

## EARLY NIGHTS

by Charles Henry

*Mr. Henry has been production manager for Moss Empires for very many years. He has probably produced more shows at the London Palladium than anyone else. That he is a remarkable personality is shown by the fact that he is the producer of the "Crazy Gang." Here is the first instalment of anecdotes from half a century in show business.*

If I were asked what has been the greatest change in the theatre during my fifty odd years' connection with it, I would say, undoubtedly, lighting.

One of my earliest engagements was with a "Fit Up". We not only travelled our own stage and proscenium front, but also lengths of barrel fitted with gas jets and reels of rubber hose. The mechanic in charge of the lighting was the Gasman as indeed he was. His job was to connect the gas battens and floats to the supply installed in the Assembly Rooms or Workmen's Halls, where we played. A check-down was a tricky affair achieved by slowly turning the main tap. If the Gasman was a bit shaky or had had *one-over-the-eight*, the jets would go right out and the play would be interrupted while a ghostly figure with a lighted taper crossed the stage. On the up-stage side of the floats were two strands of wire, I never knew if they were to prevent the long skirts of the ladies from putting out the jets or to stop the skirts from catching fire—probably both.



"... a tricky affair turning the tap."

The regular theatres were installing electricity, although the light from these old carbon lamps was not very good. Front Limes were unheard of, but we did have Perches—a carbon arc over each of the *P.*, and *O.P.*, entrances, operated usually by an inexperienced nightman, who could produce a hiss and a splutter guaranteed to drown the best of dialogue; carbon arcs were also used for entrance lighting which, of course, had to be continuously trimmed, which meant a man on each of them. There were no 1,000-watt floods. These were a godsend when they came, but sometimes the electrician had bunch lights made up by installing six or eight lamps in an ordinary tin or enamel bowl.

I had an effect in the early days, produced by projecting shafts of red light on to a drop made in folds of black American cloth and when the drop was shaken into waves, the result was roaring, leaping flames. Spotlights were unknown, so the electrician went to