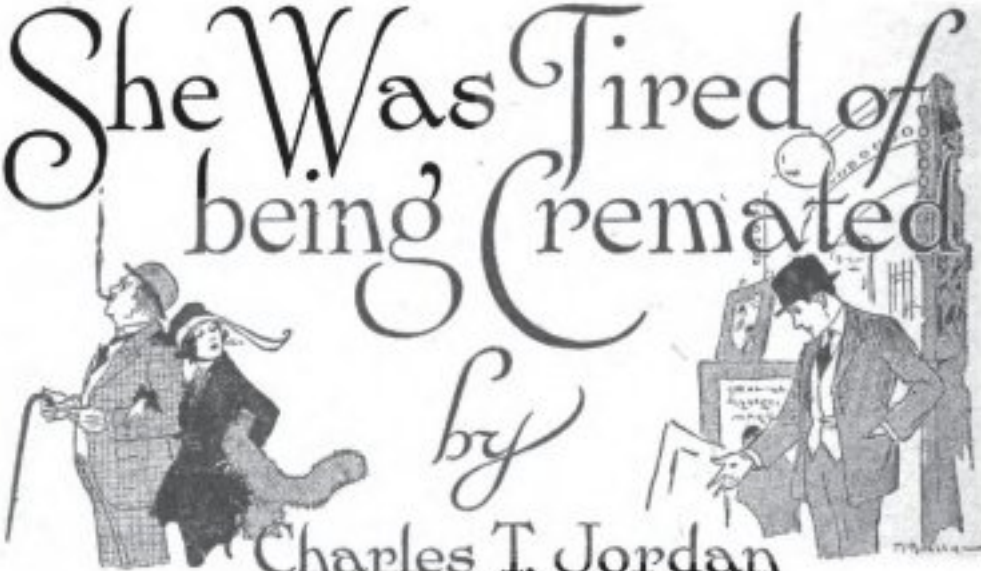


# She Was Tired of being Cremated

by  
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An illustration at the top of the page depicts a scene from a story. On the left, a man in a hat and a woman in a dark dress and hat are walking. On the right, a man in a suit is standing next to a crematorium, which is a tall, narrow structure with a sign on top. The background shows a city street with buildings and a street sign.

**I**N reality she wasn't burned alive; but it looked mightily like it from your six-bit orchestra-chair. Nor was the cremation illusion new. It was so old that it had been entirely forgotten. So, on a present-day program, it was considered a novelty.

B. Higgins had purchased the paraphernalia second hand, and on the strength of it and his own personality, had secured forty weeks' time on the Calcium Circuit. But at the last moment the young lady he had engaged for the martyr's part had gumshoed with the brainless progeny of a tobacco potentate to the little church around the corner. She was too good-looking for vaudeville, anyway, Balboa H. had soliloquized when he read her note.

Higgins never dreamed but that he had lost his chance with the Calcium people; but they happened to be short of mystery acts. Luck was with him, and he was thrown into contact with Caroline.

Be it understood that any old chorus girl would not do as subject of the cremation illusion. Good looks were desirable, but the right build was necessary.

His delight, therefore, was keen when he discovered that Miss Humphrey possessed both looks and a trim, slim figure. She, having sought employment for weeks following the dissolution of the ties binding her to Oscar "Bughouse" Brady, was only too eager to accept Hig's offer.

Caroline had confided a good deal of her past to the genial wizard with the heavy eyebrows, the mobile countenance, and the abnormally long thumb. She seemed fitted for the part of *Helia* in "Burned Alive," and gave Higgins full value. One thing he did not know, though, nor did he even suspect it.

Miss Humphrey, no longer cavorting through her small-time dancing-specialty, and always an omnivorous devourer of chocolate-creams, had become cognizant of the subtle difference in her figure that this was making. Their watery arrival in Oakland that morning had rubbed Caroline the wrong way, and, when Hig was about to leave her to her own devices in the comfortable room he had engaged for her at the Asterpole, she brought him to a standstill with a curt beckoning that could not be misunderstood.

“Don’t be in such a hurry, Mr. Higgins. Sit down a minute. I want to tell you a few things—a few important things.”

“I may have been a little brusque on the car, Car’line,” Balboa apologized. “But don’t let that get to you. I was damp and out of sorts. I didn’t expect to upset you so.”

