

THE LIFE OF A MUSIC HALL PRO in the 20's

By DON ROSS

Had I kept a Diary it might have read something like this. **Sunday:** Crewe station had its Sunday morning look. It was well swept and tidy and looked as clean as any railway station has a right to look. Hampers are packed on porters' barrows, the professional baskets bought from White's of Nottingham, with the artiste's name painted on in heavy black lettering, many with the word Theatre added and a twin basket for the same artiste marked Hotel. A weak sun casts spot limes through the gaps in the glass roof and up and down the platform patrol those who either don't want to go in to the Refreshment Room or who like to read the names of the various artistes on the theatrical baskets. In a siding are some coaches mostly with long scenery trunks attached waiting to be shunted and linked to the train that will take them further on their journey. On the windows of the carriages of the coach are labels boldly marked "Reserved" and the name of the Company—this one is **Macdonald and Youngs "Gipsy Princess" Company**, that one is **Bannister Howard's "Belle of New York" Company**, the other one is **Fred le Cren's "Models and Muddles" Revue**. But the pivotal point of the station is the Refreshment Room. As one enters it is like going in to a huge bird's cage for all the hum and chatter that assails one's ears. Over in one corner are a group of girls cheaply but showily dressed. A good looking, very well dressed woman is standing by the counter talking to two men dressed in plus fours (for plus fours were quite the thing just at this time). Two well dressed girls, obviously a sister act, are smoking cigarettes though smoking in public for women was a long way from being an accepted thing at this period. A pert little blonde enters with a little dog under one arm and an enormous box of chocolates under the other, looking round as if to say "Look what was handed up to me last night". A rather tired-looking elderly woman carries a bouquet that is wilting badly but which she obviously refused to leave behind at last week's digs. People greet each other with rather excessive cordiality. There are cries of joy of recognition not to a long lost friend but merely to someone you were on the bill with three weeks ago. Didn't they ever expect to meet again? And there is laughter, a lot of rather noisy laughter because every-

one wanted to be commented on as "having a grand sense of humour". Two revue proprietors—**Jack Cromo** and **Gar Kiddie**—have their heads together because Gar is on his way to the theatre Jack was at last week. "I warn you Gar you've got to watch 'em. They are on the fiddle. I caught them at it. Come and try to tell me there are eighty nine in the Dress Circle and bring tickets for that number in the box and I go up and count and there's over a hundred and fifty up there. Not tearing the tickets, that was their little game. That doorman was just taking the whole ticket and when he'd got a fistful dashing them down to the pay box and they were re-selling them. Blimey! Crippen was innocent. They wouldn't let you live." There is something of a stir as a big, fine looking dark woman bursts through the swing doors ignoring everyone and sweeping towards the counter. She is swathed—not dressed but swathed—in numerous scarfs, furs, capes, and bits and pieces that one wonders how she keeps control of them all. People nudge each other and whisper "**Mrs. Patrick Campbell**". "Ah my dear young lady—help a woman in grave distress" she bellows in a strong, heavy-drama-leading-lady voice. "Brandy my dear, just an eggcup full of brandy—immediately." "Are you ill?" enquires the girl behind the counter. "Never better my dear but it's my little dog, my little adored Moonbeam. He's fainting dear—brandy at once my dear. It's that train—he can't stand it. They talk about Fish and Actors—the fish will all be rotten and the actors all dead by the time some of us arrive at our destination." She cuddled the dog and persuades some of the brandy in to its mouth. As she is doing that the door flings open and a woman with brilliant red hair bounces in and once again everybody stops talking. **Lily Morris** marches straight up to the counter followed by her husband **Archie McDougall**. "Good morning my dear" she greets the counter-girl. "Have you got two of last week's rock cakes?" "Last week's rock cakes?" "Yes dear, I might as well ask for what I am going to receive. I ate half of one of your rock cakes the other Sunday and broke two teeth. Two rock cakes dear without an accent on the 'rock', and then she

