

The Vesta Tilley Collection



**The Musical Hall Actress
From Worcester
(1864-1952)**

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Introduction

Worcestershire County Council owns a collection of material which once belonged to Vesta Tilley (1864-1952), the musical hall actress. Here we give a brief overview of who Vesta was and what she did in her life, as well as displaying some of the material that makes up this fascinating collection. Born in Worcester into a poor family, Vesta rose to stardom in early childhood, and maintained this prominence until her retirement from the stage in 1920.



Vesta in Worcester

Vesta Tilley was born Matilda Alice Powles on the 13th May 1864 in Commandery Street, Worcester, and baptised not far away at St. Peter's Church on 11th September 1864. Vesta was the second of thirteen children for her mother, Matilda Broughton and her father, William Henry Powles. Her father also used his stage name - Harry Ball - interchangeably when encountering officialdom, on Vesta's baptism certificate for example he appears as Powles, whilst on his marriage certificate he appears as Ball. Vesta's parents initially lived in Tallow Hill, and are known to have still been in Worcester in 1871 as they appear in the census as living at 48 Wylds Lane under the name of Ball. Vesta's direct links with Worcester seem to end when she was about seven years old, although she came back to Worcester to perform. She played at the Alhambra, the New Concert Hall for example, made an appearance at the Public Hall - in the Cornmarket - in 1913, as well as opening a Conservative Party fete in 1920.

Vesta's Career

Vesta Tilley was one of the most famous and highly paid Music Hall Artistes and best known male impersonators of her generation.



She made her stage debut at the age of three, at the Theatre Royal in Gloucester, where her father was the chairman for a short time. Her father subsequently got the position of chairman at St. Georges Music Hall in Nottingham. Vesta, at this time known as "The Great Little Tilley" (Tilley being an abbreviation of her first name Matilda), was eager to perform, and was soon receiving requests from many places, including Dudley, Derby, and Leicester.

One night Vesta's father found her trying on his coat and top hat and decided to get Vesta her own suit of men's clothes. New songs were found for her to sing more suited for the male attire, and she made her first appearance as a male impersonator at Day's Concert Hall in Birmingham. Her act proved popular, and Vesta received a salary of five pounds a week for the run.



Approaching the age of 10, Vesta was asked to consider a proposal to undertake a London tour. Although this initially offered less money, Vesta could make several performances a night, and also gain great publicity. The offer was accepted. At this time Vesta's father appointed Vesta a proper manager, and during her London tour, having out grown the name, "the Great Little Tilley", she took the stage name Vesta Tilley. She soon established a reputation in London, and was dubbed "The London Idol". The advertisement opposite, shows this nickname.

As well as her performances on the music hall stage, Vesta was also active in pantomimes. In 1877, at the age of 13, Vesta made her first appearance in pantomime, playing Robinson Crusoe at the Royal in Portsmouth. This was the first of many roles as principal boy she was to play. Dick Whittington was her favourite role in pantomime, a role she reprised many times. Other principal boy roles she played were the Prince in Beauty and the Beast, and Sinbad the Sailor. She also played female roles, appearing as the Queen of Hearts for example at the Theatre Royal in Brighton in 1879. Booked so many years in advance for pantomime performances at Christmas, Vesta was even offered an Easter pantomime at the Grand Theatre in Birmingham, specially created at this time to secure her services.

During the First World War Vesta entertained the troops, touring hospitals and theatres, with patriotic songs like, "Girls, If You Want To Love A Soldier, You Can All Love Me", "In The Trenches", "Oh London Where Are The Girls Tonight", and "The Wounded Tommy".

The Tours

As well as having toured Britain from an early age, Vesta made several tours to the United States with great success, and commanding high salaries. One theatre for example offered her \$600 a week. See page 7 to view two letters from her tours in America. She had offers to perform from even further afield, with a theatre company in Australia requesting that she be principal boy in their forthcoming pantomime at a theatre either in Melbourne or Sydney. See page 6 to view the letter requesting her presence.

Lady de Frece



Vesta married Walter de Frece, son of a theatre manager, a theatre manager himself and later a politician, at Brixton Register Office on the 16th August 1890.

