



GRAND OPERA

Bari Style

OFTEN WHEN servicemen are gathered together for the exchange of reminiscences and the consumption of alcohol the conversation will veer round to the topic of leave, and what one used to do with it. Some one will then start to talk of the culture he absorbed, and the thrills of æsthetic delight he was caused to feel by many a musical, pictorial, and architectural masterpiece. Much of this chatter is no doubt designed to play the part of red herring, and draw attention away from the less creditable episodes of the narrator's leave. Sooner or later, however, the subject of Grand Opera, with capital letters, will be lightly touched upon, with reference to some dazzling performance witnessed in Naples or Rome.

The operatic standard in these two cities was certainly high, but I always counter such enthusiasm with the inquiry, "Did you ever see the Opera in Bari? Now, there was a performance. What scenery, what costuming. What noise. Probably nowhere else in Italy was there a performance quite like it."

Perhaps in the unique character of the presentation lay most of its charm. It was my privilege to see two performances of The Bari Opera—"Madame Butterfly" and "Lucia di Lammermoor"—and a brief description of their unusual character may be interesting.

First impressions of the Teatro Piccini are not encouraging. Two steps up from the pavement bring one to a shallow-paved portico, the roof supported

on stone columns of great stoutness. The entrance doors to the foyer resemble those of a debilitated wool-store, and are badly in need of paint. The foyer itself is also true to type—walls painted in railway drab, tessellated floor, and weary red-plush settees. I cannot recollect the presence of any of the more obscure pot-plants, but the ensemble is such as to give the impression that they have been but lately removed for their weekly dose of moth balls and adder's blood.

After this decayed magnificence, the interior of the theatre is a pleasant surprise. There are no signs of decay here, and the dimness without serves to give added lustre to the brilliance within. All the traditional playhouse trappings are there, in an excellent state of preservation. Pink and porcine cherubs decorate the roof, flapping heavily about the ears of commendably nonchalant and lightly draped females. Gold leaf drips from the cornices, and gleams in opulent festoons across the front of boxes and balconies against a background of that blue-green paint so beloved of our grandfathers. At the rear of the theatre, in the centre of the first tier, is the Royal Box. Here the decorators cast restraint to the winds, and applied the gold leaf in a frenzy of patriotic fervour, sparing not even the backs and arms of the chairs. If he ever used it, I feel sure that the diminutive Victor Emmanuel must have looked and felt like some small creature