

LAUGHTER & TEARS

"The Englishman Writes History in His Vaudeville," Says Teddy Grundy, Who Can Remember When . . .

Special to the "Record" by
NORMAN MCLEOD

THERE is no crowd like the English crowd. It sticks to its favourites long after they have lost all that made them favourite. There is a tenacity of loyalty about the English theatre-goer that makes the world wonder. The story of the English people is written in the music halls where the genius of the English has largely found its expression, which has no equal in the world. Where the Frenchman writes history in his cabaret, and the German in his beer garden, the Englishman writes his in vaudeville.

THERE is originality in that idea. But then "Teddy" Grundy, well known to Christchurch listeners of 3ZB, is an original man. Private secretary to people of title, the job paid his fare round the world 13 times. He liked New Zealand, and he had bagged BBC experience, so now radio is his job. But it was London of old that occupied his attention in a chat with a "Record" writer the other afternoon—particularly the London whose story is told by songs of other days. For "Teddy" Grundy does believe that, with the passing of the music hall and vaudeville in London, has gone no little part of England's greatness.

"There are some things, however," he said, "that will not change—the golden lights of Piccadilly, Leicester Square, and the Strand, and the lamps of the old Embankment as they show themselves through the haze, Cleopatra's Needle pointing through the winter fog, and old Nelson with his blind eye, as Dan Leno used to tell us, trying to find virtue in Tragalgat Square. Leno was perhaps the greatest comedian England has ever known. Many people asked him the secret of his success, many tried to copy him, but genius cannot be copied any more than it can be defined.

"We remember Dan Leno as an old beldame, with impossible skirts and indecorous ankles, in a waiter's dress-coat reaching to his broken-down heels, as a shopwalker—slender-waisted and frock-coated. That little Lancashire comedian's real name was George Galvin. Like all great comedians, he had known the depths of despair, hunger and misery.

ANOTHER famous figure in those days was the white-eyed Kaffir, Chergwin, who will never be forgotten. He loomed through the southern lights carrying a floppy coon hat in his hand as he danced on with his springy negro gait.

"Then there was George Formby, a typical Lancashire comedian, whose own life was a tragi-comedy. He was mortally stricken by consumption, and knew it, but with a wife and children to keep, each night he went on to make people roar with laughter at his wheezing cough. . . .

"The George Formby of to-day is his son, and doing very well indeed in character impersonations made famous by his father.

"Then there is the Gaiety Theatre. It will always be remembered for Gertie Millar, wife of the late Lionel Monckton, who later became the Countess of Dudley. She is best remembered for her song, 'Keep Off The Grass,' which later passed into the vernacular.

"There was Vesta Victoria, who always carried with her an air of refinement, whether she was singing 'Waiting at the Church' or 'Our Lodger is a Nice Young Man'—the two songs that, in those days, absolutely swept London. Even her grotesque convict's stockings, and her pretentious clothes and her assumed gawkiness could not hide the real charm of Vesta. There was another Vesta, too—the great little Vesta Tilley, who married Sir Walter de Frece. Any old soldier will remember her in the War years. She had a talent entirely her own. She is best known for her singing of 'Following in Father's Footsteps,' with which her name will be associated as long as the stars twinkle in Leicester Square. She was the perfection of male impersonation, but no woman was ever more feminine. She used to sing her famous song at the Alhambra, dressed as the perky-faced schoolboy in Eton suit and deep white collar, who follows 'Dear Old Dad' through various adventures, creditable and otherwise. As a 'snotty,' or midshipman, Vesta will never be forgotten.

"Last, but by no means least, there is Marie Lloyd—one of the greatest comedienne the stage had known. When Marie's number went up the audience shouted and whistled, and went wild with joy. She also was of the people, but the tragedy was to come in later years. There are many people now living in New Zealand who recall her last night at the Paladium—when she sang 'It's a Bit of a Ruin that Cromwell Knocked About a Bit.' Even now that song is heard on the radio.

HOW many felt pity for the humiliation of the wrecked artist? Yet she was swept away by a blast of applause. Then she came back to the wings, without her wig—an old, grey woman, wiping back the frowzy hair from her worn face. Gone were the diamonds of other days. Gone were the exquisite silk tights under the divided skirts—the days when she used to show leg and garter . . . when naughty bald-headed papas sat in the stalls with their women-folk looking at them angrily over their fans. Gone, the inimitable wink and toss of the head. . . . Nothing left but a bedraggled old woman. In the London Music Hall where she sang she reeled as she went on, whilst the audience, all unknowing, looking at such tragedy as they had never witnessed on any stage, shrieked with laughter at the weakness of a dying woman. They mistook it for buffoonery—as she would have wished. It was their last laugh at Marie. . . ."



A. R. M. ('Teddy')
GRUNDY

*Tells of London in
the old days.*