She had taken off her hat, and her auburn hair struck Hig as being primely dressed. Her forehead, too, again had taken on its enameled look. “Oh, that’s all right,” she said. “No doubt we both were a little on edge. What I’ve got to say is of more importance. It concerns our act.”

“The act? What about it, Car’line?” He overlooked the “our.”

“The cremation stunt. It’s getting impossible! We’ll have to substitute something for it.”

Balboa Higgins’s eyes widened. “Car’line, have you gone mad?”

“Hardly! It’s a wonder, though. Hig, I’ve grown—that is, the trap-door is getting too small for me to hold up my end of the illusion with propriety and comfort.” She was embarrassed and her eyes sought the carpeted floor.

A hollow noise sounded in Higgins’s throat; a snort or a chuckle—you couldn’t tell which. “Car’line, stand up,” he ordered. “Now turn around very slowly. That will do.”

She shot him a shy glance as she dropped to her chair. “Believe me now?” she asked.

“I believe it’s your imagination,” he rumbled. “The idea! Why, you only weighed a hundred and ten a little while ago.”

“That may be,” she acknowledged. “But I’ve been on the scales since and—oh, I can’t tell you, Hig! The figures would frighten you.”

Another snort. “I insist upon knowing them.”

“Well, a hundred and thirty-three, then, if you must know.”

Hig enjoyed watching the red mount in her cheeks. “That bad? You don’t look it, Car’line. But I know what’s wrong. You’re stuffing too much. Eat less confectionery and butter fat—stop feeding yourself for slaughter.”

“Hig!” She said it reproachfully.

“There, there, Car’line. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. If you don’t want to diet I’ll have a mechanic enlarge the trapdoor.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort, Balboa!” She sat erect, her brown eyes drier than he had suspected. “I said we’d have to eliminate the cremation stunt, and substitute another. I’ve never liked it! I’ve put up with it, hoping every day you’d make a change yourself. How would you like to have to crawl through a miserable sixteen-inch-square hole in the top of a table twice a day for weeks on end—at thirty a week? It’s difficult, and too—too undignified!”

“If that’s all that’s bothering you, Car’line—the thirty per—why, I suppose we could make it thirty-five in a pinch.”

“The thirty-five goes!” she speedily acquiesced. “But the pinch does not! It’s the pinch I’m sick of. If you don’t—”

Hig’s own dander was getting stirred. “Pinch or no pinch,” he declared rabidly, “‘Burned Alive’ is our *piece de résistance*—and our *piece de résistance* it’s going to remain. That’s final!”

“Final, is it?”

Hig didn’t relish her pronunciation. “Final.”

“Well, Hig,” she ultimatumed, “I won’t leave you in the hole. I’ll stick this week out. But if you don’t rig up some illusion without a trap-door, I’m off you for good. That’s final!” she triumphantly snapped.

“But, Carline, we can’t substitute. ‘Burned Alive’ is what I got the booking on. Be reasonable, won’t you?”

“I am reasonable. I’ve put up with the cremation as long as I intend to. Brady

wouldn't have stood for my doing as you've made me!"

"Mr. Brady was your husband, ma'am," meekly submitted Higgins.

She crimsoned. "Husband or no husband," she ranted, "Mr. Brady knew his place. Oh, how I wish I never had left him!"

"Left him, Carline? I thought he engineered the disappearance act."

"Look here!" she spellbound him. "Either you are going to adopt a different tone or—"

This time a genuine snort escaped Higgins. He rose unceremoniously and left the room without a word. He absently descended the stairs—though he passed a waiting elevator—walked out through the lobby, and started up the street. The rain had ceased falling, but had it poured it is doubtful if he would have returned for an umbrella.

"I'm tired hearing that everlasting Brady stuff she's been pulling lately," he muttered as he walked. "I wish to the devil she could—"

He halted, open mouthed, at a line of printed-matter that stared him in the face. He found himself looking into the spacious lobby of the local Calcium house, directly at a large, framed, display photograph. It was the picture's caption that held his eyes.

"Of all the—" he ejaculated, as soon as he could get his lips close enough together to pronounce the words. For the legend he gazed upon was:

BUGHOUSE BRADY  
Nut Comedian  
THIS WEEK

"Speaking of the marvels of telepathy!" the astounded Mr. Higgins mentioned to himself. "If this isn't the limit! Here I'm thinking of nothing on earth but Car'line's former husband, and then to open my eyes and find myself staring—" With his

long thumb and forefinger he seized the tip of his chin and twisted it—an old mannerism of his—then released his hold, his chin reddening as it unwound itself.