looks round and beams on all and sundry waving an affectionate hello to **Dolly Harmer** who is eating a ham sandwich. A train is announced and there is an immediate scuffle. Girls grab an assortment of hand-bags, larger bags, packages, baskets, paper bags, attache cases, dogs, and travelling rugs and make for the door. The soubrette with the big box of chocolates watches the departure through the window and notices an elegant young man with the biggest pile of luggage she has ever seen with one person. There are eight baskets seven feet tall and three feet square and several American trunks, something quite new for Crewe station, and all bearing in large letter the word **BARBETTE** across them. He comes into the refreshment room and once again the place is hushed. He is of medium height and elegantly dressed in a sand coloured coat with a fine fur collar. His face is not exactly good-looking, but "cared for", and on his upper lip is a scar—not a hare-lip but the scar left by a fall from his trapeze. "My word you carry some stuff", ventured the soubrette. The young man raises his eyebrows as if he didn't approve of questions from strangers. "I have a separate basket for each of my stage costumes. I just hang them in the basket and there they stay until I take them out oil fresh and uncreased. Is there anything else you'd like to know?" The soubrette shrugs her shoulders and turns away and **Barbette** orders coffee "though God knows why because I'll never be able to drink it. Drinking English coffee is one of the worst things about touring." My train comes in, I call the porter and watch him place my baskets in the guard's van. The hours pass and eventually we draw in to Newcastle on Tyne station.

I spot the baggage man waiting at the end of the platform where he expects to find the luggage van and run along to make sure he gets my baskets out and then follow him into the station yard and get a taxi which takes me to Leazes Terrace where I have stayed so many times—like hundreds of other pro's. I follow the landlady up the stairs and she throws open the door of the large front combined room on the first floor. I get a vision of blinding, endless pink. The wall paper had a pattern of black trellis-work with huge pink roses clambering all over it. The mantel piece was pink, the eiderdown was

pink, the wardrobe had been painted pink and the big armchair by the brightly burning fire had a pink cover and in a moment of triumph the landlady ducked and produced from under the bed a chamber pot and sure enough there again were the pink roses and the black trellis painted round them. "Now isn't that nice?" she said, looking from me to the chamber pot. "I couldn't get one with the black trellis on to match the paper but got this with the pink roses on and our Charlie, oh, he's a clever boy, a real artist you might say, painted on the black trellis. All to match you see. Of course when I have ladies staying in this room I put a nice pink satin bow on the handle and then spray it with Shem-el-nessim and it's ever so nice". My eyes had wandered to a large stuffed fish in a glass case hanging on the wall. "Ah now, that's a family heirloom as you might say. My father in law caught that—the biggest pike that has ever been caught in this country". She did not proceed as she noticed my eyes had left the pike and were now centred on two hideous "portraits" over the chimney piece. "My great grand parents," she said proudly. They could have been Gog and Magog or Swan and Edgar for all I cared. "And you know who this is don't you? Nellie Wallace. Stays here whenever she's working Newcastle. Wouldn't dream of going anywhere else—would sooner break her contract." "And does she stay all the week?" I ask. "How do you mean, 'all the week'?" replied the landlady. "Well I know La Petite Nellie and she'll arrive on a Sunday at rooms she's booked, keep the taxi waiting, and if she doesn't like the look of the house, or the look of the landlady,

or of the landlady's cat, she'll pay the landlady a week's rent and with a hop, skip and a jump she'll be back in the taxi to look for some other place." "Oh but I am one of her dearest friends," said the landlady. "Does Miss Wallace know that?" I asked. The landlady gave me a puzzled look and made to go. "I'll go and get your meal ready," she said and left. Very soon the baggage man arrives and he lands my basket in to my room. By the time I have unpacked the landlady is back with the joint of roast lamb, roast potatoes, peas, and an apple pie and cream. "There you are," she says. "Just as you ordered."

