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Long before Eddie Bergen and Charlie McCarthy became film famous with their ventriloquial act, Bob Hardie took a ventriloquist through the country, performing at schools where children paid 3d a seat. Magnanimously the company made donations to each school's cricket club—a subtle form of advertising. The ventriloquist was Del-monte, a Dunedin boy who had been taught by George Dickie, an expert voice-thrower—if ventriloquists do throw voices.

Now came the silent picture, with its threat to legitimate actors. With a man named Bishop, Bob took a film called "Living London" on tour. "This film," he says, "was very fine, even if the scenes of Cheapside were a bit dark." A high-pressure cylinder which Bishop used for lighting had to be charged every three days. A fire was built round a retort filled with potash and manganese, the pressure came up, and on went the show. But at Ohakune it exploded, frightening the whole town.

Films in the Goldfields

I asked how the public took to moving pictures.

"They were a bit doubtful at first," he said. "They came along out of curiosity, mainly. After I had run a season in vaudeville with my wife, Ethel Bolton, I had another go at pictures with E. C. Cutts and his Pybus Bioscope and Vaudeville Company through the goldfields in the Waihi and Karangahake district. We did very well."

Because, in 1914, a coloured performer was on the bill, an audience in a town near Mount Egmont was displeased. The locals were critical about America's attitude to the war and took it out on the negro by refusing to listen to his items and throwing firecrackers on the stage. The coloured man appealed to the audience. It was not his fault, he said. The audience realised that, and "gave him a hand," but when the company struck the scene for the night members found that their coach had been pushed down a steep incline, a bullock team being necessary to haul it out.

On the same tour the company was stranded in a small town which did not possess a store. Though Bob had £300 in his pocket, all he could buy in provisions was six dozen eggs.

Between then and 1919 he was in various theatrical enterprises before taking up his appointment at the Town Hall, Wellington. Here he assisted in preparing stages for such artists as Jascha Heifetz, the Verbruggen Orchestra, the Sistine Choir, Fritz Kreisler, Dame Clara Butt, and scores of others. Dame Clara sent him a pair of gloves from England, but somebody envied them and they were stolen. Worse luck came when his flat was burnt out and he lost all his household goods as well as many valuable souvenirs.

Probably, the affection which Clara Butt felt for him was due to a little attention he showed her by making the ramp to the stage a trifle less steep and building three small steps.

Artists "Upstage"

Temperament, somebody said recently, is temper too old to be spanked. I asked Bob if he had even fallen foul of a diva in tantrums or a male artist "getting all upstage."

Madame D'Alvarez, he said, once wanted the house lights on when she made her first entrance, but the management

had other ideas, ordering just enough lights for the audience to read the programme notes.

"I'll go mad—stark mad!" stormed D'Alvarez. But she didn't. She calmed down and sang three numbers, and when coming off said: "I'm very sorry, Bob; not your fault."

Occasionally the Town Hall is occupied with wrestling and boxing. For a ring stage extension, without ropes, was once used. Coir matting was laid round it to catch the bodies which were hurled out. Now a proper ring is erected. There is a special way of doing this job and Bob has had to teach many a promoter's assistant how to work the straining irons. He has built choir platforms from which imposing ranks of sopranos and contraltos sang lustily, supported, musically, by a solid phalanx of dress-suited basses, baritones and tenors.

A Letter from Gracie

Though he has been concerned principally with the management of entertainment enterprises, Bob and his wife, known as Delmar and Bolton, did actual stage work for some time. Mrs. Hardie was originally with P. R. Dix, Rickards, and other Australian shows.

In a little attache case he keeps a short letter from Gracie Fields. It runs: "If only we two were single, Bob."

"And what," I asked, "does Mrs. Hardie think about that?"

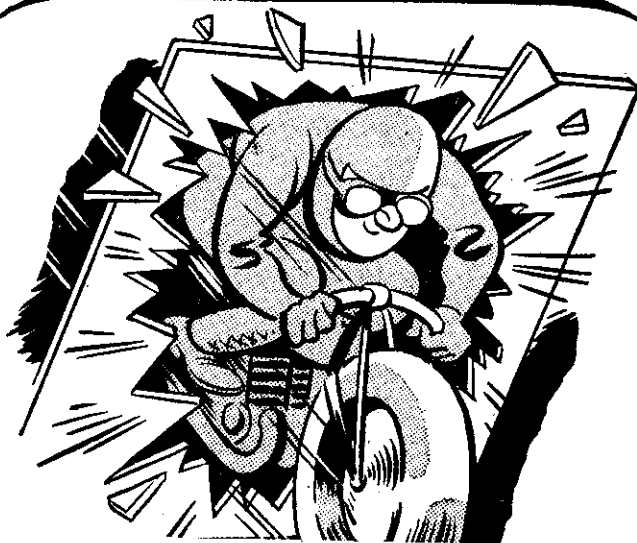
"Oh, she understands; she's an old trouser herself," he said.

"Thanks for dropping in," added Bob. "I get a great kick out of talking about entertainments which might give young people of to-day a surprise."

"Voice of the Gilberts"



WHEN Doug Smith (above) was an announcer at 42B—a very junior announcer, by the way—he hit on the idea of calling the station the "Voice of Otago." This happened only once; his original call sign was banned. However, it so happened that the next station from which he broadcast was WXL, the American Expeditionary radio station at Tarawa. About WXL there was one point which he was most anxious to explain when he was home on leave a week or two ago. WXL, he said, in the satisfied tones of one who has been vindicated, was always referred to as the "Voice of the Gilberts." For some time now, Doug Smith, with the rank of lieutenant, has been stationed at Tarawa as Superintendent of Police and Prisons.



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