Hig's knowledge of the habits and appearance of Bughouse Brady had been obtained exclusively through Caroline's lucid accounts of the events which led to their disuniting. To judge from the photograph, Brady's face was almost handsome, yet there was a trace of weakness at the mouth and about the over-large and shallow eyes.

Higgins advanced into the lobby and scrutinized the picture more closely. "I wonder," he meditated—"I wonder if I can't cook up a little concoction that will cure Car'line of ever mentioning Mr. Oscar—and here his words must have become audible—" "Bughouse Brady in my—"

"Did I hear you call my name?"

A rather tall and fleshy gentleman, standing near the box-office window had turned and approached the illusionist. Hig's eyes darted from the photograph to the round face of his interrogator. "Why—you are Mr. Brady himself!"

"I am. Anything I can do for you?"

"Eh—yes, Mr. Brady, I believe there is. If you happen to know of a place where refreshments may be—"

Already Mr. Brady was leading the way to the Elfin bar.

And, before they had passed through the small, swinging doors, Balboa Higgins had mapped a tentative course of action.

Over their tea, Hig introduced himself, and promptly bought again. "I—I have for my assistant a young lady," he chose his words carefully, "who has, of late, disturbed my mental balance somewhat. I wondered if I might ask you—a stranger—a favor?"

"A favor? Assuredly, my dear Mr. Higgins. Already I have taken a profound liking to you." With his free hand he again manipulated a bottle of bonded. "If you will

intimate the nature of your—”

“It’s like this,” Higgis proceeded, as the aproned man moved to the other end of the bar. “My assistant needs bringing down. I—eh—I have become very fond of her—but she doesn’t reciprocate. I believe that, if you are willing to attend to a simple flirtation, she would rapidly see the matter from my viewpoint.”

Mr. Brady winked knowingly. “You aren’t afraid I might carry it too far—that she might grow so fond of me that—”

Higgins raised a finger. “Not a fear at the world, Mr. Brady. In fact, I’m not certain she’ll stand for your advances at all.”

Brady had another one. “What is your assistant’s name?”

“That you’ll learn when you meet her,” smiled Hig, mentally rubbing his hands together. “No later than this afternoon.”

“Any one here by the name of Brady?” asked the bartender, who had just applied his ear to the receiver of a telephone.

Mr. Bughouse B. advanced pompously on the instrument.

Hig didn’t concern himself with the one-sided conversation his new-found companion carried on, but, rather, gave himself over to anticipating events to come. “I don’t believe Carline will even let him open his mouth,” he consoled himself.

“Will you have another, Mr. Higgins?” Brady had finished telephoning.

Higgins would.

“S my last for the present,” Brady became informative. “A friend just rang up the box-office, and they said she’d be apt to find me here. Regular walking atlases, those box-office inhabitants! But I’ll have to say ta-ta, Higgins. Got a date. Try not to let it interfere with our arrangement, though. See you some time this afternoon.”

And, proffering a bulky hand which Higgins did not like the feel of, the nut comedian walked sedately out.

“Good to look upon,” was Hig’s mental comment; “but I can see readily enough how a nice girl would grow tired of him mighty soon. By George! It wouldn’t be half bad if Car’lioie could see him with the dame he’s just dated. But he’ll be careful to keep that to himself.”

Now Hig was not a hard or frequent drinker, and already he realized that he had had enough. So he crossed the street and ate a bite of something to keep his tongue from tasting bad. Then he returned to the theater lobby and whiled away a few minutes looking over the photographs and billing of the current week’s acts. His gaze lingered fondly on his own eased display.

“To think that Caroline wants me to ditch ‘Burned Alive’!” he mumbled. “A hit from the first showing! We close the first half of the show on the strength of it. Ridiculous! Impossible!”

Then he regarded closely the trim figure of the young lady standing on the cremation table. “No getting round the fact that she’s stoutened since that was taken,” he declared. “I could see traces of it a while ago in her room—but she’d have got madder than she did if I’d as much as chirped a word. She knows she’s bigger around, and she knows I know it—but Lordy! If I admitted it in so many words—”

He glanced at his watch. “Half past one!” he whistled. “I’ve been hanging around here too long!” Hig started for the Asterpole, only a block away. As he was about to enter the portal, a couple passed him coming out—Mr. Bughouse Brady and Caroline Humphrey.

