

My Christchurch dramatic correspondent writes:—The rival shows, at the Royal and at the Opera House, have both done splendid business since my last. John F. Sheridan and Co. opened at the former on Monday in "The Earl and the Girl," one of the latest London successes. The piece is of the up-to-date "musical comedy" order, and consequently hasn't any plot worth mentioning. It is nearly all "variety" turns, but they are bright and amusing, and of the kind the jaded city man, full of business cares, likes to see and hear, although he wouldn't give a twopenny stamp to see "Hamlet" or "Othello." Alas for the degeneracy of the age and "the decay of the public taste!" But to return to our muttons. In "Jim Chease" Johnny Sheridan (described in the bill as "a dog-trainer," but whose make-up is more suggestive of a street acrobat with a dash of the professional running man) has a part that suits him well enough (although it is in burlesque female characters that John F. chiefly excels). But as the bogus earl John is certainly very funny. Miss Heba Barlow, as a coster girl, is good, although she has evidently not studied the female coster "in her habits as she lives" on her native heath—i.e., the East End of London, say down Whitechapel way. Nevertheless and notwithstanding Miss Barlow is certainly clever, and must be set down as a very popular member of the company. Mr. Avalon Colard, as Dick Wargrave, acts with the ease of the old stager, and sings most agreeably. Miss Flo. Fanning (a sister of Charles of that ilk) is capital as "the strong woman," and the remaining parts are also more or less capably filled. On Thursday "Mrs. Dooley's Joke" went on, and being well remembered here drew another big house. In this piece, and in the name part, J.F.S. is seen at his best. His "frocks" are gorgeous creations in the very latest style, the race dress being what lady enthusiasts call "a dream." What with attractive songs (interpolated and otherwise), beautiful dresses, bright and sparkling music, and any amount of fun (including a burlesque of Le Roy, Talma, and Bosco, the Rickards Company's stars), the piece "goes with a bang." Last night the panto of "Dick Whittington" formed the attraction. Of this popular production more anon. . . . Tremendous houses have been the order of the night at the Opera House since my last. Most people have found it expedient to book seats in advance. The bright particular stars of the show are Le Roy, Talma, and Bosco, and Victor Kelly. The former trio contributed a turn to the second programme quite as good as that they opened in. Nothing better, smarter, or more bewitching of its kind has ever been seen here. Their "levitation act," in which Talma is placed on a long table and covered with a piece of drapery, and then slowly rises, cover and all, into mid-air, while Le Roy passes a hoop beneath the table to show that no hidden ropes or wires exist, is marvellous. And when the drapery is pulled aside and Talma is discovered to have vanished utterly the wonder of the audience knows no bounds. The Rickards Company's season closes to-night (Saturday). One word concerning Victor Kelly (who deserves half a column). This wonderful dancer and acrobat is a genuine artist, whose equal has not often been seen in New Zealand. To-night (Saturday) Fuller's Entertainers make their reappearance at the Opera House, when our old friend John Fuller (sure of a great reception) will contribute "The Garden of the Sea" and "Geraldine," and a host of new artistes will make their bow, and several old favourites are billed to appear.

Sir Chas. Wyndham, in the Christmas "Pearson's Magazine," tells the following Irving story:—"Irving was, of course, the very essence of dignity and self-respect. At the Queen's Theatre in one room were dressing five or six of us, including Irving, Lionel Brough, and myself. One man got into the fatal habit of calling us all by our Christian names. But Irving did not like it, and hit upon a very good idea to stifle our affectionate comrade. 'I vote,' he said, 'we fine each other half-a-crown every time we address each other by our Christian names.' Our erring friend took the hint, but in two days' time we were ourselves forgetting it. Brough cried out 'Charlie' when addressing me, to which Irving reprovingly retorted, 'Half-a-crown. Lal!' and I collected the money."

After a successful season of five weeks at Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, "Merely Mary Ann" was withdrawn on Friday night last (writes Mr. George Tallis), and on Saturday Miss Tittell Brune appeared once more in Melbourne in "L'Aiglon," the stirring Napoleonic drama in which she was so instantaneously and triumphantly successful when it was first produced in Australia. The piece was exceedingly well received by a large audience, who cheered the talented young actress again and again for her powerful and emotional interpretation of the title role, and called her before the curtain at the end of every act to receive the applause she had so deservedly earned. "L'Aiglon" will only be repeated during the week and to-night (Saturday, February 3). There will be a revival of "Sunday," the piece in which Miss Brune made her Australian debut and which has always been one of the most popular plays in her extensive repertoire. Afterwards Sardou's tragedy of "La Tosca" will be done by Miss Tittell Brune for the first time in Australia, and her assumption of the hapless heroine is being eagerly anticipated with very considerable interest by playgoers.

