

Disappearing Act

In the days before the competition of other (if not always better) entertainment doomed the vaudeville stage to near oblivion, the glib three-a-day prestidigitator amazed his mystified audiences with his routine of "Now you see it and now you don't!" Whether the object of his attention was a rabbit, a gold-fish bowl, or a gorgeous blonde assistant, there it was before your very eyes—but before you could blink it was gone.

The New York TIMES, in its business columns, reports that since 1918 "the increase in machine efficiency and in the productivity of labor has more than doubled production per man-hour." Quoting statistics drawn from carefully compiled data provided by various Bureaus, Boards and Conferences, the TIMES proceeds to show that, using 100 as a base for the year 1900, man-hour production has steadily risen; in 1939 it was 325. The figure for 1940 is expected to be about 330. None of these facts and figures is at all remarkable; we accept it as natural that greater industrial skill, scientific achievement, improved machinery, better methods and wiser management have consistently increased the productive power of labor. But there is something remarkable—by its absence.

In no place does the TIMES determine or even consider what has become of the produce made possible by labor's increased productiveness. The statisticians too maintain upon this subject a demure silence. The production increment has come and gone, like the magician's rabbit; now you see it, and now you don't! There is one certainty, however; the increased production has not found its way into the pockets of labor. By a form of magic, effected not with mirrors or false-bottomed trunks, but with monopoly and privilege, the added wealth that labor produces slips from its hands. Then it re-appears—in the possession of the dexterous manipulator.

Vaudeville may be a thing of the past, but the Great Disappearing Act still goes on, with variations.

—SYDNEY MAYERS