Balboa Higgins experienced a severe mental shock. Here was the very thing he had intended bringing about coming true of its own accord—only it was coming ten times truer than he had anticipated or desired. Hig had believed that one look at the nut comedian would be enough for Caroline, and here she promenaded in full view with him!

The conjurer stumbled into the Asterpole and up to his room. He threw himself on the bed. Gradually the fog lifted. "What if she did humor him enough to take a walk with him?" he cogitated. "She haven't seen him for a long time. Perhaps she figures she can stand him a few minutes."

Later, as Higgins approached the stage door of the Calcium Theater, he beheld two familiar figures conversing there; but, as he neared them, one, the man, lifted his hat to his companion and vanished inside. Hig quickened his steps.

"What does this mean, Car'line?" he demanded in as soft a voice as he could summon.

Her nose tilted skyward. "What does what mean?"

"Why—er—your gallivanting round with Bughouse Brady."

Her tone became dangerous. "I'll have you understand, Mr. Higgins, that what I do outside our act is none of your business."

He begged her pardon, and she softened somewhat.

"I picked up a morning paper and saw Brady was booked for the Calcium this week, and acting on an odd whim, I called up the box-office. They told me I might find him at the Elfin bar, and I did."

"Oh!" gulped Higgins. "But—do you really care for him again, Car'line?"

She searched his mobile countenance with something akin to amazement. "Hig, does that make any difference to you!"

Balboa spluttered and bowed and scraped and looked anything but comfortable. "Your being legally separated from him, I—I only thought it strange that you'd be taking up with him again," he stumbled weakly.

"Brady's all right in some ways." She watched his face as she spoke. "In fact, I think I like him better than I imagined I would."

Higgins thought he'd better conceal his emotions in a coughing spell, but she had

known him long enough to see through the subterfuge. Then, in confusion, he seized the tip of his chin and began winding it.

She laughed. "You're so funny, Hig. But isn't it time we go inside?"

He accepted the suggestion with pleasure, and they went to their dressing-rooms.

Fifteen minutes before time for their act to go on, Hig stepped to the wings and listened to the delivery of Bughouse Brady's monologue. The magician with the weekend face could see nothing funny in the big comedian's remarks, though the audience howled and held its sides. Perhaps Hig paid more attention to the man than to what he said. Balboa longed for a moment's conversation with the monologist, but realized there would be no chance until his own act had been presented.

Bughouse took three bows and an encore, and the street scene rose. Ensued ten minutes of magic such as only the dexterous Higgins could get away with. Then, Miss Humphrey, as *Helia*, was introduced.

She mounted a metal table, and screens standing on its top were drawn about her. Mirrors beneath the table reflected a surface the same color as the rear drapery, and the space under the stand offered plenty of sanctuary for a medium-sized woman.

No sooner had Hig screened *Helia* from view than she commenced the tortuous task of squirming through the trap-door in the table top. A torch was touched to the surrounding screens, and they burned brightly for a few seconds.

When they were extinguished, nothing but a heap of ashes and a couple of charred bones remained on the metal stand. Half of Caroline's day's work was done. Only once more would she be cremated before Monday—at the evening performance.

The curtain fell and rose again. Now *Helia*, escaped from her cramped posture

beneath the table, at Higgins's side, bowed acknowledgment of the applause.

Balboa was in his street clothes first, and dashed from his dressing-room to find Brady. The comedian awaited him. Before Hig could put in a word, Bughouse queried: "How soon will Miss Humphrey be out?"

Higgins stopped short and took firm hold of his chin tip. "I—have a heart!" spluttered the magician contritely. "This thing isn't going as I expected it would. You—you got in ahead of time."

"Miss Humphrey is a splendid young woman," Brady strove to calm him. "She has promised to dine with me this afternoon." Hig's chin turned red as he released his hold. "Go easy, Brady. Go easy, please!" he implored.

Bughouse Brady smiled and Hig sought the open air.

