with a ball on top as big as a football, were simply disbelieved as products of a six-year-old imagination. It gave him enormous pleasure to bring schoolfriends and schoolmistresses and show them that these things really did happen.

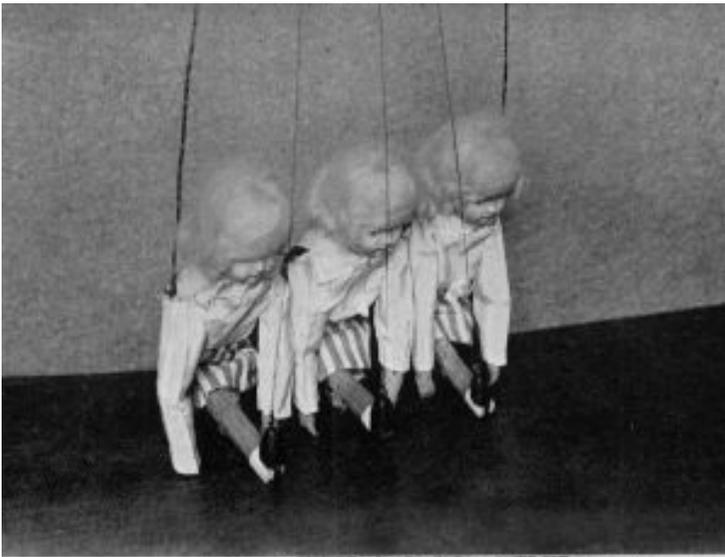
Incidentally, it gave us some practice in the gentle art of “vamping”—I don’t mean acting like vamps, but in extemporising words and gestures on the stage. Our show, you see, was not really intended for children. There were one or two turns which were definitely not aimed at the child mind—our play “What Every Boy should know,” for instance, and the long speeches by the compère. We slurred through those bits as quickly as we might, although we found that the children were quite happy to sit and listen to things they did not understand as long as they had a gesticulating doll to look at. We had to go right through, because with other performances imminent we did not yet dare to make a break in our routine. But we had agreed to put in something—a little chatty talk by the compère directed at these particular children, sprinkled with the kind of mild personalities which children love.

I had intended to write that speech and to run through it a few times with G. working the compère, but somehow it had not been done. Perhaps I had been suddenly struck with the necessity of earning my living, or perhaps it had merely been sheer laziness, but, anyway, that speech had not been written, although I was full of good intentions right up to the very minute when the children began to file into their seats. As it was, G. and I had to “vamp.” The curtain rose with the compère standing on the stage, and I began to say all the things I ought to have written down first, about the row of nice clean faces before me (standing in the wings with the screen six inches in front of my nose I couldn’t see a thing, of course) and about Mary’s nice pink frock and about Peter’s recent recovery from measles and all the rest of it, while G. hurriedly twisted the compère this way and that to face the different people addressed (he had been busy memorising the positions of the audience as they came in) and made the appropriate gestures. It was a source of huge delight to the children. Topical remarks in a real theatre were just what they liked. It was far easier than I had anticipated—it was an easy audience, of course—and since that time we have risked similar performances with more critical audiences. It is a very fine exercise for a puppeteer, and it teaches the “voice” a good deal, too, about how to play up to the puppet on the stage.

And so the children’s performance was got through, and we worked up to those entertainments given to friends which we had contemplated ever since we began to use marionettes. They were nervous work, too, for some reason. I could always contemplate with equanimity the prospect of my friends reading

my novels, or going to see my plays, but when it came to their seeing my puppets and hearing my voice I found I was not so tranquil about it. It was queer, if only because no part of my living depended upon the success of the performances. But we survived them, and, believe me, once you have a marionette show properly rehearsed it is the easiest way of offering hospitality that I know. It is far less trouble and bother than any dinner party, and I have never stopped to ask my guests if they would not prefer a dinner for which Kathleen would be responsible, to a marionette show. That is perhaps the richest dividend the enterprise has shown.

Once you have settled down you will never lack audiences. It is extraordinary how many friends you can discover, twenty at a time, to invite to your shows. And if you are willing to act for nothing you will find a lot of people who are only too anxious to ask you to do so at assemblies in which they are interested. Then, sooner or later, you will have professional offers made to you which, of course, you will take. The proudest moment in a puppeteer's life is when people show willingness to pay real money to see his act. If you are in a hurry to get professional engagements the best thing to do is to write to a reputable firm of entertainment agents and ask them to see your show. Most of these professional engagements will be at children's parties, so that you must have a real children's programme ready, and you must reconcile yourself to doing nine-tenths of your paying work round about Christmas. But be quite sure before you invite the agents that your show is good enough; and if you want to feel puppeteer's nerves at their worst that is when you will do so, acting before an audience of one or two people, who are not merely expecting, but anxious, to be displeased. I can only end by hoping that they will be pleasantly disappointed.



