

## CHAPTER ONE

### New Readers Start Here

#### *The Stage is Set*

It was a day popular performers thought they would never see. Reviled over many years, music hall, that rumbustious and vulgar entertainment of the late Nineteenth Century, had finally been accepted by the Establishment: the first Royal Command Performance was to be staged before George V and Queen Mary at the Palace Theatre, Cambridge Circus, on 1 July 1912. Such comics as George Robey, sometimes a little saucy, but never salacious, and Harry Tate, with his up-to-the-minute parody on motoring, were allowed their moment of glory. Interestingly, those two men attracted more laughter that evening than anyone else on the bill and were the only entertainers who successfully carried their careers on from music hall to the variety theatre.

In spite of losing some of its bite, music hall was still popular in the years immediately preceding the First World War. In the year of the Royal Command, there were 48 music hall theatres in London alone. Each night [and often twice nightly] they played to 70,000 people. In the world at large, everything appeared normal. Smart hotels held Tango Teas at which women wearing skirts slashed to near the top of the leg danced with young men known as Nuts and, if the tango appeared too complicated, there was another innovation, the foxtrot:

But everywhere a restless spirit was perceptible, as of people waiting on some impending climax. Nobody knew that we had reached the end of an age, yet everybody in his bones and blood was sensible of something disconcerting, some hovering and pervading disquiet.<sup>1</sup>

On the first night of the Great War, there were lengthy queues outside the most popular halls in the West End. At the Palladium, Little Tich, the four foot six comic who danced in boots nearly half that length, appeared as Miss Turpentine.



*Harry Tate: again in mechanical difficulties.*

## 12 Old-Time Variety: an Illustrated History

At the London Pavilion, the much loved Marie Lloyd sang *I'd Like to Live in Paris All the Time*. The only concession to international tension was that, at the end of the evening, the national anthems of Russia and France were played, as well as that of Britain.

Once the call-up began, the young men of Britain marched to war belting out the latest music hall songs they had heard: *Pack Up Your Troubles*; *Good-Bye-Ee*; *Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty*; and this:

Send out the Army and the Navy.  
Send out the rank and file.  
Send out the brave old Territorials.  
They'll face the danger with a smile.  
Send out the boys of the Old Brigade,  
Who made old England free.  
Send out my brother, my sister and my mother,  
But for Gawd's sake don't send me.

Come 1918, it did not seem so funny. Nearly three-quarters of a million British soldiers had died, about two-thirds of them in their twenties.

During the course of the war, so many young men were overseas that their girlfriends and wives had to make their own lives, eating out with each other, some of them drinking and smoking for the first time. Between 1914 and 1918, the consumption of alcohol actually fell by about a half, although smoking increased. Pubs, which had closed at 12.30am, now had to shut at 10pm. A similar curfew was imposed on all places of entertainment, but music halls still drew big audiences, as did cinemas and theatres staging a new type of entertainment, revue. People needed escapism.

By the end of the war, movies were becoming big business. Several music halls had already been converted into cinemas: the Balham Empire; the Bradford Empire; in Brighton, the Empire and the Alhambra; the New Star, Bristol; the Alhambra, Edinburgh; the Hippodrome, Gateshead; the Savoy, Glasgow; the Tivoli, Liverpool; the Grand, Sheffield; the Variety, Shoreditch; and the Empire, Stockton-on-Tees. More importantly, 3,500 purpose-built cinemas were constructed between 1910 and 1914.

Revue, speedy concoctions of unlinked sketches and songs, had been staged at the Empire, one of three major halls in Leicester Square, since it re-opened after refurbishment in 1906. The first, *Rogues and Vagabonds*, was written by George Grossmith, a leading player in the earliest musical comedies produced by George Edwardes at the Gaiety Theatre. Grossmith also wrote part of the Empire revues, *Hello ... London!* [1910] and *Everybody's Doing It* [1912], built around one of Irving Berlin's earliest hits. By 1912, the craze for revue had London in its grip. At the end of that year, Albert de Courville, who ran the London Hippodrome, staged *Hullo, Ragtime!* his first big spectacular revue, which capitalised on the fashion for ragtime. It ran for 451 performances and de Courville followed it with *Hullo Tango!* in which Harry Tate gave an impersonation of how George Robey would play his sketch about golf. *Hullo Tango!* did even better: 485 performances.

In the years following the war, the revues, the movies, the dances and music hall all reflected the spirit of the age, but times were changing rapidly:

The old order had gone ... Restrictions imposed in wartime were never quite lifted.<sup>2</sup> That centuries-old feeling of security had vanished ... Life was no longer simple. It was sharper and more brittle. The old code of morality had slackened ... and the days of national pride had been veneered over with self-restraint ... The conditions which created music hall no longer existed. There was a new thing called sophistication. The old insularity had gone. Men who had never been further than Margate now knew all about Mesopotamia. It was a different world.<sup>3</sup>

The stars were dying off, too. After years of alcoholism and nervous breakdowns, music hall's pre-eminent comedian, Dan Leno, had died of syphilis in 1904 at the age of 43 and, after the First World War, Marie Lloyd, now weary and bloated, was showing signs of the maltreatment inflicted on her by two brutal husbands. She died in the arms of one of her sisters in 1922, aged 52.

The night she died, a young Lancashire woman, who was in the fifth year of a touring revue that was to make her name, was appearing in Swindon. Once she was famous, people began to refer to her as Marie's successor. She was Gracie Fields.