The Wilcannia, which reached Melbourne from South Africa in the early part of the week, had on board Mr. R. G. Knowles, who is under engagement to Mr. J. C. Williamson for an Australasian tour as a monologue entertainer. He is accompanied by his wife, herself a banjo player of no mean order, who assisted materially in the entertainment with which Mr. Knowles has been so very successful in South Africa and elsewhere. They both proceeded in the steamer to Sydney, where Mr. Knowles opens at the Palace Theatre on the 10th inst. in "Trifles that Trouble the Traveller," and "Songs and Stories of the Stage." As the theatre is wanted a fortnight later for the farewell season of the Knight-Jeffries Company Mr. Knowles will be on tour before the end of the month, and it is probable that he will begin his Melbourne visit at the Athenaeum somewhere about Eastertime.

Mr. George Edwardes produced "The Little Cherub," a musical comedy by Owen Hall and Ivan Caryll at the Prince of Wales' Theatre, London, about a fortnight ago, and Mr. J. C. Williamson has already received a cable from his London agent stating that an enormous success had been made by the play. He is now waiting fuller particulars by mail, and if these indicate that the character of the piece insures its acceptance by Australian audiences, he will, of course, secure the Australasian rights in it.

There can be no possible doubt that "Utopia, Limited," as played by the Gilbert and Sullivan Company, has achieved already a most gratifying popularity, and that the taste of the theatregoing public is still strongly in favour of comic opera of the high standard maintained by the famous collaborators. From the opening performance the piece has been received with undiminished enthusiasm, and both its "book" and its music have won ungrudging applause from large audiences. Last week there was a change in the cast owing to Miss Dolly Castles feeling the strain of such an arduous year of preparation and playing as she has had. She is now taking a deserved rest, and her part of Princess Zara has been undertaken in a finished manner by Miss Olive Godwin, who combines the acceptable attributes of a graceful stage presence, a well-trained voice, and a spirit of genuine comedy in her acting. Miss Godwin it will be remembered, played the part of Josephine Zaccary in "The Orchid," while Miss Florence Young was absent in America, and received universal praise for her singing and acting. She should prove a decided acquisition to the company.

It is not generally known (writes "Pasquin") that a Programme Trust has been formed in connection with the theatres in New Zealand. From the theatre proprietors' view-point the venture may be a good one, but from that of the proprietor of the touring company it may not be altogether desirable. Further developments in connection therewith will be interesting.

The death is reported in Melbourne of Mr. Dan Fitzgerald, the well-known circus proprietor. There were few more familiar figures throughout the colonies than poor Dan, who will be greatly missed from the circus ring. He had been ailing for some time, and the news of his death was not, therefore, quite unexpected.

Arrangements have been completed by Messrs. Meynell and Gunn for the early production in Australia of the American melodrama, "The Fatal Wedding," by Theodore Kremer. This play has achieved great success in America, and later on in England. Messrs. Meynell and Gunn have secured the Theatre Royal, Melbourne, from Mr. Bland Holt, and in that city "The Fatal Wedding" will be first played in Australia, under the supervision of Mr. Clyde Meynell. A new company has been engaged, and will tour Australia with this play.

There was a great sale of Irving relics at Christie's, London, recently. The collection offered, valued by the prosaic experts at £500, realised £2558. The sale began with the ivory crucifix which always used to hang above Sir Henry's bed, and ended with Onslow Ford's telling figure of the great actor as Hamlet. Mr. Albert Jackson, a prominent buyer of Shakespearean quartos, bought both—the crucifix for 26 guineas and the Hamlet for 310 guineas, the highest price of the day. Amongst the collection was a Malacca cane, once owned by David Garrick, and afterwards by Edmund Kean—this was sold for 40 guineas; a gold ring which belonged to Garrick, and presented to Irving by Edwin Booth, sold for 41 guineas; snuffboxes which were owned by Grimaldi and Fichter; Edmund Kean's green silk purse and the knife which he always used as Shylock; the Flaxman shield given by the citizens of Edinburgh to John Philip Kemble; a cane once owned by Thomas King, the original of Sir Peter Teazle, and a number of stage properties associated with Irving himself. Amongst the buyers were Mr. Seymour Hicks, Mr. Bram Stoker, and other members of the theatrical profession.

Miss Maud Jeffries is not likely to be wholly grateful for the latest role her popularity has called upon her to play. An article in the London "Daily Mail" a few weeks ago on the gruesome topic of graveyard memorials, announced that the largest dealers in that class of work had taken a suggestion from a photograph of her as Mercia in "The Sign of the Cross," and that her sculptured effigy—"quite a recognisable likeness"—now stands at the head of a grave in the flowing robes and with the cross and lantern of the character. Even the newspaper's assertion that the new cemetery fashion thus unconsciously set by Miss Jeffries is in pursuance of "a desire for something less gloomy but still dignified," and that her representation "makes an excellent memorial statue," will hardly reconcile Miss Jeffries to her unsought, and in this case unpleasant, publicity.