After the honeymoon Vesta returned to work and Walter to his new job, as he had joined the firm of Richard Warner & Co, one of the leading theatrical agents of that time.

In 1919 Walter was knighted for services during the war, and Vesta became Lady de Frece. Deciding to follow a political career, Walter persuaded Vesta to retire from the stage. Although Vesta was booked up for a further six years, she was released from her contracts, and gave one final farewell tour, beginning this in August 1919. Initially touring the largest provincial towns and donating each week's salary to the local children's hospital, Vesta finished her tour in London, where she performed for a month. Walter was elected as the conservative MP for Ashton-Under-Lyne, Vesta having been involved in canvassing very successfully for this.

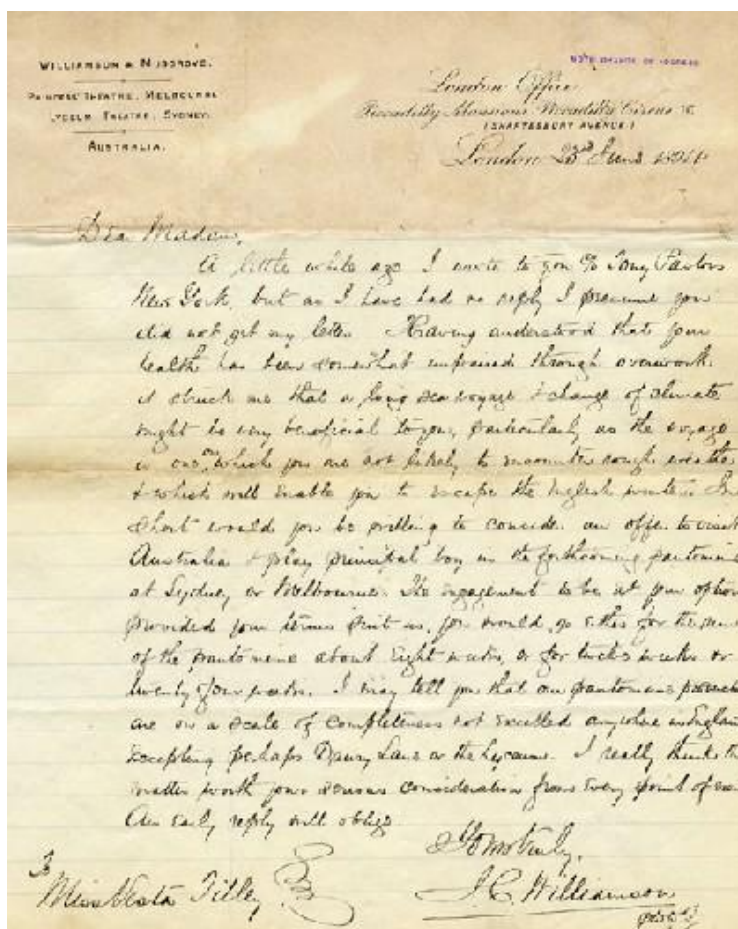
The de Frece's had several homes, including one in Monte Carlo, where they often wintered, for the benefit of Vesta's health. It was in Monte Carlo that Walter died in 1935.

The Collection

The collection is very varied and spans many years, from the 1890s to the 1920s. It includes a large collection of letters, press cuttings and programmes. Many of the items are in scrapbooks, often layer upon layer, made up by Vesta, and are therefore in a fragile condition. The collection also holds some of Vesta's costumes, which includes hats, shoes, an evening suit, and many waistcoats, a feature for which she was particularly well known. These are held at the County Museum.

Due to the fragile condition of much of the collection it has been digitised. It is available to the public to view at the Record Office, County Hall, on DVD, although at present the digitised material is not catalogued.

