

# STAGE

May, 1935

p. 14



## VAUDEVILLE

*in its good old golden days*

By

FRANKLIN P. ADAMS

(F. P. A.)

**J**ust because somebody remembered that I remembered a few words of a few songs that were sung when I was incredibly young, right away I'm stuck in a pigeon-hole labeled The Old Rememberer.

Of course, I am neither angry nor hurt this time but some day they'll catch me. "You used to go to the old vaudeville shows," I was asked the other day. "What were they like?" Well, boys and girls, I told them.

They were Continuous Variety Shows. They ran—at any rate at the Olympic Theatre, known in Chicago as the Big O—from 12:30 P.M. to 11:00 P.M.

While those days often are referred to as the Golden Days of Vaudeville, candor compels the admission that they were brimming with dross; that vaudeville's standard in 1896 was no more aureate than musical comedy's in 1935 is. Possibly the dull spots—and dull for those days, I mean—were bigger and more frequent than they are today. We rememberers fall into the habit—sometimes we are stampeded into it—of sighing for past glories. We forget that when we were seeing those old shows we were comparatively carefree; that it made little difference whether the show were good or bad; and it did not occur to us that we might have seen something better for the money. For we couldn't have seen anything better; there were not dozens of choices, and a mistake cost at most thirty cents, instead of the Tidy Sum that it would cost this evening for the two of us to see, for example, *Anything Goes!*

Also, there is no comparison, for there is no more out-and-out vaudeville. There is a court room act in *Thumbs Up*, a riotously comic scene written by H. I. Phillips, and played by Clark and McCullough and Sheila Barrett. It is a satire on current murder trials. It is not so comical to me as was the burlesque trial scene in the Cohan revue where Cohan and Collier, Joseph Santley, and Richard Carle did the whole thing in ragtime—a burlesque of *Common Clay* in which Jane Cowl was weeping all over the 42nd Street of 1917. Carle was the Judge and I can still



## VAUDEVILLE



hear him say: "Clerk—take a note." And "What have you got to say? What have you got to say? You said you came to testify, so what have you got to say?" That, by the way, was the show in which George Cohan's *Down on the Erie*, which ended

Poor John O'Leary

I'm afraid you've lost your pal,  
For I've left you flat, my dearie,  
On the Erie Canal,

turned from an obvious burlesque song into one which was taken seriously by the song-buying public. It occurs to me now that that revue was even better and funnier than any variety show that I am supposed to be yearning for. (Personal to George M. Cohan: How about another one like that?)

And at Sam T. Jack's Madison Street Opera House, Chicago's chief palace of burlesque, there was a court room scene with what I think was a take-off on the Bradley-Martin Ball, if that was the swell New York affair at which Little Egypt danced. This harlequinade was called the Radley-Barton Ball, and all I remember is the multiplicity of bladders—everybody hitting everybody else; and, speaking of court room scenes, there is the best and tunefulest of all. I refer, friends, to all of Gilbert's words and all of Sullivan's music in *Trial by Jury*. I skim the dulnesses of those old variety shows—the acts I heard two or three times an afternoon—the so called supper shows. The singing paper-tearers, the horrible brother acts, the worse sister acts, the dull acrobats for whom the Olympic orchestra perfunctorily always played either *Funeral March of a Marionette* or Waldteufel's *The Skaters*, the statue cloggers, the whistlers whose high point was the mocking bird calling its mate, and the ventriloquists.

It was necessary for boys in those days to sit through all that stuff that even then bored us in order to see the big acts. Seats at the Olympic were not reserved, and if we wanted to sit way down front we had to get there at a little after noon. It was not until



3  
VAUDEVILLE

two o'clock that the first-rate acts began to come on. And now let me strike gold.

For my first variety show included the Russell Brothers in *The Irish Servant Girls*. That act opened with one of them sliding in and saying, "Why didn't you stop me?" "I didn't see you comin'." "If I had two dollars you'd see me quick enough." Laugh? Gentlemen, I thought I'd die. The Russell Brothers, by the way, were the forerunners of Savoy and Brennan. There were the Beaumont Sisters, who sang *The Boys of Company B.* and Lucy and Vinie Daly, whom I saw so often dancing to Sousa's *King Cotton* that I, no snappy terpsichorean, could do their whole act any time I happened to hear *King Cotton* again.

There were the soubrettes, known as serio-comics, such as Lottie Gilson, *The Little Magnet*, who sang *Sweet Rosie O'Grady* and *Elsie from Chelsea* which went—boy, I'm started—

Elsie from Chelsea,  
I can think of nobody elsie,  
But Elsie from Chelsea—  
Nobody elsie for me.