The reception of "Veronique" at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney, on Saturday, January 27, was even more flattering than the Melbourne one, and Messenger's dainty opera evoked an unequivocal enthusiasm from the rise of the curtain on the first act to its final fall. All the principals shared in the honours of the evening, while the chorus showed the result of Mr. Coventry's training. Mr. Williamson, it is worthy of note, has decided to add the opera to the repertoire of the Gilbert and Sullivan Company, who indeed have already begun rehearsing it with the intention of making it as well as "Utopia, Limited," a feature of their approaching New Zealand tour. This is the first step in a new plan completed some time ago by Mr. Williamson, who intends to confine the Royal Comic Opera Company more to the larger towns in future, while he keeps the Repertoire Company—as the Gilbert and Sullivan Company should now be called—on tour with all the latest musical successes, thus giving playgoers all over Australia an opportunity of keeping thoroughly up to date.

Our old friends, the Steele-Payne Bellringers, were in Adelaide at last advices. The "Register" says of them that the Exhibition Building was crowded on Sunday night, when the Steele-Payne bellringers gave a sacred concert. An excellent programme, which extended over an hour, was presented, and frequent encores were demanded. The bellringers were much enjoyed, and additional items of this character would have been appreciated. Miss Lorraine Ansley, Miss Maud Payne, and Mr. Steele contributed songs, Miss Hilda Whidburn gave recitations, and Miss Lizzie Payne rendered selections on the sleigh bells.

A Melbourne publisher is negotiating with Roy Redgrave for the publication of a book which he has just completed.

At the close of the Wellington season of the George Stephenson Musical Comedy Company, an overland tour will be undertaken en route to Auckland. The following are the towns to be visited and the dates:—Napier, February 15, 16, 17, and 19; Gisborne, February 21, 22, 23, and 24; Auckland, February 26 to March 17; New Plymouth, March 19 and 20; Hawera, March 21; Wanganui, March 22, 23, and 24; Marton, March 26; Masterton, March 27, 28, and 29.

The following are the bookings of MacMahon's Dramatic Company:—Theatre Royal, Christchurch, February 17 to March 3; His Majesty's Theatre, Auckland, March 19 to April 12; Theatre Royal, Christchurch, Easter Monday, April 14 to April 28; Opera House, Wellington, May 5 (four weeks).

Fred. Graham and Miss Nellie Dent made a great success of their comedy sketch, "Packing Up," at the Sydney Tivoli (says "Punch.") Every movement was watched with amused interest by a crowded house, and when the missing collar-stud was found, after a series of cleverly-designed accidents and delays, the pair of fun-makers were recalled. The sketch is one of the best things in the much-ado-about-nothing class that we have had on the Sydney stage for quite a number of years. It is a "regulation" farce, compressed, by smart acting, into about a quarter of the time usually taken up with this sort of funny business. The comedian does all the work, yet he contrives that his "assistant" comes in for a full share of the applause and laughter.

A comedy, entitled "The Man from Mexico," is announced to be introduced to Sydney audiences at the Criterion Theatre early in May. The principals are Messrs. George Wiloughby and Hugh Ward and Miss Grace Palotta. After the Australian season a tour of this colony will be undertaken.

Mr. R. G. Knowles, the genial humorist, will open his season at the Palace Theatre on February 10, under the direction of Mr. J. W. Williamson. A prince of comedians, his career is without parallel on the stage to-day. Deserting the world of vaudeville for that of monologue entertainer, at one bound he has placed himself in a line with the greatest entertainers extant, and in England, and recently in South Africa, was attracting enormous business. Mr. Knowles engages his audience in a humorous conversation on various subjects, and during his "conversation," if the audience are not in paroxysms of laughter, the celebrated R.G. is not to blame—Mr. Knowles is essentially famous for his original witticisms and quaint conceits. In an evening he introduces his hearers in a new and novel manner to the "Trifles that Trouble the Traveller," as he has seen them during his tour round the world. The trip takes two hours to describe, and the audience is shown the funny side of life in many of the cities and thoroughfares of the world. During the entertainment he will introduce some of the songs and dances for which he is famous. Mrs. R. G. Knowles, a delightful banjo performer, will assist; and to create an atmosphere of realism, special biograph pictures will be shown of various places Mr. Knowles describes. Mr. Bert Royle has just booked a comprehensive tour of New Zealand for Mr. Knowles.