

Secrets Behind the Scenes in the Grand Opera

Mlle. Amazar, the Pretty Soprano and the Sweetheart of the Russian Baritone, Baklanoff, Tells More of Her Experiences and Observations Among the Singers

By ELVIRA AMAZAR
(In an interview).

IN this series of mine I detailed last Sunday some of the most amusing manifestations of childishness among the great stars of the grand opera stage. The theme of my sermon this week is "Artistic Temperament," and paraphrasing Mme. — I might exclaim of it as she did of liberty—"how many crimes are committed in thy name!"

Two most remarkable instances of artistic temperament—with echoes of which Broadway paving stones still ring—are those of which Lillian Nordica and Mary Garden were the heroines.

Nordica—God rest her brave, turbulent soul; she has found peace at last—heard a rumor that Jean de Reszke and Maurice Grau, the manager of the Metropolitan Opera House, had formed a cabal with the purpose of denying her the kind of roles she wished to sing. Some whispering tongue told her that the roles were to be divided among other singers in the great temple of song.

What would anyone outside of the topsyturvy land of opera have done in such a case? Investigated the rumor and taken her findings to the manager, of course. Everyone—even a much-tried manager of an opera company—is entitled to a hearing. But the great Nordica did nothing of the kind. She resigned. She took the whole world into her confidence and went on a concert tour. That act practically ended her career in grand opera. Certainly it diminished her vogue in the metropolis.

Mary Garden played her most emotional role, not on the stage, but in the offices of the Manhattan Opera House. She was deep in rehearsals of the exacting role of Salome. For weeks she would not be able to sing because of the exactions the rehearsals imposed upon her time and strength. Meanwhile the public and the subscribers were clamoring for more representations of Thais. Miss Garden had been a superb Thais. Everyone who had heard her in it wished to hear it again, and the public was not of the demands of rehearsals. Requests came by every mail for more performances of "Thais."

At the regular Sunday conference at the Manhattan Opera House Oscar Hammerstein stated the fact to his business associates. The business associates, who knew little about artistic temperament but much about how to draw a stream of dollars into the box office, said, "If they want 'Thais' let them have 'Thais.'"

"But I told you Miss Garden has all any woman can do to get up in 'Salome' before the opening night," wearily replied Mr. Hammerstein.

"Isn't there anybody else in America who can sing it?"

"Lina Cavalieri sang it in Paris."

"But Mme. Cavalieri is sailing at once for Russia."

"Tell her to postpone her trip."

A hasty telephone was the speedy result of the conference. A summoning of a taxi, and Cavalieri stood before the trustees of the Manhattan Opera House in solemn conclave assembled.

"Yes, gentlemen, I am to sail for Russia the day after tomorrow. But I am willing to cancel my passage to sir, 'Thais' for you."

"You are tres amiable, madame." The trustees rose and bowed as one man.

The next morning the newspapers announced that Lina Cavalieri would sing "Thais" while Miss Garden was rehearsing "Salome." Long before the hour for rehearsals Miss Garden appeared at the business office. She granted a brief, pungent interview to each sordid business man present. These, in her opinion, included Oscar Hammerstein.

"I won't have that woman ruin French art by singing 'Thais.' If she sings it I will stop rehearsals of 'Salome' and will cancel my contract." Her eyes blazed; her head shook; her figure quivered.

On the stage the company waited for rehearsals of "Salome." Where was Salome? She was in the office of her attorney, who was drawing up a new contract. The lawyer carried the contract to Mr. Hammerstein, who weekly signed it. "It gives her the earth, but she shall have it," he sighed.

La belle Cavalieri did not sing "Thais." She sang, instead, "Tosca" and Herodiade. She sent a letter to Mary Garden, saying, "I have no wish to hurt the pride nor injure the standing of a fellow artist. Therefore I will not sing 'Thais.'"

The collision between Olive Fremstadt and Johanna Gadski is one of the memorable ones of grand opera land. The opera was "Valkyrie." Fremstadt and Gadski were to sing Brunhilde and Sigelinde. Mme. Fremstadt, arriving with little mar-

gin for dressing, opened the door of what she expected would be her dressing room, and found Gadski there applying rouge to her cheeks by a handy rabbit's heel.

