

# Opera's Oldest Usher Discusses the "Good Old Days"

He Has Observed Stars of Both Sides of the Footlights for a Quarter of a Century—When Prince Heinrich of Prussia Was Entertained—Opera No Longer a Social Function—Recalls Days When Ushers "Used to Chase Farrar Back to Her Place as a Standee"

By VERA BLOOM

JOHN HALL has been leading music-lovers to opera seats for twenty-five years. He has said "Checks, please!" to Metropolitan devotees for so long that he knows who's who, and where, from the first parterre box to the last row of standing-room.

In that quarter of a century he has watched the elite of both sides of the footlights come and go. Stars have waxed and waned, and a half dozen managerial dynasties have given way to one another. Even the open sesame to the Golden Horseshoe has been given to countless more than that first "Four Hundred"—yet John Hall stays on, as energetic in the day of Farrar's *Carmen* as he was before Calvé came to town.

Of all the laymen at the opera the usher is the most fortunate. The stagehands are too busy and in the wrong place to hear the music in its true values; the box-office men must stay in the counting house and make the opera a "paying proposition," but the usher hears and sees both the performance and the audience in all their glory. After an apprenticeship at the old Academy of Music, Mr. Hall came to usher at the Metropolitan.

That was in the golden age, when the de Reszkes, Melba, Sembrich, Eames Nordica, Calvé, Patti and Tamagno would take their curtain-calls under a shower of bouquets and frenzied *bravos*, on the old "apron-stage," entering from a door on either side in front of the curtain, for it was before the golden draperies were installed.

"That apron-stage made a great difference in the style of singing," Mr. Hall says, "for when the big aria, like the 'Bell Song' in 'Lakmé' or the waltz from 'Romeo and Juliet,' would come, the prima donna forgot all about the character she was playing, and would walk calmly out past the proscenium arch and give her whole attention to her singing,



"A Pretty Standee That the Ushers Chased from Place to Place When She Tried to Steal a Seat on Admission"

as if acting had nothing to do with the opera—which it hadn't at that time."

And then John Hall got up and gave a most remarkable imitation of some *Lakmé* of the past, putting in every coloratura passage and even giving the important words in French!

### Rehearsing Curtain Calls

"When did acting become a requirement, aside from beautiful singing?" I asked.

"Under Conried," he replied. "He had a great dramatic feeling and loved fine acting. So he was the first manager to look for what they call nowadays 'the singing actor.' But even before, some of the stars spent as much time working up



John Hall, Oldest Usher at Metropolitan Opera House

their curtain calls and encores as they do now on the part itself. I remember Patti used to even rehearse the tears she was going to shed that night at her ovation, and bow before the curtain a dozen times to get the best effect to use on the audience!"

"Did the claque help with the applause then as it does to-day?"

"Claque!" echoed Mr. Hall. "They didn't know what a claque was—they didn't need one! Why, the boxes would go as wild as the gallery—they couldn't help themselves. There was such a thrill in those all-star casts that the audience was always swept off its feet. Then, you know, Jean de Reszke was a real 'matinée idol.' To-day the matinée girls go to the theater for their heroes."

"I suppose you mean it was as if Lou Tellegen were singing *Romeo* or Shelley Hull were singing *Faust*?"

"Exactly," he agreed. "Why, there were three French girls who used to come to every one of Jean's performances. I could almost speak French from talking to them all the time. They nearly grew pop-eyed from using opera glasses so much; and will you believe it, when Jean went back to Paris, although they never expected to meet him, they packed up and followed on the next boat, because they wouldn't stay in New York if he wasn't here!"

"He used to sing a wonderful range of parts. It was nothing for him to do 'Romeo' one night, 'Trovatore' at a matinée and 'Siegfried' the next day.

"By the way, in those days there was only one chorus, the Italian. The principals would sing in the language of the opera, of course—French, German or whatever it might be—but no one ex-

pected anything but Italian from the chorus!"

### Entertaining Prince Henry

"And what was the most brilliant night you remember?" I asked.

He thought a moment over what must have been a great galaxy of gala events, and then said, with a twinkle in his eye, "The night they entertained Prince Henry, the Kaiser's brother!"

"When was that?"

"About eighteen years ago, I should think. He was visiting here—yes, officially—and the Vanderbilts—the same Colonel Cornelius who's leading the boys to Berlin right now!—were at the head of the committee of society people to entertain him. It was said at the time that they had their house entirely redecorated to give him one dinner party! But that was nothing to what they did to the opera house. The curtain was completely covered in roses and smilax, and from the ceiling to the floor was nothing but lattice-work hung with flowers and ferns! The six boxes in the middle of the parterre were made into one for a magnificent royal box, and all the ushers were in new uniforms, with white kid gloves, and stood in line to salute the prince.

"It was an all-star bill, with one act from each opera, so that most of the company were to appear that evening. I remember Sembrich was kept for the last, but before the time came the prince and more than half the audience had left. We all wondered if she would appear after such an insult. Sure enough, an announcement was made that Mme. Sembrich was unable to appear and the performance stopped right there!

"It was said that night that at no

and place. People don't seem to realize that so many things are asked of an opera singer to-day that they must divide their attention both while studying and afterward at their performances, instead of being able to forget everything but the voice, as they did before.

