

Last of the Three Great Savoyard Knights



"I Really Don't Know
A Crotchet From A
Quaver," Henry Lytton
Laughingly Told
Malcolm Sargent

Sir Henry and Lady Lytton, happiest of married couples, photographed recently in their London home. The great Savoyard ran away from home at the age of 17 and got married—much to his father's annoyance.

"It is one of the most pleasant recollections of my life—that I was the conductor at the farewell performance of Sir Henry Lytton," said Dr. Malcolm Sargent, the eminent English conductor, at present in Wellington, to the "Radio Record," in commenting on the death last week of Sir Henry Lytton, the last of the three great Savoyard knights.

"I so well remember the theatre crowded with an excited and expectant audience eagerly awaiting the first notes from the orchestra. The title of the opera to be performed that night had not been announced in the press or advertisements. Henry Lytton's farewell appearance in a Gilbert and Sullivan opera had been more than sufficient to cause 'house full' boards to be placed outside long before the curtain rose.

"A murmur of delight rippled through the theatre when my baton released the opening bars of the beautiful 'Iolanthe' overture from the augmented orchestra. The orchestral playing had been a noted feature in the season's performance and there was tumultuous applause when the overture ended, which changed to laughter and cheers when the curtain rose on Act I of 'The Gondoliers.' Lytton was applauded for minutes before he made his famous entry as the Duke of Plaza-Toro. It seemed that never before had he 'led the army from behind' with such success.

"After the interval a beam of light on a darkened stage showed the sentry-box and we were back in 'Iolanthe' once more—but only for a few minutes, for after the famous Sentry Song the lights went up revealing the setting of 'Mikado': Act II. It was an evening of almost hilarious pleasure for all concerned—even the members of the company themselves had not known what opera (or operas) were to be performed until they arrived in their dressing-room and found their clothes laid out. Needless to say that Henry Lytton's reception in both sets and after his farewell speech was terrific."

When Richard D'Oyley Carte first engaged Henry Lytton, the conductor's verdict was—"Not much of a voice." "Never mind," said D'Oyley Carte, "he will do as an understudy to David Fisher as King Gama." And his salary was two pounds a week. Sir Henry himself was rather proud of his humble beginnings. He ran away from school at 17 and was secretly married. When his father, unaware of the marriage, took a stout stick to his son, the youthful Henry flared, "Stop it! You are thrashing a married man." He had some hard times after that—as bill-poster, scene shifter, "super."

Interview With Dr. Sargent, Personal Friend of Lytton

"When Rupert D'Oyley Carte asked me to take charge of the music for a Gilbert and Sullivan London season I was delighted," Dr. Sargent went on. "As a boy I had been keenly interested in the operas, and I had always been at the feet of Henry Lytton, who was my idea of all that an actor should be. He was most charming and diffident about his music. 'I really don't know a crotchet from a quaver,' he laughingly confided to me at our first rehearsal. But whether he did or did not, he had a keen ear for music and an amazing sense of rhythm."

"It was a great joy to go to Sir Henry's dressing-room—and he would invariably offer me a spoonful of the chicken jelly which he always brought to the theatre. He was a most painstaking man about his makeup, arriving at the theatre an hour before the performance to allow himself plenty of time. His makeup as the ugly King Gama in 'Princess Ida' was a masterpiece."

"He had an uncanny capacity for getting right inside the part he was playing. If I had merely seen Sir Henry's legs walking across the stage I could have told by his gait just which part he was interpreting. Of course, his New York season was the wildest success. The newest and gayest musical comedy could not have been received with more enthusiasm on Broadway than the Gilbert and Sullivan operas with their essentially English atmosphere and humour."

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