

Max Dill and his Stars.

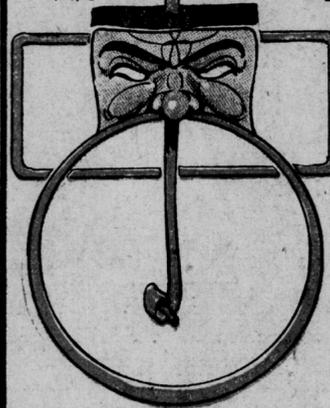
by Walter Anthony



BEATRICE MICHELENA-MIDDLETON



MAX DILL



she asked as we sat in her pretty home, while her husband beamed proudly on the girl whom he had married and for two years had kept to himself and away from the stage.

"Oh," said I, "when a person suddenly acquires fame, particularly a theatrical person, there are rumors at once about them, and the ungracious are always anxious to attribute unworthy sentiments to them. The rumor was that you had denied yourself to interviewers."

"I could not be ungracious," she smiled. "I am too happy; too thankful and too anxious to express my thanks to the public which has been so kind to me."

Beatrice Michelena-Middleton is the sister of Vera, who is now a star in the east. Both are pupils of their father, Fernando Michelena, whose Faust at the old Tivoli is one of the big memories of my very young days. Beatrice is evidence of the fact that musical gifts and a disposition to sing are in their highest power when acquired through heredity. Brought up in an atmosphere that quivered with song; tutored under the very ears of a master of "bel canto"—why I ask shouldn't she sing?

At 16 she was a star in "A Girl From Dixie." She was the youngest star that ever Henry W. Savage entrusted with a leading role. That was in "Peggy From Paris," which unfortunately did not come west. Her very first engagement was in "Princess Chic," which played at the Columbia before the fire, of course, and in it Vera, her senior by two years, was the star.

"Vera's voice," she said, "was naturally placed. Mine was not. My father undertook that task, and now I have three octaves."

One disadvantage—if it be a disadvantage—which Beatrice Michelena labors under is that few persons realize to what heights of tone she soars. Her top note in her solo at the Garrick this week is a high C; but it comes forth from a free throat, with relaxed bigness and warm with what musicians call "overtones," and it sounds no higher than a contralto's tone of an octave below.

"My father used to say: 'My dear, there's no such thing as a high tone. You say 'high,' and then you think you have to climb, which is a very hard thing to do. The tone is there in the throat just as it is on a piano. All you have to do is to sound it. You do not have to reach it.'"

An excellent theory, truly, and one which has nothing to do with swelling neck, stiffened chords at the throat and a constricted yell like that emitted by a straining victim. It is a theory which Michelena used to practice with such beauty in "Salve Dimora," when with clear, pure, clarion tone he "sounded" the high C—"Che a meraviglia la fanciulla"—in "Faust" of other days.

Added to great beauty of voice the young singer at the Garrick has beauty of person which lasts and looks better even when the makeup is off.

"With such gifts," said I, "the owner, if her husband permits (always, of course, the husband must 'permit'), should aim higher than musical comedy."

"And so I do," said the singer.

"And so she does," said her husband. "You know my father was sent by Blanco, the 'George Washington of

Venezuela, to Italy, where he got his start as a singer after he had studied due time. Now papa plans to go to Italy with me. But I want to get up a repertoire first. Already I have three roles: Carmen and Michela in 'Carmen,' and Violetta in 'Traviata.' I have been studying hard ever since I was married and this venture was a part of our plan, wasn't it?" This to Mr. Middleton, who nodded his head.

"You see," said Beatrice, "I was afraid I had lost what stage training I had received and was frightened at the thought of appearing in so pretentious an offering as grand opera. I got so that my knees shook together if I so much as sang for a few friends. So when Mr. Dill and Mr. Wagner came after me to sing for them I consented after overcoming my husband's objections."

"I don't object to grand opera," he interjected, "but I didn't like the idea of musical comedy."

"But as a stepping stone—" I suggested.

"Anyway, after awhile Mr. Middleton agreed," interposed the singer, "and Mr. Dill has been simply splendid to me. He is not a star that is afraid to give his principals a chance, and I was delighted when I got in front of the footlights to find that I had not forgotten my stage manners—though I nearly broke down, I don't mind admitting to you, on the opening night. It was not from fright or embarrassment, but from joy."

By which, as well as her love and admiration for Tetrassini's art, and by her vivacity and dark beauty, you may be sure that the daughter of Fernando

Michelena is asserting herself and doing credit to her origin, which, it is needless to say, is Latin. It is proven in her natural pantomime, her taste for the stage and her exuberant gifts of expressiveness no less than by the three octaves of her mellifluous voice.

A BEAUTIFUL contrast with Beatrice Michelena-Middleton is Lora Lieb.

The latter's blonde coloring, and hair suggesting the Teuton quite as decisively as the former's Latin origin is evident at a glance. Miss Lieb, like Miss Michelena, was a San Francisco school girl and a daughter of the profession. Beatrice Lieb is a name that will be remembered by old Alcazar goers. She was leading woman at that theater in O'Farrell street many years ago, and was leading woman, too, at the Columbia theater. Beatrice Lieb is Miss Lieb's mother.

"She was accounted a good leading woman, too," Miss Lieb told me. "From her, no doubt, I inherited my disposition to go upon the stage. I was educated at the Denman school and at Mills seminary, but went east to begin my real work."

