

Basement Room

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The stairway that led to the basement room, where all the actors spent their free time, was always dark. The light that was supposed to illuminate the stairs had burned out long ago. A wooden hand railing ran along the wall and served as a guide and brace for anyone who felt his way down the eleven cement steps. Once down the steps, the basement hall seemed darker than the stairs, although I hardly think it possible. At the end of the hall, shining through the blackness, was the faint outline made by the light from within as it shone through the crack around the door. The door, to my knowledge, was never locked and swung easily on its hinges.

The room itself was not particularly inviting, for it was cold and damp in the summer, overheated and stuffy in the winter, and musty all the time. But we young actors thought it a magic room, a room where dreams were made. And almost every night we could see that these dreams do come true, because the room would be crowded with showmen who had fashioned their lives, in dreams, in this very room.

Cabinets lined two walls from ceiling to floor. The windows, on the far side of the room, were high off the floor, but really at ground level. Sometimes, during a severe winter, the snow would completely cover them and shut out the sights and sounds of the street. Under-

neath the windows were two desks, back to back, that were always littered with printed matter. Now it would be complete files of "Opera News," now scripts for a play that was under rehearsal, or scrapbooks being brought up to date. On the right side of the room was a large table, around which sat a dozen or so chairs waiting to be occupied and tilted back. The floor, in the center of the room, was constantly crowded with boxes of costumes. From across the room these costumes looked as though they were made of plush velvet and rich silk, many of them adorned with royal jewels. With closer scrutiny one would find that the costumes were cotton and the jewels were cut glass, but that only added mystery and enchantment to the room of which they were so much a part. In a corner, near the table, there were a couch and more chairs for the people who gathered to tell their tall tales.

Those actors may have been the ones who gave the room its personality, but to me it had a lure all its own. The lure was not only the mysterious costumes, the large scrapbooks, or the table around which people sat and lied in a pleasant sort of way, but it was the very atmosphere of the stage—the pasty smell of fresh scenery paint, the mustiness of old canvas backdrops, and all the things that are the echo of those who "walk the boards."