Australian Request for Vesta Tilley



A transcript of the letter

Williamson & Musgrove
Princess Theatre, Melbourne
Lyceum Theatre, Sydney
Australia

London Office,
Picadilly Mansions, Picadilly Circus
(Shaftesbury Avenue)
London, 23rd June 1894

Dear Madam,

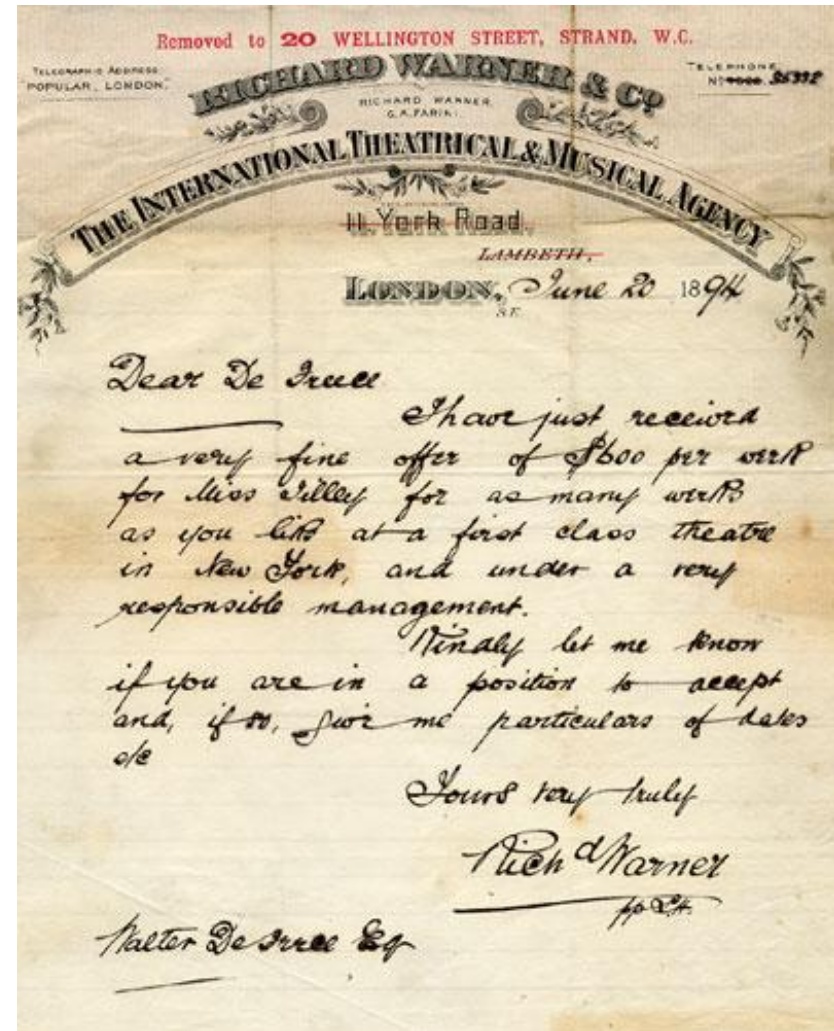
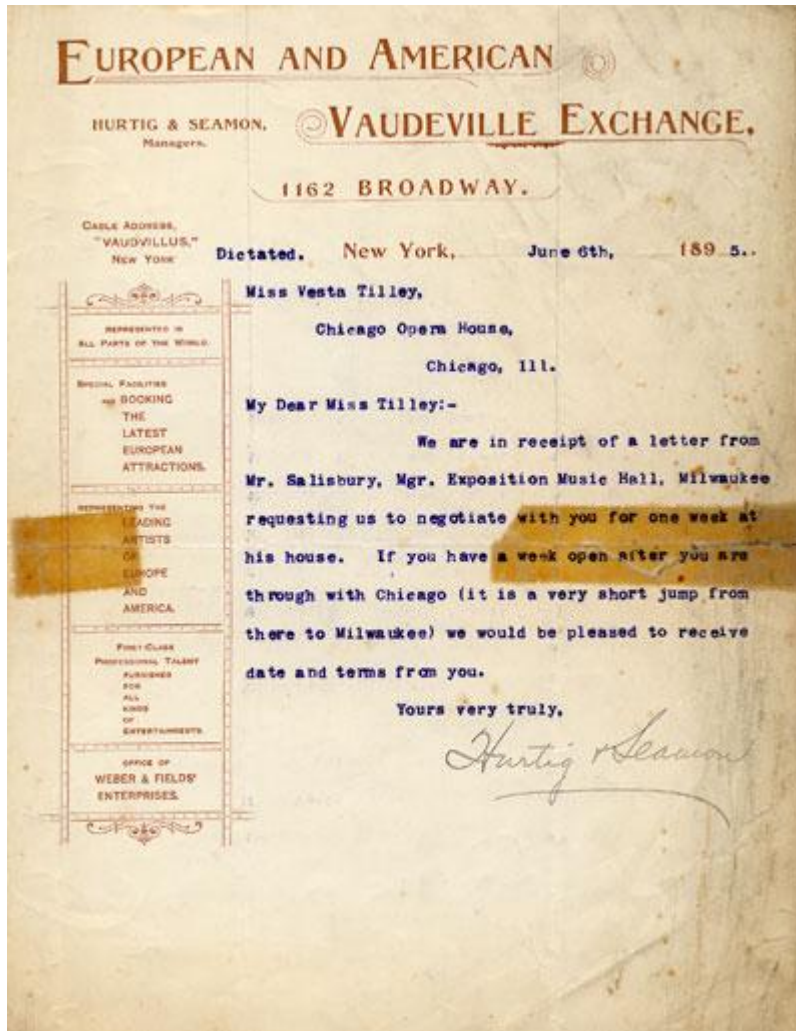
A little while ago I wrote to you c/o Tony Pastors, New York, but as I have had no reply I presume you did not get my letter. Having understood that your health has been somewhat impaired through overwork it struck me that a long sea voyage and a change of climate might be very beneficial to you, particularly as the voyage is one in which you are not likely to encounter rough weather & will enable you to escape the English winter. In short would you be willing to consider an offer to visit Australia & play principal boy in the forthcoming pantomime at Sydney or Melbourne? The engagement to be at your option provided your times suit us, you would either go for the run of the pantomime about eight weeks, or for twelve weeks or twenty four weeks. I may tell you that our pantomime productions are on a scale of completeness not excelled anywhere in England, excepting perhaps Drury Lane or the Lyceum. I really think the matter worth your serious consideration from every point of view. An early reply will oblige.