Precedence in the size and convenient location of dressing rooms depends upon the importance of the singer and the part she sings. The person who assigned the dressing rooms for "Valkyrie" thought that the singers and the parts they sung of equal rank. Not so Fremstadt, as you will learn from what followed.

Mme. Fremstadt closed the door. Truth to tell, she slammed it. She dashed to find Signor Gatti Casazza. Twenty minutes remained until the rise of the curtain. Fremstadt consumed seventeen of them in expressing her emotions to the impresario. That German upstart! Why should she be permitted to occupy the dressing room which should have been Fremstadt's? Gatti Casazza spent two minutes in gently explaining to Gadski that a mistake had been made in the assignments and leading her to another room. Fortunately she was made up. One minute remained before the curtain. Fremstadt endeavored to make ready for the scene in sixty seconds. The curtain was held.

An indignant manager said to Fremstadt, "You are the meanest woman in grand opera." To which she is said to have replied, "I always defend my own rights."

Toscanini is ever temperamental. I have heard of a rehearsal at which he flung out angrily at the horn player. He spoke in Italian. The horn player, who was a German, answered in his own tongue.

"Why don't you read your notes?" asked the conductor.

"I am reading the notes," responded the horn player.

Ensued contradictions and profanity in their respective tongues. The horn player left his seat and carried his score to the conductor.

"You see," he said, "I am reading my notes."

"But they are the notes of the second act. We are rehearsing the first act. Look at the stage. Do you not see it is set for the first?"

They glared at each other for a moment. Then Toscanini. The German answered "kamaerad" or something equivalent, and the rehearsal continued.

No one who knows the artistic temperament as I do was surprised to learn that the New Orleans Opera Company had lain down its makeup pots, as a striking bricklayer his trowel, and had walked out of the Athenaeum.

Although Impresario Verande had made a gallant attempt to recoup his heavy loss through the burning of the French Opera House, his fingers did not second his efforts. A few bad houses, a little apparent lassitude on the part of the public, and the basses and baritones, the tenors and sopranos, the mezzos and contraltos struck—even though there was an agreement with the public to finish the season, even though the curtain would rise in a short while on a presentation of Charpentier's realistic opera, connected inseparably with the name of Mary Garden, "Louise."

An attempt was made to reach the persons who had bought tickets for the evening. It was as ineffectual as Mrs. Partridge's attempt to sweep back the ocean with a broom. Louis P. Verande, the manager, when he found that there was no hope, adopted the Spartan attitude. He shrugged his shoulders.

"What can you do?" he asked. A pertinent observation in regard to human songsters and songstresses.

Newspapers published the story of the debacle under the headline "Drive Up and Drive Home Many Opera Lovers Turned Back at the Door." One chronicler was moved to the rhyme:

"The debutantes, with their attendant men,
Drove to the opera, then drove back again.
Carriage after carriage, and limousine
after limousine drew up to the entrance
of the Athenaeum and then drove away

(C) 1920, International Feature Service, Inc.

Mlle. Amazar.

after receiving the news that there would be no opera.

"No performance to-night," stated a sign in dull black type. A man stood on the steps and explained matters as well as he could.

"I am sorry; I am so very, very sorry, madam," he said again and again. With patient tact the bearer of bad news broke it as easily as possible to those who had gathered in opera clothes and opera mood. "Elderly matrons, beautifully gowned and bejewelled women and highly groomed men expressed astonishment at this unexpected message. The exclamation, 'I am so very sorry,' was the invariable reply."

There was no doubt about the truth of the remark. The price of the tickets was refunded.

Although they had agreed to accept payment pro rata according to receipts, the deserting artists, without apology for having forsaken their posts, arranged a series of benefits for themselves. From which, it was natural, most of them who had gone to hear the opera "Louise" remained away.

Responsibility, where is thy abode in the opera singer's make-up? The answer is, "Nobody home."