I enjoy the meal and then go out and walk towards the theatre. I stop to read the bills advertising the other theatres, making note of any matinee performances I may be able to see during the week and then get to the Hippodrome. I read through the bill particularly noting my own position on it which is amongst the "also-rans". I inspect the frames of photographs outside the theatre, one of mine has been put in upside down, and then I go on to the Rates Office which is at the Salisbury Hotel. That is a permanent first job in each town for being a member of the Music Hall Artists Railway Association I get a considerable reduction on my railway fare to the next town. Mr. Daly is busy behind his bar. "I want to put my name down on the Rates please," and he unhooks a sheet of foolscap clipped to a board hanging at the back of the bar. I produce my green card with the postage-stamp-size photograph up in the right hand corner. "Where to?" he asks. "One to Edinburgh, please," and he inserts my name and destination on the sheet.

Scotch Kelly comes in and I invite him to a drink along with Mr. Daly and as we are drinking it Damsel and Boy and the Ruby Sisters come in to put their names on the Rates list. Jimmy Kelly and I leave and walk round to the Turks Head, the recognised hotel for the better paid pro's and a regular Sunday night haunt for all the profession. There is already quite a bunch of artistes sitting chatting and having a drink. There is Dick and Alice Bell (The Bells, revolving ladder act), Adah Le Cren with The Brothers Obo who are touring in a pantomime, my old friend Billy Matchett, and other old friends in Annie Cohen and Stan Shaw (Lune and Shaw, comedy act "Mr. and Mrs. Henpecker", Annie Cohen is Mrs. Shaw). "Well look who's here Stan," says Annie as she embraces me. "I noticed you were on the same bill with us." Florrie Forde walks through on her way to the restaurant and stops to chat with Ernie Mayne and Ray and Bert Errol. She looks across at me. "You can play Poker Don can't you?" she asks. "Yes, I thought you did. How about coming to my place Wednesday night for a bit of supper and a game? Come round to my dressing room at the Palace after you've done your work at the Hippodrome and then we'll go on home."

It's getting late and the last train from London has arrived and May Henderson and also The Versatile Three arrive at the hotel. It's turning-out time now. It's been happy and friendly but tomorrow looms ahead, unavoidable Monday, so home and to bed. The landlady calls from her kitchen as she hears me come in. "What time in the morning?" "Call me at 8 please, just a pot of tea. I



ERNIE MAYNE



BERT ERROL



MAY HENDERSON



LILY MORRIS

don't take breakfast. Goodnight!"

MONDAY. Up quickly and down to the theatre. However amicable everyone seemed last night this morning found them mostly a bit on edge. There is a slightly aggressive atmosphere mixed with an air of resigned grievance. I hurry to put my books down by the footlights, already four books are down and it is that order starting at the first one that the orchestra will rehearse. Oh well, just so long as no one else gets in with any number I'm using well and good because if they do then I will have to substitute other music and that would be a nuisance, but first come first served and no two acts are allowed to use the same piece of music. I go over to the stage manager's corner to look at the Running Order—follow intermission—eight minutes. I seem fated to work in that spot and if I grumbled about it I know exactly what the manager would say—"I can't alter it, Head Office send down the running order but anyway we must have a bright, fast, lively act to open up after the interval. It gets things going again". "And that's me," I say. "And that's you," he says. Annie Cohen comes up to me, her eyes flooded with tears. Annie was a good cry-er. "Do you see that? Second turn again. Always second turn, they never give us a chance. At least they've given us fifteen minutes. Must have something big to set behind our front cloth. We can't do less. Our act is a set routine." (The times I've heard that!) "Now last week at Openshaw Mr. Broadhead had us full bottom of the bill and we went on last but one and paralysed them." "But Annie you always go well." I tried to comfort her. "We'd go a damn sight better in a decent spot. Second turn is no good for patter. Too early!" Her husband, Stan, has walked up behind her and winks at me. He is used to Annie's weepy Monday mornings. Lillian Fitzroy is fixing her rigging. She is very silent and doesn't speak much to anyone. She is greasing the swivel on which she does her dental spin that closes her act. Ernie Mayne walks in looking like a prosperous business man. Bert Errol and his wife Ray follow, and Billy Bennett comes in chatting to Lena and Peggy Chisholm, then my dear friends Percy and Eva (Les **Beaucaires**, jugglers, afterwards billed as **Rich and Eva**, parents of **Kenny Earle of Earle and Vaughan**). Things brighten up. "Where were you last week?" "Who was top." "How was the business?" "Have you got a good address for Burnley?" "What are