Monday and Tuesday, Miss Humphrey and the nut comedian were as thick as molasses, and hourly Balboa Hig's heart beat more faintly. But what could he do about it? Even had he not incubated the plan, they inevitably would have met. He had sized Caroline up all wrong. She actually seemed fond of that ass with the beefy body! Hig was in despair.

Wednesday afternoon Miss Humphrey came upon him in the Asterpole lounging-room. "Take a walk, Mr. Higgins?" she purringly inquired.

Balboa grabbed for the straw and nearly swallowed it in his excitement. "I haven't seen you much lately, Car'line," he lamented.

"You'll see less after a few days," she said affectionately.

He frowned questioningly.

"Brady and I have about decided to do a double again," she explained languidly. "Of course I'll not leave you without notice. Ill stay with the act through next week."

It came like a bombshell. "But,

Car'line! You can't—you mustn't think of doing that! I—I'll—"

"Mustn't, eh?" Her laugh was almost profane.

"I'll cut out the cremation—I'll see the management—I'll do anything—just so you stay with me! You'd grow tired of him soon, and then you'd wish you hadn't left—"

"Hig, you make me sick!"

"But have you really decided definitely to—"

"I told you we had about decided."

"Then there is hope! I'll see Maxwell to-day. I'll find another illusion—without a trap-door! Then you'll stay with me?"

"I'll promise you nothing, Hig. But it would be mighty nice, next week, if you got something different. Suit yourself, though. Don't let me influence you."

That very day, quoth Maxwell, a high official of the Calcium Circuit: "Sure thing, Higgins! We don't give a hang what you use, just so you put over the usual hit. Go to it! Your personality ought to see you by with most anything."

The conjurer made a trip to San Francisco after the matinee. After the evening show he sought Miss Humphrey. "Saw Myers. You know—the fellow who repairs magical apparatus, out on Golden Gate Avenue. He had a peach of a Noah's Ark on hand. I got it for seventy-five dollars. It'll be delivered at the Calcium stage tomorrow morning."

If she was particularly interested she didn't show it. "All right," she said. "Better than the cremation, anyway."

"A lot better," he agreed. "Car'line, on the level, don't you realize you've come to mean a great deal to me? I've not harped much on the subject, but haven't you read it in my eyes? Honest, I'm jeal—"

"Hig, you talk like a child! I'm going now. I have an appointment with Mr. Brady."

"But you'll come to the Calcium tomorrow morning at eleven for rehearsal?"

“Sure. I’ll be there. So-long.”

Higgins spent a miserable night.

Next morning she accompanied him to the theater. The Noah’s Ark apparatus had arrived, as also had a third individual.

“What on earth is Brady hanging round the stage door for at this hour?” Hig whispered to his companion.

“He’s come to watch our rehearsal, Hig. What did you suppose?” And she looked queerly at him.

“But it would be much better if we rehearsed alone! We don’t want every Tom, Dick, and Harry to learn the secrets of our act.”

“Secrets? Hig, do you know how old Noah’s Ark is? Why, they say Grant tumbled to the mystery the first time he saw it, a boy in his teens.”

Balboa flushed. “It is old, I know, Car’line. But it won’t seem to be so after we get through with it. You know my talent for imbuing a chestnut with up-to-dateness and life. For instance, the animals we’ll use won’t be of the old stock description. We’ll add variety—produce a dozen different kinds of birds and beasts.”

“How do you know you can get them?”

“Got a crate of them already.” Brady, watching them from a few feet away, now approached and lifted his hat.

“Good morning, Miss Humphrey—you, too, Higgins.”

Balboa H. had to reply. Caroline might do most anything if he didn’t. But his answer was not noticeably cordial.

For Hig’s part the ensuing hour was extremely uncomfortable. Brady was forever interposing a bit of advice, and the conjurer couldn’t get in a word of what he intended to tell Caroline. After doing the stunt a dozen times, the perspiring Balboa decided to call it a day. He returned to the Asterpole alone.

Much to the magician’s disgust, Brady

saw fit to be present at all the rest of the rehearsals, and Miss Humphrey seemed to take increased pleasure in his company.

Sunday morning—the matinee would witness the first public presentation of their new finale—Hig could stand it no longer. At ten o’clock he demanded audience with Caroline, and she listened in silence for twenty minutes to the outpouring of his heart. Apparently he made little impression on her, though.

