

L'envers du décor

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BEHIND THE SCENES

In front of the awning covered entrance, as in New York, stands the porter. Tall, upright, uniformed and braided like some Ruritanian prince, he commands the front of the stage and not behind the scenes. He is an important character. He knows how to open car doors with the right mixture of deference and dignity, and how to bow while holding his gold braided cap, but also how to crack a joke with the chauffeurs who are his friends. He rakes in a considerable amount in the way of tips, and in the evening, discarding his finery for civilian clothes, goes to have a drink at the little cafe round the corner. Gone the refined accent, the suavity, giving place to a wholesome Parisian slang. The « props » have been put away for the night. It is the same with every fashion house. There is the official side of the performance, the smiling saleswomen, the hieratic and slightly disdainful mannequins. But the

real life is behind doors through which the customers dare not penetrate. The life is in the hive; for the fashion house throbs and buzzes with activity just like a hive.

9 o'clock. Staff entrance. The seamstresses arrive, clock in and make their way up the stairs to where the Assistant Forewoman is already waiting, the power behind the throne, organiser, supervisor and right hand woman to the Forewoman. The clothes are taken out of the cupboards and drawers, each team takes up the dress that they were working on the day before. Team is indeed the right word; usually it consists of the head, a first assistant, a second assistant and a handy girl



reserved specially for the easy jobs and the finishing off. Everything is starting up again, the irons are plugged in and the events of the evening before are gone over, with that sentimental touch peculiar to seamstresses; the spicy conversations are more likely to occur among the mannequins and the saleswomen. The seamstress is generally pure at heart. On special occasions, like Sainte-Catherine's Day, there is singing in the workrooms and the most popular songs are always those in which «moon» rhymes with «June» and «arms» with «charms».

9.30 a.m. The apprentices, or the young girls still training, make their way to the stores to get supplies of fabrics and materials. In the morning, the stores are the heart of the Fashion House. Here are kept the lengths of woollens and silks, the buttons, pearls, zip-fasteners, ribbons, gros-grains, reinforcements, hooks and eyes, press studs and the material for making patterns. The storekeepers in their white smocks guard their treasures jealously, argue, give short measure, cut and serve. They know everything that goes on, the life of the workrooms, the likes and dislikes of the forewomen, the reservations for the customers, the agents. They know just where in the whole of Paris to find such and such a lamé which has not been seen for the last ten years at least, or how to match the green worsted that the designer clamoured for yesterday evening; they know the dyers, the manufacturers of buttons, belts and glass beads. All the wheels of the house revolve around the stores. The assistant saleswomen come here to air their grievances, the mannequins to choose the fabric for their dresses, the accountants to protest against the delay in passing on a thousand and one bits of paper, the salesgirls to complain that Lady So-and-so was badly served, and the errand girls who are sent here at least ten times a day for the same thing: «That assistant forewoman, she doesn't know her own mind.» The stores are the lifeblood of the House. As it is not very often that a building is designed specially to be a modern, rational Fashion House but rather that, in most cases, the best has been made of some old premises in which the drawing-rooms were the most important feature, the stores are often in some dark, cluttered up old corner, where half the time is spent in putting away what has just been taken out. In it are kept hundreds of thousands of francs' worth of materials that will no longer be fashionable next season if they are not used. There are also telephones direct to the outside world. To be in well with the stores is to have the possibility of receiving a call, of making a date, of getting round the regulations, of having a cutting put on one side for next winter with which one will be able to make an inexpensive coat. That



is the employees' point of view; the designer's point of view is that the stores are a necessary evil, a millstone round his neck, indispensable but always viewed with mistrust. But the good store-keeper could not care less. She knows herself to be indispensable. She is an invaluable source of information and she goes on with her work, ignoring the outbursts, the anger and the explosions. It is for all these reasons that the couturier who is about to set himself up ought to be advised right from the start to build everything round the stores, like the modern woman who, when planning her future home, begins by deciding on the position of the kitchen.

The corridors and the stairs are the domain of the errand girls and the assistant saleswomen. Generally speaking, the errand girls are the younger. Youngsters from Belleville, the rue Mouffetard or the suburbs, they are given all kinds of jobs. They go everywhere, worm their way in everywhere. If by chance a film star is trying on an evening dress in one of the drawing-rooms on the second floor, there is bound to be the cheeky face of an errand girl peering through the half open door to admire the star whose photograph is pinned up on the workroom walls. « My, look how beautiful she is »... (or the contrary). Sometimes the errand girl can be found in the street off on some vague, indeterminate errand. Very likely it is forbidden, but everything is permissible as long as it escapes the vigilant eye of the timekeeper. And then there are the evening classes outside, a thrilling pretext for going out at night. The errand girl knows the words of all the love songs by heart and even if she is only just beginning to know the first thing about overcasting, fifteen miles a day along corridors, up and down stairs, and a hundred snubs and rebuffs do not daunt her. She is always in a hurry, without getting there any the quicker for it. She enters body and soul into the life of couture. She learns to love her thankless task, and already — at fifteen, Juliet's age — she is dreaming of her Prince Charming.

The assistant saleswoman is quite another thing. She is the factotum of the chief saleswoman who orders her about, bullies her and nearly drives her crazy. Usually her family has insisted on her being taken on at a very low salary to learn the job of saleswoman which later — very much later — will be lucrative. The assistant saleswoman must be pleasant to look at, quietly smart, well shod, correctly dressed, speak a foreign language and be content to earn less than a seamstress. A hundred times a day she will go backwards and forwards between the accountancy department, the despatching office, the mannequins' dressing rooms, the stores and the fitting rooms. She must



not take offence at being accused of stupidity. To accept everything with a smile is her duty. One day, unless she gets married and leaves the trade, she will become chief saleswoman in her turn, when she will get fatter round the waist and begin to grow a double chin. In her turn she will help to train the young...

For the present however, she runs up and down the corridors without even having the right — noblesse oblige — to the nickname of «corridor rabbit» reserved for the errand girls.

Meanwhile, in the workroom where the Forewoman has finally arrived, silence is almost restored. Heads are bent over the work which is spread out everywhere. From these formless pieces of material streaked with long white threads, these crumpled fabrics, will be born the sumptuous dress on which Rita Hayworth will carelessly spill the ash of her cigarette. When it leaves the workroom after the last alterations, those who have made it will never see it again except perhaps in the magazines they glance through in the evening at home or in the suburban train, proud, in spite of everything, at having helped to create a little more beauty.

(To be continued).

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