your digs like?" "Where are you next week?" "Have you heard—" and heads close together on a bit of gossip. It runs so much to pattern. The stage manager comes on to the stage. I approach him and shake hands. "Nice to see you back," he says, which is civil of him. "What have you got for me this week? Can you manage me The Conservatory cloth in Two?" "Not in Two, can do it in one-and-a-half." "That's no good. You'll have me over the footlights. I must be in Two," I insist. I find the electrician and give him my lighting plot made out as seems to be the universal custom on the back of an old Box Office card bound round the edges with passe partout binding. Nothing fancy. No good having anything too fancy because you won't get it any way. Just give me plenty of light so they can see me, good or bad. Keep a bit back to give me a good full up at finish."

I look on the call board. I'm Number Seven so I go upstairs and find my basket already there and I unpack. A sheet on the wall to hang my clothes against, a cloth on the wooden bench for my make-up box, brilliantine, Crowe's *Cremine* for taking-off with, towels and soap, brush and comb, clothes brush, 'Dab-it-Off', shoe cleaning material and polishers. Someone is calling me so I run down stairs and find the Conductor waiting to take my music. Someone says, "Do you play golf Don—we want to get some golf in this week." "I don't play," I replied. "Well how about a snooker match, we've got some good snooker players on the bill." "Don't play snooker either," I said. "Well what the hell do you do then?" "Well, I am very fond of horse riding but apart from that I practice for two hours every morning except Monday." "Well you better mention it to the stage manager then and fix a time for you to have the stage because that continental act on the bill is sure to want the stage every morning. You know what they are like for practising."

I stroll home content and eat my lunch, get the morning paper and sit by the fire and read. But by four o'clock I am ready to move. The landlady brings me tea and some cake. "Thought you might like a bit of my plum cake. I make it all myself and everybody likes it." I am restless and want to get down to the theatre. Always there is the possibility of a change of running order, though unlikely. After Tuesday night you are safe. The Award Contract says they can't change your turn after

Tuesday night. I dress carefully. I was taught that one should be as careful of one's appearance on the street as on the stage. People recognise pro's so easily. I guess there is just something about them.

I enter the stage door and look on the letter rack for any mail, get my key from the hall-keeper and go up to number Seven. Everywhere is quiet. I undress slowly and start to make up. Then I hear the Overture start, not "1812", or "The March of the Gladiators" but a selection from the musical comedy "Irene". Now Les **Beaucaires** are on and the call boy is knocking at Lune and Shaw's dressing room door: "The act you follow is on please, Lune and Shaw". Percy and Eva are climbing the stairs. I call "What are they like?" and Percy replies "Oh not bad, a bit Monday night first-housish. But it's a good house." And Eva calls, "Watch the bit of stage right down centre. Don. It's a very slippery patch. Put some resin on your shoes." "Thanks Eva, will see you when I've been on." The call boy calls **Peggy and Lena Chisholm**. "Hurry please, Lune and Shaw are on their finish," and there is a scurry of feminine high heels pattering down the stone staircase.

I feel a flutter of nerves and I stare at myself in the mirror and wonder. Why? Why this tremor of nerves? For what? I know I've got an acceptable act. I've got confidence in myself and my act. Is it just an anxiety to please—to be liked? Or is it an anxiety about whether the orchestra, and the stage manager, and the electrician will all do that I require for my act? The time passes. I hear the interval selection being played. The call boy calls me. I put the last touches to my make up, the last brush of my clothes and I walk down the stairs. I wait at the side of the stage. None of the other artistes are about—it is considered unprofessional to stand on the side of the stage and watch the other acts on a Monday night. The interval selection finishes. There is a smatter of applause. I hear the iron curtain being raised. I take my place at the centre opening ready for my entrance. The stage manager calls "Are you right Don? Go on then ring him in!" The electrician rings down to the Conductor and his little red light switches on. My music starts. Two deep breaths. I am on.