Yours truly,

JG Williamson

Vesta in America

Here are two examples of requests to book Vesta whilst she was performing in America.



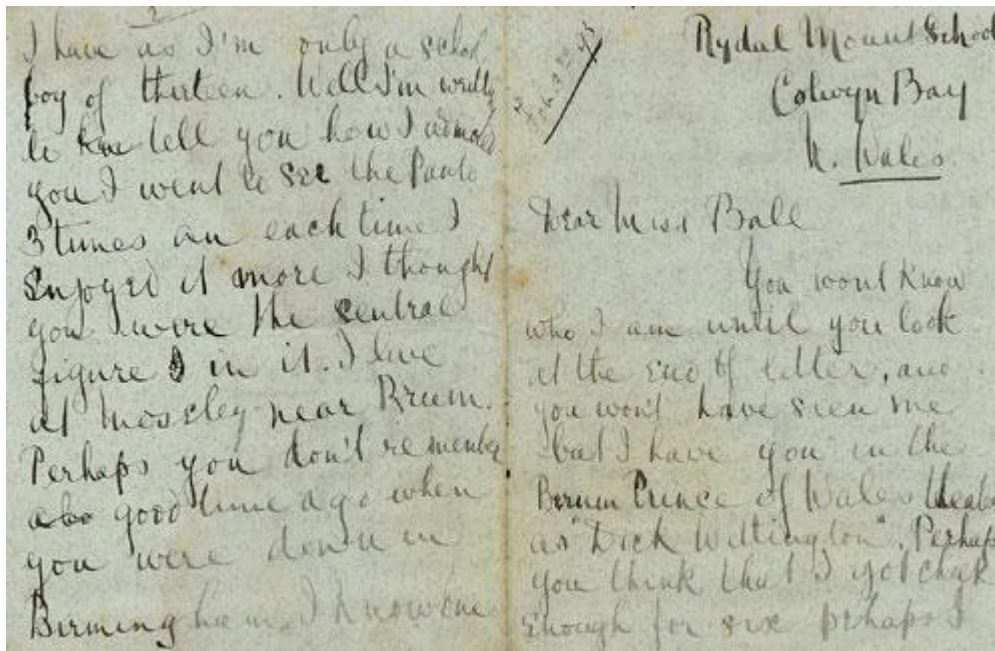
The Fans

Vesta Tilley's huge popularity secured her many fans, this is evidenced in the fan mail she received from men and women, boys and girls alike. The collection includes some of this mail, and these make interesting reading. We hold a selection of some of these fan letters.