“Why have you kept this to yourself so long?” she asked, rather unfeelingly. “You wait until you think I’m going to pair off with some one else, and then—”

“But I thought you knew it, Car’line. I didn’t think it was necessary to tell you in so many words.”

“Look back at last Sunday morning,” she reminded him. “Think of the way you treated me on the street-car! Was that any indication of what you thought of me? You don’t interest me.”

“I know I’ve a beastly temper. But I will be able to make you happy, Car’line. I know I will!”

“Maybe you could—maybe you couldn’t. But let’s talk about something else.”

Hig couldn’t think of anything else worthy of conversation. But he wasn’t to have much further opportunity, anyway. A knock sounded on the door, and Caroline called: “Come in.”

Bughouse Brady, fresh as a new-laid egg, entered.

Sunday houses always were good in Oakland. A quarter of an hour before the Calcium matinee began the “Standing Room Only” sign was displayed.

At twelve minutes after three the street drop before which Brady delivered his nut monologue was raised, disclosing the stage setting of Mysterious Higgins and Company.

The conjurer with the rapidly shifting features had not varied the preliminaries of his entertainment; but after he had been on ten minutes, spectators who had witnessed last week's performance became cognizant that the act was going to finish differently.

Balboa H. advanced to the footlights. "For my closing item, folks," he addressed them in a soft, but distinct voice, "I shall present a brand-new illusion entitled 'Noah's Ark—or After the Flood.'"

The ark, which was wheeled on by a stage-hand, differed in some essentials from its ancient prototype of shittim-wood. For one thing, it was mounted on four slender castored legs.

Hig took charge, and swung the boxlike affair around, that the audience might view all sides. Then, wheeling it well forward, he lowered its rear door, then the front door. He also let down its hooded ends. Undoubtedly the thing was empty—you could look right through its skeleton to the rear of the stage.

But, had you viewed the ark from behind, you would have beheld Caroline Humphrey, erstwhile *Helia*, of "Burned Alive," firmly secured to the hanging rear door by two welt-raising straps. Assuredly the posture was uncomfortable.

The stage-hand helped Hig close the front door first—then the end hoods. Together they now lifted the back door into place without suggesting to the audience that it was heavier than the front one.

The conjurer produced from somewhere a large, tin funnel, and inserted its spout in a hole in the front left corner of the ark's flat top. He stepped back a moment, then: "On with the flood!"

Three stage-hands each made three trips behind the scenes, at each appearance bringing on a twelve-quart pail of water in each hand. Lifting a pail dexterously, Higgins the Great eased its rim into the funnel bowl—

and poured.

Caroline, safely ensconced inside the ark, unstrapped herself from the rear door and rubbed as best she could the bruises made by the straps. How pesky things smelt in the narrow confines of her prison! It must have been the menagerie packed tightly into the end hoods of the contrivance.

She released the miniature doors at either end of her coffinlike container, and, one by one, the furred and feathered occupants of the end compartments joined her. Rabbits, dogs, cats, chickens, geese—the place became a veritable barnyard.

Came the flood!

Now, a properly constructed Noah's Ark intended for magical purposes boasts of a hollow leg—the one directly under the hole in which the funnel is inserted. Higgins's newly acquired ark was equipped with this necessary adjunct, as rehearsals had proved, but—

Caroline twisted her head and watched the inch-thick stream of water from Hig's first bucket playfully descend straight for the hollow leg, whence, normally, it should have found natural outlet through a hole in the stage to a vessel placed beneath.

But things weren't going normally this afternoon, for, just as playfully as the stream had descended, did it hesitate, as the hollow leg overflowed, and gradually spread itself over the ark's flooring on which she lay.

"The leg's plugged!" she exclaimed softly, and apprehensively she awaited the coming of the second bucketful.

Its advent more than verified her finding. She pulled up her skirts and tried to support herself on the balls of her thin-soled pumps. The costume she wore was a clinging, silken affair, and she knew it wouldn't stand wetting.

What should she do? Halt the show by letting Hig know something was wrong? Descended a third pailful of aqua pura.

"The darned thing is water-tight!" she



was bound to confess, as she watched the liquid reach a two-inch level.

Hig must have become excited, or else the whole behind-the-scenes force was assisting him, for, in rapid succession, came gallon after gallon of water through the funnel spout. Her ankles suddenly grew chill, and she knew it had risen that high.