*Above THE BALLET  
A supremely modest little curtsey*

*Below BUTTERFLIES  
They drop off to sleep on a gradually darkening stage*

## EPILOGUE



*Spoken by the Compère.*

You see, we are more fortunate than you,  
Our friends are never false, though never true.  
We lead a quiet life, as well we might—  
We keep our platinum blondes locked up at night.  
With brains as small as ours we must be fools—  
But ours weren't ossified at public schools.  
We never have to weather Freudian storms—  
Never will fat disgrace our graceful forms.  
When they are made that way our faces smile—  
Not because smiling may be worth our while.  
Although to take a drink is past our powers  
We never have to wait for licensed hours.  
Our work's our life, yet "resting" leaves no void;  
We need no dole when we are unemployed.  
When old age comes, as destiny appoints  
A drop of oil rejuvenates our joints.  
Though time has wings, and life is fleeting fast  
We fear no future, we regret no past.  
And now the play is over it is time  
To say farewell in valedictory rhyme.  
And so—good night. Sweet slumber may it bring.  
God rest you, sirs. And may God save the King!

## Appendix



### AN EXAMPLE OF A PUPPET PLAY

#### “WHAT EVERY BOY SHOULD KNOW”

*(The curtain rises on a mid-Victorian scene. The background is of red velvet with a yellow lace dado. The lighting is pink. MAMA is a middle-aged lady in a hooped skirt. She wears black lace mitts, and, although she is sitting in a rocking-chair, R., she contrives to convey the impression that she has swallowed a poker. By the aid of a thread tied to the chair the latter is made to rock when she is not speaking, and to stop abruptly when she begins to speak. Her voice should be in the wing, R., and she is facing to the centre. Her single arm and head control is managed by a puppeteer above. PAPA is standing C. He is a little older; he wears a frock coat and sponge-bag trousers, heavy whiskers and a smoking-cap. It is best if his voice is behind the backcloth, C., he needs a foot control as well as a head and arm control, and the puppeteer must bear in mind the fact that he must later on turn from facing MAMA to face BERTIE, who comes on, L. BERTIE, when he appears, is a small Eton-jacketed boy. As his appearance is brief, he can if desired be held on from the wing L., on a wire, by his own voice.)*

PAPA. I trust, my dear, that all adequate arrangements have been made for Bertie's birthday.

MAMA. I think so, dear. There is an unusually large amount of delicacies in the house.

PAPA. We must be careful of the young—ahem—stomach, though, if you will pardon the allusion, my dear.

MAMA. Of course. But we must have a cake with fourteen candles on it, must we not?

PAPA. Fourteen! I was forgetting that little Bertie would be fourteen to-

morrow.

MAMA. Children grow up while you look at them nowadays.

PAPA. But fourteen! I think, my dear, it was time he was told.

MAMA. Told what, dear?

PAPA. You know.

MAMA. You mean——?

PAPA. Yes, that's what I mean. It is a solemn, not to say a distressing, moment.

MAMA. I should be very nervous if I were you and had to tell him.

PAPA. I? I had no idea of telling him. I intended that you should.

MAMA. Oh, I could not. I should be far too shy.

PAPA. It's a mother's duty to tell her son.

MAMA. On the contrary, Papa, if you will pardon me, I think it is the father's place. Boys hear these things so much better from men.

PAPA. But then, a woman is more sympathetic.

MAMA. But a man is, after all, of the same sex—Heaven forgive me for having to use that word.

PAPA. I think that is not a good argument. I think you must tell him.

MAMA. Oh, I can't, I can't.

PAPA. Priscilla, I command you to!

MAMA. Augustus, I have never disobeyed you before. But this time I must.

PAPA. You mean you refuse to do what I say?

MAMA. I do refuse, with an aching heart, Augustus.

PAPA. Can I believe my ears?

MAMA. I don't know, Augustus. But I shall not tell him, and I insist that you shall.

PAPA. You insist?

MAMA. It is you that insists, too. You say Bertie must be told, and as I will not, it must be you, Augustus.

PAPA. Perfectly preposterous!

MAMA. But very necessary. Shall I call Bertie so that you can tell him now?

PAPA. Very well, I will tell him, then. But you must be present, too.

MAMA. I shall be so uncomfortable!

PAPA. Discomfort is a woman's lot. Call him, then, Priscilla.

MAMA (*calling*). Bertie! Bertie! (*Bertie comes in.*) Papa has something to tell you, Bertie.

BERTIE. Yes, Papa?

PAPA. Er—h'm. Bertie. Er—h'm. Bertie, we have something to tell you. At your age I don't think it is right that a boy should remain in ignorance any longer.

BERTIE. Yes, Papa?

PAPA. Er—h'm. What I have to say is this, Bertie. Er—h'm. It isn't Father

Christmas who puts the presents in your stocking after all, Bertie.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Marionettes at Home* by C. S. Forester]