Here are some examples of the fan letters which Vesta Tilley received:

A Schoolboy's Request

This letter is from a 13 year old schoolboy from Wales, who wishes to have a photograph of Vesta for his "mantle piece in the bedroom at school for perhaps," he writes, "I shall never see you again."

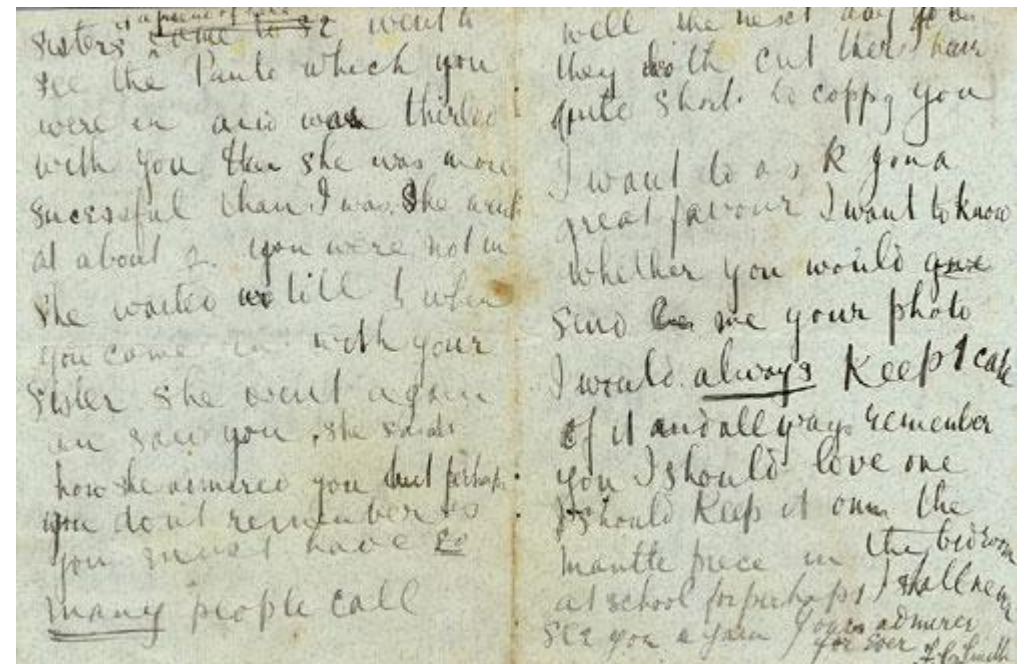


22/11/1907

I have as I'm only a school boy of thirteen. Well I'm really to tell you how I admire you I want to see the pants 3 times an each time I enjoyed it more I thought you were the central figure in it. I live at Moseley near Birm. Perhaps you don't remember a good time ago when you were down in Birmingham. I know the Rydal Mount School Colwyn Bay N. Wales.