The Spanish Opera Company, being launched in what might have become a highly prosperous season at the Park Theatre in New York, elected to strike after the second performance of the second bill. Its members had been paid to date, but they wanted to be paid in advance. The backer answered, "I decline to submit to such tyranny." The season closed. The quarter of a million Latin-Americans in New York were left without opera because of an excess of artistic temperament.

One who knows opera folk recalls the old but pertinent story of Adelina Patti. It is a standard example of artistic temperament rampant. Mme. Patti in her heyday remarked concerning Colonel Mapleson, who managed the Academy of Music, "Colonel Mapleson calls on me when he wants me to sing. He calls me 'my dear child.' He goes down on his knees and kisses my hands. He has such a supplicating face. It is not easy to be firm with a man who has such suavity of manner."

Nevertheless there was an occasion on which he was firm as the oft quoted unbudging laws of the Medes and Persians. Adelina Patti was unwilling that any man should be her debtor. Her personal agent



Prima Donna Olive Fremstadt.

once moved back and forth with the regularity of a pendulum between Patti's dressing room and Colonel Mapleson's office. The hour of the performance was nearing. The diva had begun to dress for the performance.

"Madame Patti bids me to tell you that she will not put on her slippers until you have paid her the balance you owe her."

Colonel Mapleson wrote a check for a thousand dollars. "Go, give her this, and tell her to put on her slippers," he commanded.

Returned her worried personal representative. "Madame has put on one slipper, but she says she'll be blanked if she'll put on the other until you pay her every cent you owe her." The overture was playing. She got her money.

Enrico Caruso, probably the most amiable of tenors, for his cheerful disposition they call "the big boy" about the Metropolitan Opera House. If any one of his fellow-artists falls out with him he makes a cartoon of the incident. The angry one is laughed into good humor. But there was an occasion on which the Italian tenor robusto displayed temperament, although of a gentler sort and untinted with mercenaryness.

The occasion was one in which the singer was in love. It was long before his marriage—long, indeed, before he had met the lovely Miss Benjamin who became his wife and who presented to him during the holidays a daughter. The object of his desperate flirtation was a handsome young woman whose first name was Minnie. In the beginning of the litigation in a breach of promise suit which blighted this romance the young woman said, "I sat in the front row at a matinee of the opera 'La Boheme.' He looked straight at me and sang not Minnie, the character in the opera, but Minnie. I was proud of his attention but dreadfully embarrassed. He said to me afterward, 'I was made very happy by seeing you in the audience. Did you not hear me sing Minnie instead of Mimì? Of a certainty I did it on purpose. I cared not for the audience, only for you. I was singing to you.'"

After a while this incident was to cost Mr. Caruso several thousand dollars, because Minnie, expecting to become the wife of the world's most famous opera singer, built so many castles in the air that when they tumbled down, all at once, she was most unhappy and went to the Italian courts about it. They awarded her a verdict in heavy damages against the tenor, even though he took his private lawyer to Italy with him to fight the claims of his erstwhile sweetheart.

There is another historical incident which has become almost an opera-love classic, in which Caruso is concerned, this time with the noted soprano, Geraldine Farrar. New York's most distinguished society leaders were witnesses to this incident, and many of them will never tire of talking about it.

Everyone knows, of course, that Farrar is the world's greatest Carmen. And Caruso is the greatest of Don Jose. One night, while Don Jose was singing an address to Carmen, Miss Farrar walked nervously about the stage instead of standing still. The tenor did not like this. He mumbled something at the soprano, asking her to be "quiet." She, in her turn, didn't like this. She lifted her head and began to walk deliberately all over the boards. And when, at the end of the act, she ran from the stage—where she throws a flower at her admirer, she flung it so hard it landed quite smartly against the tenor's cheek.

Caruso waited until the second act. Here there is a scene where Don Jose pushes Carmen away from him. Caruso pushed hard—so hard that Carmen lost her balance and fell in an undignified heap.

Caruso smiled. Farrar glared. And when the curtain fell at last—but that would be wrong, to tell just what happened when the curtain fell, and Don Jose and Carmen, their make-believe over, were left on the stage that night with the audience shut away from them. Both have tongues that talk as well as sing. But the next day Caruso laughed when Farrar glared at him—and afterward they were friends again.

Great Britain Rights Reserved.