I never care to do anything after the show Monday nights but go straight home, have my supper and a little read and go to bed. It's been a big, nervy sort of day. Had a nice



chat with Ernie Mayne between my two shows. He's a nice man and so tidy, I never saw a dressing room so tidy. He says it's because he's so fat if he were untidy he'd never find anything. He's got a big success with the song "Oh, Granny, what big eyes you've got".

TUESDAY. I was in the theatre by 10 a.m. The continental act (troupe of trick cyclists) wanted all the stage to rehearse on but the stage manager found me a nice corner which was plenty of room for me to do my limbering in. Annie and Stan looked in and Percy and Eva came down for letters and after two hours' practice I went with them for a coffee. I am going to the pictures after lunch and then shall go in to Tilley's for my tea and walk up to the theatre. There is a lot of stuff in the town what with Florrie at the Palace, Herschel Henlere, Talbot O'Farrell, Lily Morris, May Henderson, Rich and Galvin, Clay Keyes, Fred Curran, and Dave Poole at the Empire. Fred Terry and Julia Neilson at the Theatre Royal, Adah le Cren and the Brothers Obo at the Empire, Gateshead. The Versatile Three are at the Palace with Florrie. They told me they were packed second-house last night.

WEDNESDAY. Practice again as usual this morning. Florrie Forde came down on the stage to make sure I had not forgotten my appointment with her for tonight. Annie and Stan came in and asked me if I'd like to go over to Cullercoats with them and get some nice prawns and maybe a crab so I decided to go. It was lovely there and very quaint and the Fisherwomen in their traditional costumes looked very picturesque. We walked down a narrow street of cottages and in several of the doorways were wicker skips full of prawns so we bought some and then we came across



one that had some fine crabs all prepared for eating and we bought one each of those. Annie and Stan said to go home with them and we would make a nice High Tea of what we had bought with a big dish of brown bread and butter and it was delicious. With going to the pictures yesterday I had not done two or three things necessary so when I had done my first show I sat in the dressing room and sent off some bill matter that was due for an engagement a clear three weeks ahead. Then I wrote off to an address in Oldham for digs for my week there. G. S. Melvin gave me the address, he always has very reliable addresses. I did some of the weekly postcards that most pro's send out to the agents they keep in touch with just reminding them of your vacant dates and I also wrote to next week's landlady at Edinburgh to let her know what I want getting in for my meal on Sunday. A nice supper and a good game of Poker at Flo's.

THURSDAY. While I was practising someone called me to the telephone. It was George Barclay who does most of my bookings. "Don, you know that week you've got vacant between Manchester and Oldham. Well I've fixed it for you at the Crown, Eccles. How much? Well I'll tell you the most they can pay is fifteen." "Yes, well then I'm not taking it. I've told you before my lowest is twenty and I'm not going to work for less. Now don't start telling me how badly they are doing at Eccles and we must all help. Let some of the tops take a bit less, and for God's sake George, don't start giving me the "Hearts and Flowers" routine. I'm waiting for the day when