She studied singing with Carl Breeman, where she was discovered by a manager and the first role that was given to her was a prima donna role; "And I have never had any other kind," she said. "I have not seen my native city for eight years, and then I did not appear professionally, but was just here on a list, so you may imagine my delight at the opportunity afforded me by Mr. Dill's offer to come back home. You can not imagine my delight at the way I have been treated since I have

come. I thought, when the applause started on Monday night and the flowers flooded the aisles: 'Will they never stop?' I had never seen anything like that before. They don't do things that way in the east."

"And besides I was so utterly unknown here. Why was I entitled to applause before I had even opened my mouth to speak or sing? It was as though the public wanted to help me along and give me courage and make me feel at home. A person would be cold indeed who wouldn't warm up to such treatment. After all, it is an excellent policy for an audience to assume. It gets the best a player has to give. You can't be cold in the face of such hospitality nor stingy before such generosity."

Miss Lieb merely smiled at the accidents which, like fate, seemed to pursue her on the opening night, and said, "Accidents will happen, particularly on the first night; but such a house and such a reception as was granted us cover up a multitude of mishaps."

Off the stage Miss Lieb resembles Miss Lieb on the stage. She has the knack of looking like her photographs, and of these she has a remarkable collection. Or, putting the statement another way, she acts as smartly as her photographs look. She is something new to San Francisco, which has had many imitation swagger girls from Broadway. Miss Lieb is genuine. In fact, she has just finished playing the prima donna role with Raymond Hitchcock and as such has been associated with "The Man Who Owns Broadway." No wonder she looks the part.



LORA LIEB

DO not insist that I am right, but submit to the reader whether it is not more profitable in these Sunday morning saunterings with stage celebrities to maintain a pleasant pace, repeat the agreeable things said and leave bickerings to the news columns, which, thanks to impish activities, you may be sure, will remain crowded with the chronicling of quarrels.

But for us, let us have peace. So, in this interview with Dill and his stars, the recent unpleasantness which stirred the breasts of the long and the short comedian, and which still ripples through the courts, shall find small space. Only the propitious beginnings of Dill minus Kolb shall be regarded as pertinent and proper to our story.

One thing, however, must be said, in order to keep faith with Dill, the genial comedian. His "White Hen" is laying golden eggs for him at the Garrick and he is happy, but he wants to say something to the public and asked me to repeat it. "Whatever else you quote me as saying," remarked Dill magnanimously, "I will not pay any attention to; but please say this:

"It was I who left Mr. Kolb; not Kolb who left me. I left him because I didn't like his manners. I stood them for many years because I thought I had to. Everybody said that united we stood a theatrical chance, but that divided we'd fall, and so I stood for more than money could pay me to endure now. He begged me to reconsider and resume the partnership, and he agreed to make almost any concession I might ask. 'We were boys together,' said I to him at our last meeting in his law-

yer's office, and we have been partners out of Cleveland for 11 years. I know you like a book. We've reached the end of the road. I hope you'll have the best of luck, but I never want to see you again. I may not get along very well, but I can always make a living. The people may say I'm a rotten actor, but they'll never say I'm no good."

Dill slapped his palm down on Manager Loverich's desk with emphasis. There was little to suggest the mild eyed, amiable, imbecilic Dill of the padded vest and expansive German smile. He was not acting. He was sincere and his eyes shone with earnestness.

"That," thought I, "is characteristic of his stage impersonations, after all, for Dill's little fat Dutchman is invariably honest and the imposed upon and not imposing party."

"My wife," he resumed, "who was with us during the Fischer days and who knows all about the K. & D. partnership, told me the other day that I behaved like a different person. I'm not worried any more. That's the difference. I propose to give the public the best shows I can and to put them on in the best way I can. I do not expect to make money out of the San Francisco engagement, for I plan to put every dollar into the productions. This first show is a sample of what I intend to do. After the local engagement, when I take my company on the road, is when I hope to gather a little profit; for the productions will then be paid for."

If courage, a light heart, 11 years of experience in making the world laugh and a great natural talent

for comedy will suffice, Dill will not fall in his enterprise of steering his own theatrical craft.

THE determination to give the public "the best of it," which Max Dill expressed, was not a mere expression nor an idle boast. He has two stars shining brightly on his comedy. That makes three stars altogether, or what is called an "all star cast." In this case the phrase has validity.

One of his stars is well known here. The other is not but soon will be. One is a singer by inheritance and substantial gifts, backed by training; the other is a prima donna stamped with Broadway individuality. One is a beautiful brunette; the other a beautifully contrasting blonde. The two, at once, on any stage, exhibit what few musical comedy companies contain in equal measure—pulchritude, music, vivacity, youth and originality. The combination of Beatrice Michelena-Middleton and Lora Lieb is entirely irresistible, and for one I confess complete capitulation.

HAD been told that the daughter of Fernando Michelena would not be interviewed.

"Perhaps," I said to myself, "that is because of the reception she received Monday night when she sang 'Sweetheart, I Am Waiting.'"

Yet it did not seem reasonable that one who could sing so amiably and sweetly could in so short a time develop a head beyond any hat's capacity to cover, so I rang her up to find out. It was as I thought. She would be happy to meet a newspaperman to tell the town through him her thanks.

"How ever did you get that notion?"