

Vaudeville

Radio Variety



A vaudeville show will be broadcast by 2YA on Wednesday, December 7, which will compare favourably with any programme heard at the old Palace or Tivoli, omitting, of course, items impossible of broadcast, such as the juggling of Paul Cinquevalle, the feats of strength of Eugene Sandow, the conjuring and illusions of Chang, or the daring "tableaux vivants" that roused the ire of Mrs. Ormiston Chant.

IT comes as a shock to the modern mind to learn that vaudeville has its roots in customs and entertainment over 500 years old. True to its powers of survival, "age cannot wither nor custom stale, its infinite variety!"

Casting round for origins we learn that it is, as the name implies, of French origin, and means a country ballad from the Old French, "vau" (French "vol"), "de Vire," or Valley of Vire, a town in Normandy. The term vaudeville was originally applied to a country song of like kind with those written by Oliver Basselin, of the valleys of Vieux de Vire, in Normandy, in the fifteenth century. These songs, which were satirical, had for their subjects love, drinking, and passing events. They became very popular, and were spread over France. The peculiarity of their character lived after their origin was forgotten, and plays, interspersed with songs of this description, came to be called vaudeville. So there is nothing new under the sun after all.

The topical song still survives after five centuries of use—the satire, the love, the drinking, and the topicalities still flourish like the bay tree—vaudeville minus these ingredients would not be vaudeville; and as under the skin we are primitives almost to a man, we seldom fail to respond to the appeal of these simple and what ought to be innocent delights.

LITTLE more than eighty years ago the first music-hall was opened by Charles Morton, and within the lifetime of one music-hall singer, Charles Coborn, the institution we now term vaudeville has come up from a thing of full tankards, low smoke-filled rooms, crowded and expectant male audiences, listening with rapture to the poor stuff that passed for entertainment in the good old days. Morton changed all this, and by the time the 'sixties were ushered in bigger places were needed for the growing audiences that saw in the lion-comique and the serio-comic female performer a subject for gossip for weeks on end. Music-halls (in the words of Mr. Willson Disher) were being born in litters.

A new industry was born almost overnight, and a demand set in for performers. Of all the series of the old days the one with the most characteristic career was Jenny Hill, known as the "Vital Spark." Her father, according to H. G. Hibbert, was a cab-minder, hanging about a rank in Marylebone. She worked in an artificial flower factory until given the part of the legs of a goose in a pantomime at the Westminster Aquarium. She was apprenticed to a North Country publican for seven years to learn the trade of a serio-comic singer, while making herself useful as a household drudge. "On market days,"

says Mr. Hibbert, "the farmers would sit over their cups till 1 or 2 in the morning. While

ere they lingered, the poor little serio-comic singer and dancer must be ready to take the stage of the "free and easy." And at 5 a.m. she must be alert to scrub floors, polish pewter, or bottle beer, at which she became quite an adept. At noon, the performances began again."

JENNY HILL married an acrobat, who taught her, not too kindly, his trade.

While barely out of her teens she was waiting, with a baby in her arms, in the offices of music-hall agents. One agent, to get rid of her, sent her with a note to the manager of the Pavilion. It ran: "Don't trouble to see bearer. I have merely sent her up to get rid of her."

She's troublesome." It had the effect of moving the manager to give her a chance. She had an immediate success, which she did not live long to enjoy. Her early hardships and the "lessons" her husband had given her in acrobatics, brought about a premature old age. At 40 she had to leave the stage, and she died six years later (1896) with nothing left of the large sums she had earned.

Such a childhood compared with that of present-day "queens of vaudeville" seems like a page from life in the Middle Ages. Happily it is a chapter of history closed for ever.

The present generation know little or nothing of the vaudeville stars of the past, although a few greybeards or near greybeards wax eloquent over Billy Williams of the "velvet jacket," R. G. Knowles of the "white trousers," George Lashwood, the "immaculately-dressed one"; Harry Frogson, the Englishman who captured Paris before he finally conquered London; Eugene Stratton, of "Little Dolly Daydream" fame, the "White-eyed Kaffir" with his song of "The Blind Boy"; Harry Champion with a dial and voice of brass (lately died etat 72) Gus Elen and Albert Chevalier, true Costers both; T. E. Dunville and Mark Sheridan, who both, alas, found suicides' graves; Dan Leno and "Bertie" Campbell, Charles Whittle and George Formby "fra' Lancashire," and half a hundred others.

Among the ladies were Vesta Tilley, male impersonator; Marie Lloyd, with her amazing magnetic personality; Vesta Victoria, "Waiting at the Church"; Victoria Monks, "one of the people"; Lottie Collins, who was made by "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay." We may have no Little Tich or Arthur Roberts to-day, but we have Chapman and Dwyer, Alexander and Mose, and dear old John Henry. Gracie Fields takes the place of artists like Florrie Forde.

Norman Long plays his own accompaniments with all the charm of a Leslie Harris, Barclay Gammon or Mel B. Spur. Flotsam and Jetsam are unique, Will Fyffe is funnier than ever, Harry Tate is still with us, Will Hay and his "scholars" are priceless, Elsie and Doris Waters are a particularly able pair, and Harry Gordon and Bransby Williams continue to delight us with their art. (Continued on page 18.)