With a shrill meow! a cat leaped to her shoulder. More water, and yet more. A duck quacked gleefully as it swam about.

“Hig!” she whispered softly, yet with force. “Hig!”

For answer came another torrent.

“I’ll be drowned!” she realized in mortal terror. “Why doesn’t he stop and begin producing the animals? Oh, for a Mount Ararat!”

The water was fast reaching the level of her knees. The animals were huddled in her lap, on her shoulders—those too small to keep their nostrils in the air.

She could stand it no longer—spoil the show or not. “Hig!” she screamed, with all the pent fury of a trapped wildcat. “Hig!”

No reply, save another avalanche.

“It’s sound-proof, too! Hig! Open the door! I’m drowning! Let me out!”

She paused for breath. For an instant she recalled the wetting of her hat plume the Sunday before. That had been as nothing to her present predicament. Why didn’t he answer?

The truth was, he had gone for more water: for the audience liked the jokes he cracked as he poured in each additional pailful. He had four more jokes on tap. Talk about putting over an old stunt in a new way!

Hig returned to the stage with two more brimming buckets. What was that? He thought he heard a sound from inside the ark. Could Caroline be signaling him?

Suddenly the whole contrivance—the ark and the legs supporting it—began rocking frightfully. Higgins regarded the phenomenon

in astonishment. Then it rocked too far, and straight toward the auditorium it toppled.

A door burst open. A flood of water coursed toward the footlights. The musicians in the orchestra pit ducked to evade a waterfall. Chickens, ducks, cats, guinea-pigs, a bull pup—flew, quacked, sprang, trotted, leaped from their forced imprisonment, and scattered themselves to the four points of the compass.

And finally, with a peculiar, rolling movement, emerged a form in rainbow-hued silks—a veritable mermaid—dampened Caroline!

The spectators rose to their feet as one. Cheers, howls, rumbling laughter filled the theater. The orchestra burst into a current seaside success, and Balboa Higgins, catching sight of a cork embedded in the bottom of an upturned, hollow, ark leg, shambled backward dizzily.

The figure in clinging silks got to its feet. The figure’s eyes alighted on the cork. The curtain fell.

Fascinated, Higgins watched Caroline reach for the handle of one of the overfull buckets he had let thud to the floor. She lifted the heavy pail as though it were a feather, and advanced on the horror-stricken magician.

“Car’line!”

Probably the innocence she read in his eyes, rather than his voice, influenced her; for, suddenly swerving to the right, she strode toward a puffed-up effigy in the wings—an effigy that had not time to turn and flee before she reached him.

“You! You’re the one! You tried to queer our act! Make a nymph of me!”

She helmeted him with the pail of ice-cold water, and the corpulent nut monologist fell without a murmur.

Her features cleared. She rushed to the amazed conjurer, and with an “Oh, Hig!” pillowed her wet head on his shoulder.

The stage door opened. A muscular

six-footer with a red face confronted them. "Caroline," the newcomer faltered, "I want to thank you for sending for me. Where's—"

She pointed to the coming-to-life wreck in the wings, then, her nose tilted, her face pale, her tone cold: "You needn't thank me, sir!" And taking Balboa gently by the arm: "Come on, Hig."

They hadn't moved ten paces when a second person rushed in from the street—Maxwell, of the Calcium Circuit.

"Great, Higgins! Biggest laughing hit in years! Something went wrong, though, didn't it? Luckiest thing that ever happened! Play your magical skit exactly as you did today, and you can start right over the circuit again as soon as you finish this tour. An act like that's worth more money, too! How about it?"

"How 'bout it, Car'line?" Balboa passed the buck.

She hesitated. "I don't know, Hig," she smiled. "But I think I prefer the flood to the

fire."

At her dressing-room door, receiving a glad affirmation to a leading question, Higgins ventured another.

"You didn't really care for Brady after all, Car'line?"

"I should say not! Nor the fellow I've been hobnobbing round with the last week, either. I only went with him to get you good and jealous, and make you cancel that cremation—"

"Wasn't the man who watched our rehearsals—"

"He was a pirate! He was using my former partner's stuff, all right, and was willing to pose as him for your benefit. But he was no more the original—I thought it only right, though, to wire Brady, so he could come on from the East and protect his material.

"But me care for him? Huh! Didn't you see the cold shoulder I gave him? Hig! Let go your chin! You'll break it off!"