Dear Miss Ball

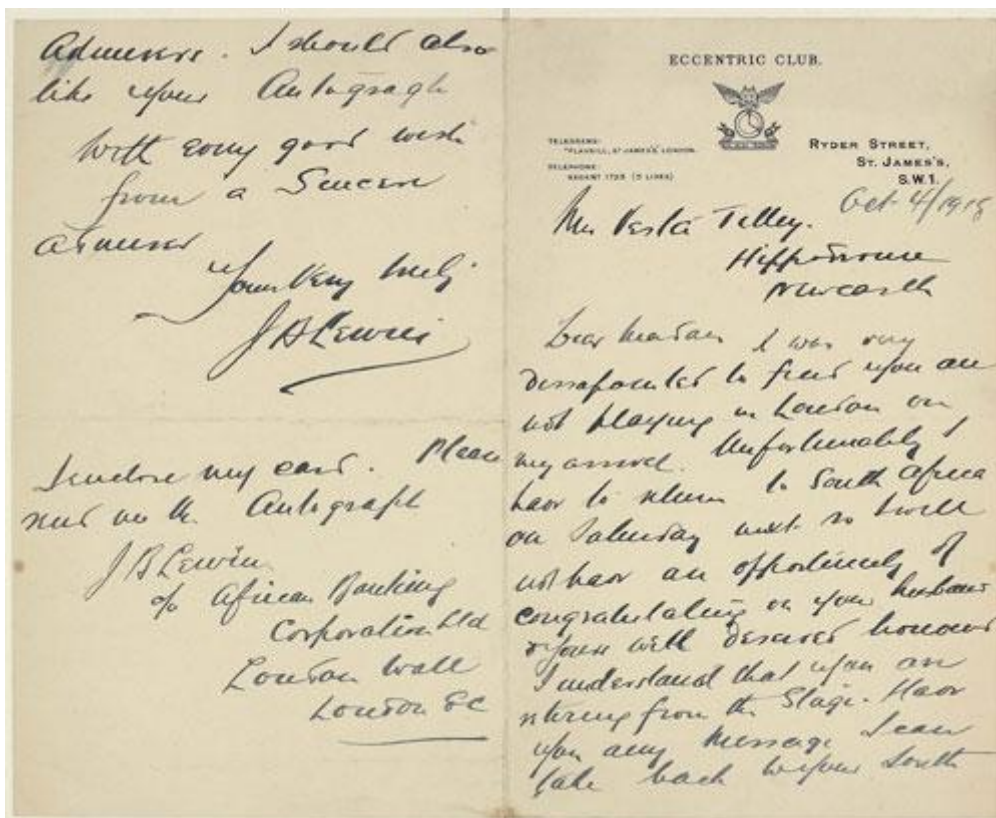
You won't know who I am until you look at the end of letter, and you won't have seen me but I have you in the Prince of Wales Theatre as Dick Wittington. Perhaps you think that I got that through for six perhaps I



Sisters ^{at a piece of paper} I want to see the pants which you were in and was there with you then she was more successful than I was. She was at about 2. you were not in she waited until I when you come in with your sister she went again in say you, she said how she admired you but perhaps you don't remember so you must have so many people call

well the next day if they do it cut their hair quite short to copy you I want to ask you a great favour I want to know whether you would give send me your photo I would always keep it of it and all ways remember you I should love one I should keep it on the mantle piece in the bedroom at school perhaps I shall see you again for ever & ever

