

# THE TRAGEDY OF THE GREAT LAFAYETTE

Reseached from the Performer and from local newspapers of the period

by **DON ROSS**

He was born in Germany and his name was Neuberger. His father was a scene painter at the Opera House in Munich and under his father the son began to learn the trade. He did not stay however with his father but set out to become an illusionist and in America he took American nationality and changed his name to The Great Lafayette. Under that name he became one of the most famous illusionists of all time. He toured the world with a company of no less than thirty people who included six carpenters constantly working on new illusions under his direction. He never bought an illusion, he never sold one. Everything he did was his own creation. Part of his company was a band called The Travesty Band and there were two midgets with the troupe. But the most important person in his entire troupe was a dog named 'Beauty' to whom Lafayette was completely devoted. 'Beauty' had been given to him by his friend HOUDINI. She is reported to have taken her meals sitting at the table with her master with a napkin tied round her neck. She wore a collar made of gold and studded with precious jewels. Inclined to be a "loner" Lafayette was well liked and respected in the profession. His closest friend possibly was LALLA SELBINI, a trick cyclist, who usually appeared on his programmes.

He was booked to the Empire, Edinburgh for two consecutive weeks, a sure sign of his drawing powers as it was not usual to retain the same headliner for two successive weeks in the provinces. For the week of May 1, 1911 the company supporting him was Harry Friskey, Rob Ivy and Lyn. Winifred Ward, The Brothers Dean, Fred Land, Doody and Wright, and The Bioscope.

His success was enormous, the only disturbing thing about it was that Beauty was obviously dying and on the Thursday did actually pass away. Lafayette was beside himself and next day went to Piershill Cemetery in Edinburgh. He wished his dog to be buried there but it was explained to him that the cemetery was consecrated ground and it was out of the question that a space could be sold to contain the remains of a dog. He was insistent and in the end bought a grave space on the understanding that when the time came, no matter where his death should occur,

his own body should be brought to rest in the tomb he had in mind to have built immediately. As regards the depositing of the dog's body in the tomb he felt he could get over that little problem quietly and without any fuss. The dog was embalmed and laid in a coffin of oak with silver handles. It was covered by a glass lid with an outer covering of polished oak. Lafayette set the funeral of the dog for the following Wednesday when the vault should be ready as it was to be lined with white tiles.

On Monday, May 8, new bills came out in Edinburgh announcing "Absolutely the Last Week of The Great Lafayette" and the supporting company comprised Peter Bermingham, Mdle. Eldee "The Girl in the Golden Frame", Warsaw Brothers, Rhoda Paul, The Bensons, and The Bioscope. On the Tuesday night second house the bill was drawing to a close with Lafayette's classic illusion "The Lion's Bride" in which a real lion was used. Through an electric fuse some curtains at the back of the stage caught fire and within minutes the whole stage was firmly alight. The fire curtain came down and the manager, Mr. Fontaine, rushed down to the orchestra and shouted to the Conductor to play "The King". This he did and sur-



**THE GREAT LAFAYETTE**

prisingly there was no panic, an audience of three thousand people calmly leaving the theatre. But Lafayette was trapped. It was a contractual ruling that not only was no one permitted on the stage except himself and his own assistants during his performance. There was also a clause that all doors leading on to the stage must be locked and that he should have the keys. Added to the intense danger caused by this was the fact that there were at least 22 tons of props and baggage belonging to Lafayette packed all round the stage, plus the lion in its cage and the beautiful horse he used in one item. Shortly after midnight the fire was subdued and it was found that nine people were unaccounted for.

The following day, the tomb having been duly prepared, the dog Beauty was placed there and a slab of marble inscribed "To the Loving Memory of my darling Beauty" was laid over the top of the vault. Amongst the wreckage of the back stage of the theatre a body had been recovered and identified as being that of Lafayette. All the bodies were so badly burned it had been difficult to recognise them. The body was rushed over to Glasgow as there was no crematorium in Edinburgh and duly cremated, brought back to Edinburgh ready for the funeral on Sunday, May 14. But then another body was recovered amongst the charred wreckage beneath the stage. On the fingers were valuable rings instantly recognisable as belonging to Lafayette.

So the wrong man had been cremated — who was he? It was Richards, drummer in Lafayette's band who frequently doubled for Lafayette in some of the illusions. And so on the Saturday the body of Lafayette was rushed over to the crematorium at Glasgow, cremated hurriedly, and the ashes brought back to Edinburgh.

On the Sunday afternoon one of the strangest funerals ever seen took place. Within the hearse was the casket of ashes covered by a purple velvet pall. Then followed Lafayette's handsome Mercedes saloon. Two tall negroes, members of the Company, stood as footmen on the luggage rack at the back of the limousine. Alone inside sat "Mabel" a dalmation hound and favourite dog of Lafayette's. There were twenty carriages in all,

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seven of them piled high with flowers. Lafayette was a Jew but no Rabbi would consider undertaking the Committal owing to the knowledge that a dog had already been entombed and so a Presbyterian minister, the Rev. D. Finlay Clark, was persuaded to do the Last Rites.

As soon as the hearse reached the cemetery the undertaker seized the casket and put it in the open coffin of the embalmed dog, placing it between the dog's paws. The coffin was

immediately closed and deposited in the vault, the covering replaced and padlocked so that by the time the whole cortege had arrived at the cemetery they saw nothing but the already sealed tomb. The flowers were magnificent but the most magnificent of them all was a set-piece that stood six feet high and was over four feet wide. It represented the proscenium of a theatre and the red looped-up curtains were of solid red roses. The act drop curtain was made of thousands of lillies of the valley and across it the words "The Last Act" were figured out in forget-me-nots. The card attached to it read "To my beloved lost friend, the Great Lafayette,

from Lalla Selbini". Lafayette was 40 years of age.

(If you visit Piershill Cemetery in Edinburgh you will find the grave on the left hand side of the entrance gates. It is surmounted by a tall marble Grecian tablet which says "Sacred to the Memory of The Great Lafayette. Born—25th February 1871. Died—9th May 1911." And on the right hand side, facing the grave, is a Dogs' Cemetery in which several hundred dogs, mostly with marble head-pieces on their graves, are buried. Lafayette must have started something!)