There was Lizzie B. Raymond, a vigorous and plentiful gal, who sang *And the Band Played On*. There was Helena Mora, the female baritone, whom I didn't like, especially when she recited ~~how~~ *Salvator* won the race and sang *The Moth and the Flame*. No; I was, credit it or no, a light-minded boy, whose tastes ran all to humor and to sex. Villon wrote that his urge was all to wine and women, or, in Henley's version, "Booze and the blowens cop the lot." My ballade's refrain would have been, "I'm all for giggles and the gals," and I shouldn't like it to get beyond the confines of this magazine, but I haven't changed in all those years. Eliminate the laughs and the ladies from my life, and you shed my blood. There was Carrie Scott, who sang a tough Bowery song ending *Ain't A'goin' To Tell*, and then—it was the time of the Gould-Castellane wedding—*I Was a Plain American Girl Is Good Enough for Me*. There was Lady Sholto Douglas, who sang *She is the daughter of Officer Porter, is charming Kitty Laughing and merry, with lips like a cherry, so gay and witty—* She's known, of course, as the pride of the force, and the boy's delight— *She is the daughter of Officer Porter, and she is all right*

but her singing was incidental, for she wore a diamond garter, just below the knee, and it was not until next week, when I heard some less alluring soubrette sing it, that I paid the slightest attention to the words. And there was Henrietta Byron, who was Barney Fagan's dancing partner when they sang *My Gal Is a High-Born Lady*. I was



# VAUDEVILLE

violently in love with Norma Whalley who sang *Louisiana Lou*. There was Josephine Sabel, who sang *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*, and there were two little girls whom I saw frequently and detested until they grew up. They were Little Irene Franklin and Little Elsie Janis.

Four acts stand out as my favorites and every time they played the Olympic I went three or four times a week. They were Weber and Fields, Johnny and Emma Ray, Williams and Walker, and McIntyre and Heath. These acts later became stage history and often were diluted into three-hour shows. Never to my notion were they so good as they were in those thirty-minute acts when it was my boyhood wish that they would go on being comical forever. I dislike to grow didactic, but I learned this lesson: that it is better to have people say "I wish there were more" than to have them say "Will it never stop?"

I remember well James F. Hoey, who gave a sonorous imitation of Sir Henry Irving to enormous applause. "Liars," said Hoey, "you never saw Irving in your lives."



There were four musical acts that I remember with great joy: Wood and Shepherd, a black-face act; Falke and Semon; Smith and Fuller, who played on something that they called a marimbaphone; and Staley and Birbeck, the musical blacksmiths, whose wind-up was the Anvil Chorus from *Il Trovatore*.

There were two acrobatic acts that must have been of a high order of excellence, for they always had a high place on the bill and are pleasantly vivid in the memory of this acrobat loather. One of these acts was Caron and Herbert, one of whom used to dive into a lake painted on the backdrop. From some mysterious place a few drops of water would splash about. Don't tell me that that wasn't fun, and don't tell me that it wasn't funny when one of them hung his hat and coat on the backdrop, in the apparent delusion that



# VAUDEVILLE

a hook was there. The apparel fell down of course. Why, often at a party, I steal that staff today and it never fails to panic. The other act was Felix and Cain, and the climax of that act, as I remember it, was when one of them walked up an enormous plank till everybody in the first ten rows screamed in fear that he would be catapulted across the theatre.

I have no records of those days for there were no programs. But I cannot forget Dixon, Bowers, and Dixon, billed as The Three Rubes, whose pantomime of a pitcher, catcher, and batter was something that today would doubtless be learnedly discussed as art. I cannot forget Billy Van, who wobbled a big cigar as he spoke—the funniest, to my notion, of all the blackface predecessors of Frank Tinney. Nor James J. Morton, whose manner always seemed to be the one Tinney, though comical himself, got his stuff from.

I can't forget this, either. It is impossible to prove that these old boys and girls were good, or even funny. I saw Weber and Fields when Radio City Music Hall opened, two years ago. They were not funny, even to me, although they did a few of the same things that they did in 1896. I can't forget that our pace is faster, our choices ineffably greater. I can't forget that Sir Owen Seaman said it all when he said

You, too, in turn may have a son,  
And marvel how he finds his fun  
In wheezes where you notice none.

For here, on this terrestrial ball,  
Nations and markets rise and fall,  
But Humor wobbles most of all.

I almost forgot, however, that a long time ago I appropriated a refrain of Henley's and wrote the following "Ballade of Ancient Acts:

Where are the wheezes they essayed,  
And where the smiles they made to flow?  
Where's Caron's seltzer siphon laid,  
A squirt from which laid Herbert low?  
Where's Charlie Case's comic woe?  
Where Georgie Cohan's nasal drawl?  
The afterpiece? The olio?  
Into the night go one and all.

Where are the japeries, fresh or frayed,  
That Fields and Lewis used to throw?  
Where is the horn that Shepherd played?  
The slide trombone that Wood would blo  
Amelia Glover's L. f. toe?  
The Rays with their domestic brawl?  
Bert Williams with "Oh, I Don't Know"  
Into the night go one and all.

Where's Lizzie Raymond, peppy jade?  
The braggart Lew, the simple Joe?  
And where the Irish servant maid



## VAUDEVILLE

That Jimmy Russell used to show?  
Charles Sweet, who tore the paper snow?  
Ben Harney's where? And Artie Hall?  
Nash Walker, Darktown's grandest beau?  
Into the night go one and all.

## L'ENVOI

Prince, though our children laugh "Ho! Ho!"  
At us who gleefully would fall  
For acts that played the Long Ago,  
Into the night go one and all.