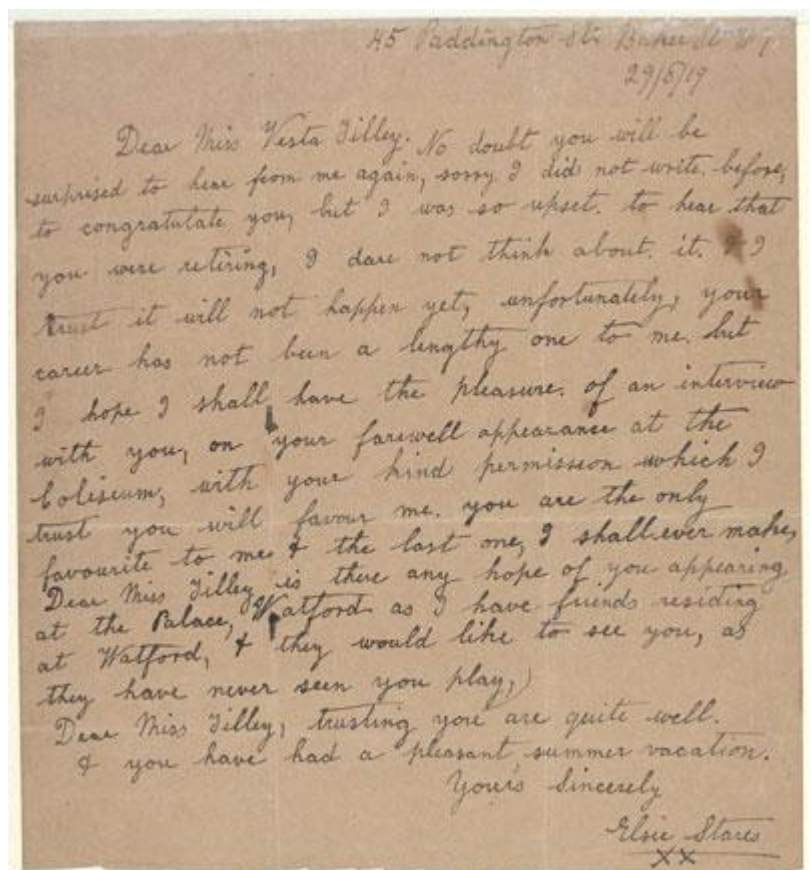
A Banker's Request



This letter, with the letterhead, "Eccentric Club", is from a gentleman, expressing his disappointment that he will be unable to see Vesta perform in London before his return to South Africa. He requests her autograph, and gives his address as care of the African Banking Corporation Limited.

A Female Fan's Request

This letter from a female fan, expresses sadness to hear that Vesta is retiring from the stage. The fan, Elsie, is so upset that she "dare not think about it". She also hopes that she will have the opportunity to talk to Vesta at her farewell appearance at the Coliseum, and wonders whether Vesta would consider performing in Watford, as she has friends there who have never seen Vesta perform.



Anonymous Admirer's Appeal

Friday
Oct 24/19.

To
Miss Vesta Tilley.

Pardon the liberty
a few admirers are taking in
writing you but having seen ~~on~~ in
one of the papers that you would
sing anything by request during
your farewell visit. I venture
to write & ask you if you would
be so kind as to sing "Following in
Father's Footsteps" & the song, which,
I think is one of your latest, where
you are dressed as a wounded
Tommy in Hospital Blue. For last
House Monday night Oct 27th
your kindness, which is your nature
will deeply oblige.

Your Admirers
with a good wish for Good Health &
Good Luck in your well earned new
sphere of life. "Good Bye"

This letter from a "few admirers" requests some songs for Vesta to sing at her farewell visit. The songs requested are "Following in Father's Footsteps" and "The song, which I think is one of your latest, where you are dressed as a wounded Tommy in Hospital Blue."

Charity Appeal

Sep 11 1919

4 Arbour Street
Southport

Dear Madam,

Hearing of all your kindness
to Cripple children in England I venture
to write and ask your interest for
deaf dumb & blind children of India
among whom I have been working
for 20 years. I have 2 orphanages in
Madras & Palamcottah with 180 of such
children who are utterly neglected by
their people who often think them
possessed by evil spirits & cast them
away. I am only home for a few months
to get help and helpers. I have
found a trained teacher ready to come
out & help me if I can raise the
£500 needed for her passage & five
years service in India. I should be
so grateful to you if you would
help me, hearing of your kindness to
children I venture to plead. Yrs Truly
(Miss) Tilley

This letter is appealing to Vesta's generosity, as the lady writing has heard of Vesta's "kindness to cripple children in England", and wonders if she would be interested in helping deaf, dumb and blind children in India. She has two orphanages with about 180 "such children who are utterly neglected by their people who often think them possessed by evil spirits & cast them away."

This lady has come to England for a few months to get both help and helpers, and requires five hundred pounds to fund the passage to India for and the employment of a teacher to work for five years in India.

Further Information

The Vesta Tilley Society is a non-profit making organisation dedicated to furthering the memory of Vesta Tilley and raising her profile both locally and nationally.

Visit their website - www.vestatilleyociety.net - for more details.

Further Reading

- Gwynedd Sudworth, *The Great Little Tilley: Vesta Tilley and Her Times*, Courtney Publications, 1984
- Lady De Frece, *Recollections of Vesta Tilley*, The Mayflower Press, 1934
- Sara Maitland, *Vesta Tilley*, Virago Press, 1986