

OLD SHOWMEN NEVER DIE

The Man Whose Bald Head Gracie Fields Kissed

THERE was so much of it and it was all so interesting to anybody fond of tracing the progress of entertainment in New Zealand from early days till now, that it took me more than two hours to interview Bob Hardie. Even then a lot was left out.

You may ask: "Who is Bob Hardie?" He is known by sight to all patrons of the Wellington Town Hall and personally to almost every singer, actor, musician, boxer, and wrestler who has appeared there for 26 years. He won't mind if his profile is described as being very much like Mr. Punch; the accompanying photograph bears that out. "Bob"—he prefers it to "Mr."—has pushed and pulled at more grand pianos than he cares to think about; and he has hauled up and down thousands of tons of stage curtains, scenes and drapes in his time. He is the assistant custodian, but has himself been a professional comedian and has appeared, in some theatrical capacity, in almost every town in New Zealand.

We began our chat with the days when Bob was a programme boy at the

old Exchange Hall, Lambton Quay, and finished with the kiss which Gracie Fields imprinted on his bald head in public a few weeks ago. There was no need for press cutting books—his memory was good. He went back to his days as property and baggage man with Charlie Naylor, the elder, in a vaudeville show up and down the North Island, and then told of his rise to resplendency in a boiled shirt when he became house manager for Hall and Valentine's Entertainers for six months.

Companies of all types were on the road at this time and there was little worry about getting an audience. Bob joined Cooper and McDermott's panorama and musical show and then Vanberg's dramatic company in the Federal Hall, Manners Street, where the leads were George Coppin, jun., and his wife, Millie Collier. When the company broke up he was "out of a shop" for a while before going into partnership with one McAuley, and enjoying considerable success.

Gee-up!

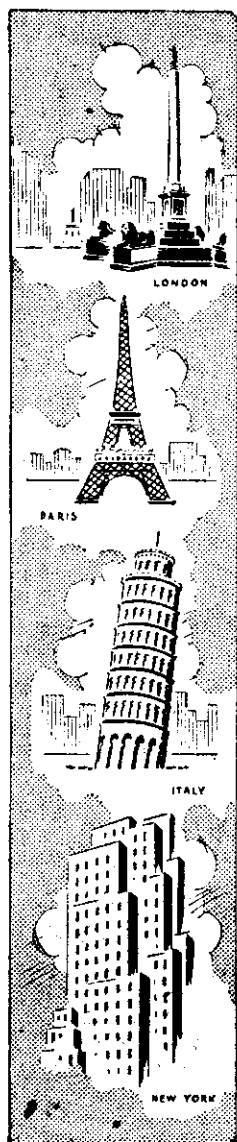
Old-time players did all their own work, travelling in horse-drawn waggons sometimes, and living more or less a

gipsy life. One show, which Mr. Hardie took north when the main trunk railway was being built, played in billiard rooms and even in blacksmiths' shops. Stages were built of timber borrowed from near-by mills. These shows were crowded out, the audience occupying even the rafters. This company, Bob said, was an early sample of socialism in its simplest form. It was run on "commonwealth" lines, members dividing the profits when expenses had been paid. But success went to the heads of some of the players and at Hamilton quarrels started. The show was sold up and disbanded.



BOB HARDIE: he has hauled up thousands of tons of stage curtains

(continued on next page)



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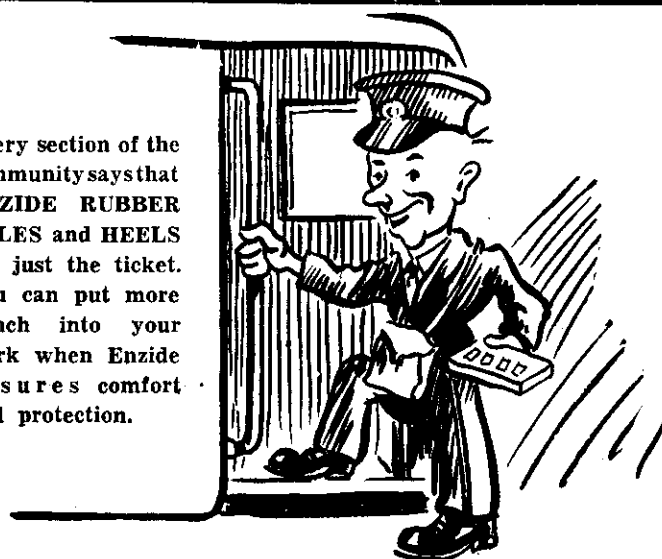
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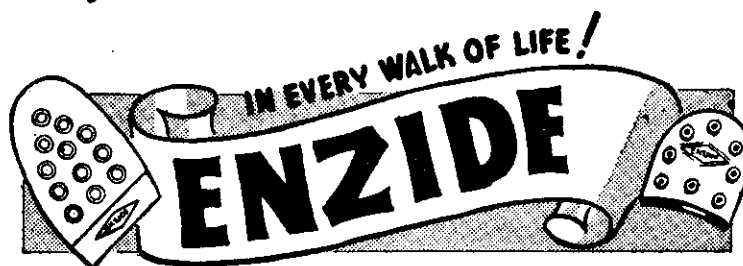
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