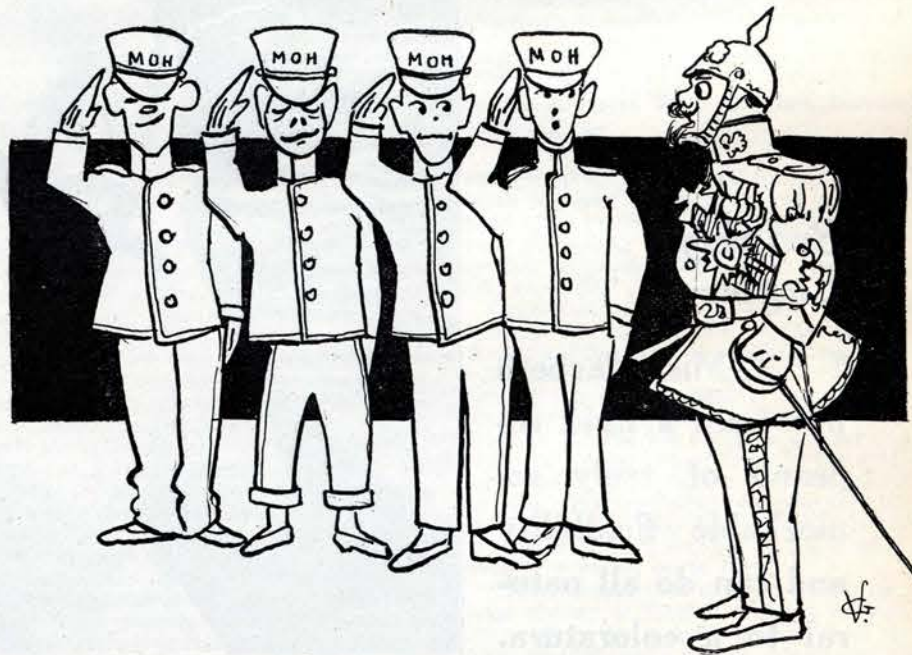
"Then, another thing, the opera has become a spectacle, taking the place in the old days of such things as 'The Black Crook' and the English pantomimes. We used to be satisfied with any scenery if the voices were there. Now everything, to the last chorus woman's costume, must be perfect, and the settings are said to be more gorgeous at the opera than anywhere in the world. All these things take the audience's attention away from the singers and it is harder for an artist to make his hearers concentrate on the voice than ever before."

"As far as you know them personally, are the stars of to-day more 'human' than the ones of yesterday?"

"I come in contact with so few of them," said Mr. Hall, "but I never meet Mme. Alda, Miss Farrar, Mr. Caruso or Mr. Scotti without getting a word of greeting, and often a handclasp. Everyone knows that Caruso is just a genial grown-up boy, but few know that Scotti is just as kind and—well, approachable; and everyone at the opera adores Mme. Alda and Geraldine Farrar. And Tom Bull, who has been in charge of the ushers for years, is the finest man in the world."

### When Farrar Was "Chased"

"One day, before Farrar came to sing at the Metropolitan, Emma Thursby, her teacher in New York, came to me and asked me if I remembered the pretty young girl we ushers used to chase from



"When Prince Henry, the Kaiser's Brother, Attended Opera at the Metropolitan"

court in Europe could be found the jewels and wealth displayed by the American society women, and I can well believe it!

"Of course, that was in the days when to have a box in the Horseshoe meant you were absolutely of the 'Four Hundred.' Why, I knew everyone in every box, from Mrs. Golet's around to the other end. The evening was not considered really begun then until Mrs. Astor was in her box, with her daughter, Mrs. Orme Wilson, on one side and Mrs. Ava Willing Astor on the other. Then it was one set the whole way 'round—everyone knew everyone else. Nowadays there are only a few, like Mrs. Gould and Mrs. Lydig, who really mean something to the evening when they appear, and that is why the opera isn't quite so much of a social function. The parterre is divided into a dozen 'sets,' and the day of a 'leader' is gone."

"But do you think the day of great singers is gone?"

I could see from my talk with him that Mr. Hall understands music and the opera, and could give me a real answer to my question, if not an authoritative one.

"There are as great singers to-day, but somehow not as many at one time

one place to another when she tried to steal a seat 'on admission'! Of course I did; no one could ever forget Farrar, even when she was only a constant standee, and none of us even knew she had a voice.

"Well," said Miss Thursby, "that same young girl is coming back as our next prima donna—be sure to give her a welcoming hand." Everyone knows my welcoming hand wasn't needed!"

"With all this music around you continually, haven't you ever wanted to sing yourself—especially as you have the voice and have learned so much by ear?"

And then Mr. Hall confessed. After the season, when the song-birds fly to their summer nests, he has his musical fling! He has even won prizes for dressing in costume and singing the arias from the operas, the coloratura ones by preference, but at times the heavier rôles.

### Frieda Hempel Wins Re-engagement in Los Angeles

Frieda Hempel, the Metropolitan soprano, who is now on her first tour of the Pacific Coast, was so enthusiastically received at her first appearance in Los Angeles, on March 12, that a return recital was arranged for March 23.

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