you'll have a new number, something like 'When the Saints go Marching In'." The telephone went quiet and then a different voice came on the line. "Now Don, do be reasonable," and I knew Bob Wade, Barclay's head man, had come on to smooch me. "I am reasonable and you can call me what son-of-a-bitch you like but I am not taking fifteen pounds. Alright, Effie and Sylvia have taken twelve and there's two of them. That's their business, find another act that'll take another twelve and you're out of trouble. I know the fare is only three shillings, I know my digs will cost me only one pound all-in. My expenses are my own affair. No Bob I won't do it." I returned to practice but in a few minutes the telephone rang again. It was Bob on the line. "Now listen Don, it's all fixed. The Guv'nor's been on to Mr. Broadhead — the call must have cost him three shillings he was on so long — and he's got you eighteen. Now don't jump — never mind what you said about twenty, take it, there's a good boy. You know we do our best and it does suit your journey." "Well, you've said everything except that a week at Eccles will be good for my health — alright, send me the contract." I felt annoyed and lost interest in my practice. It seemed such a struggle working all the time to improve one's act and yet having to fight for every shilling. Just then The Ruby Sisters and Joe Ringle and Renee came on to the stage, they are working Sunderland and had popped over. "Hello there girls, how are you Joe and Renee? — come and have some coffee with me" and we all went out and had some coffee and cakes

and I felt better. Then I went down to the station to check my train for Sunday, quite an easy one.

For many years at most theatres the representatives of the various railway companies — The Midland, The Great Northern, The Great Eastern, The Great Western, etc. — would come round to each dressing room on a Monday night to find out where you were moving to on the following Sunday and vie with each other to give you a better and quicker service. That's how much they wanted your business! But the time came when gradually they didn't come any more, no doubt caused by so many artistes travelling by road and eventually the Nationalisation of the railways which did away with the individual companies and the competition they created.

When I got to the theatre for the night's work I added my name and time of train to the Baggage man's list that was already on the Call Board. A new notice had been put up on the board that the new cinema in the town "honoured the Wilkie" (Wilkie Bard, slang for Visiting Card) so maybe I'll go there. Another card has been put up for some Club inviting artistes to go along after the show and I hear one or two arranging to go but it's not in my line. Percy and Eva said to me: "Do you remember that Fish and Chip supper we had at Bolton a few weeks ago.

Nice wasn't it? Let's do it again tomorrow night, eh? At our place? Lovely!" I'd sooner do that than go to any Clubs.

FRIDAY. How the weeks slip by! Here it is, Friday. The business was quiet at the first houses early part of the week, good second houses though but since Thursday (Early Closing Day) we have been quite full. I watched the whole bill from the side of the stage tonight and it is a good working bill. Got the professional papers this morning — they do not arrive in Newcastle until Friday though they come out on Thursday. Great interest to look at the calls to see who I am with next week at Edinburgh and glad to be with **The Elliott Savonas**. They are such nice people. I went this afternoon to collect my voucher from the Rates Office. Supper with Percy and Eva. Lovely gossip.

SATURDAY. Comparable to Monday in being a busy day but none of the nerves of Monday. Did my practice and went in to Tilley's for lunch then on to see **Julia Neilson and Fred Terry** in "Sweet Nell of Old Drury" at the matinee. There was such a crowd of pro's waiting in the vestibule. They'd come from Sunderland, South Shields, Jarrow, Hebburn, Bishop Auckland, Durham, Ashington and some from West Hartlepool, apart from a contingent of the pro's

from the Newcastle theatres. The manager kept us all waiting in the vestibule while a commissionaire collected our cards. I felt it a bit humiliating and would rather not do it again if it's going to be like that. Mind you, he wanted to see what seats he'd got available before giving us tickets and we all had a nice chat together while we were waiting. I enjoyed the show very much though I had seen them in it before. Straight from the Theatre Royal up to the Hippodrome, no time for tea. The stage door keeper had my laundry so I paid him for that and the commissionaire brought my photographs round from the front of the theatre and I tipped him. As soon as I had done my first show (packed house) the manager came round to pay me and then I started to pack my make up first and then my clothes. Just kept out a lump of Cremine on an old envelope to take off with. Second house sounded a bit noisy as they were coming in. Somebody said Newcastle had won the football match and they were celebrating. Annie Cohen said she didn't like the sound of them and if that was the way they were going to be it was going to be a case of "lively on and lively off" as far as their act was concerned. But as soon as the show started they quietened down. Maybe they laughed too loudly or kept applauding too long but they were with you and not against you.



JULIA NEILSON



SCOTCH KELLY



FLORRIE FORDE



FRED TERRY