

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

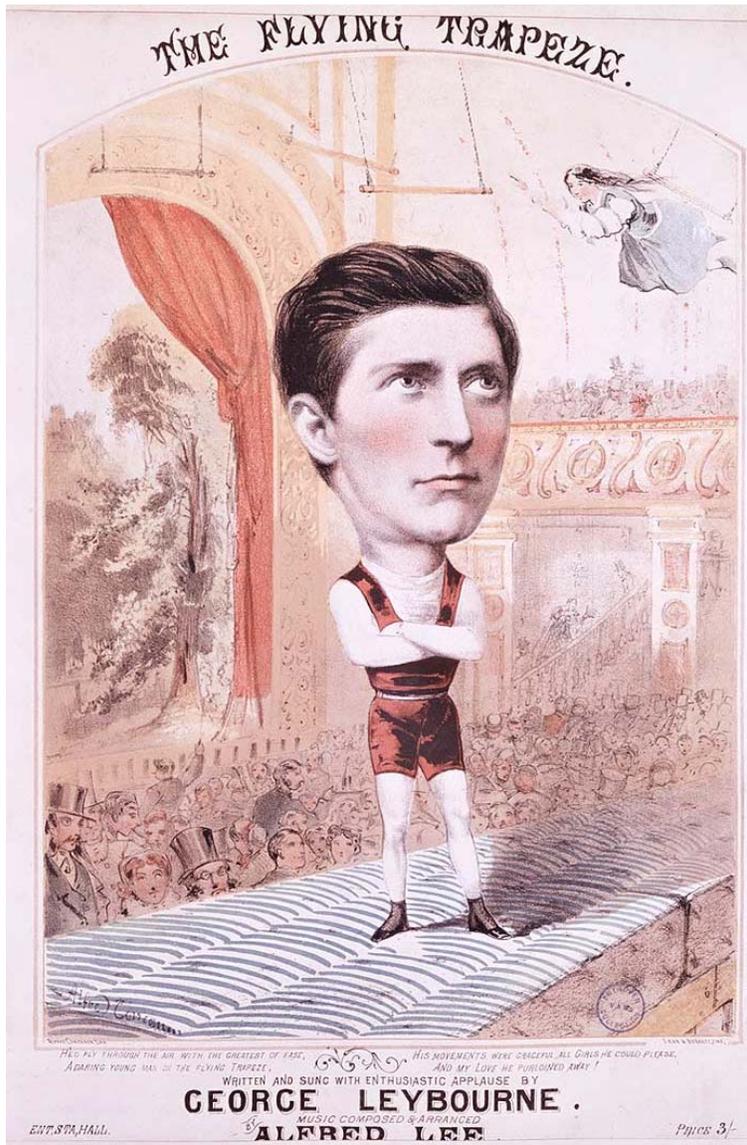
### **From “Men in Tights” to “Men in Krewes”**

Perhaps the most famous “man in tights” was Jules Léotard, a French acrobat who became the rage of London. Born in France in 1842, he was master of the flying trapeze act. Trained by his father, a Toulouse gymnastics instructor and swimming pool owner, he learned by practicing over the water. After passing his law exams, Léotard gave up a legal career for one on the trapeze. His first appearance in London was at the Alhambra in May of 1861. Two months later, at the Ashburnham Pavilion, Cremorne Gardens, Chelsea, the ace aerialist did his act on five trapezes - turning somersaults between each one. He returned again to London in 1866 and 1868, performing primarily in music halls and pleasure gardens, where he gained great popularity.



*Jules Léotard, more confident than daring, in his tights*

Jules Léotard's success and notoriety brought about two things: "Leotards" became a new word for tights, and a man named George Leybourne wrote a popular British music hall song in 1867, *The Flying Trapeze*. We know the song as *The (Daring Young) Man On The Flying Trapeze*, a song that played a significant part in the 1934 Academy Award winning movie "It Happened One Night", starring Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert.



*The Daring Young Man On The Flying Trapeze*  
(illustrated sheet music cover page)

Leybourne (March 17, 1842 - September 15, 1884), whose real name was Joe Saunders, originated for London music halls the role of "Champagne Charlie", a high-rolling "swell" who was seen only in the most fashionable places. It is believed that he based this character on the dapper real-life French champagne magnate Charles Heidsieck. To affect this persona, Leybourne appeared on stage perfectly attired in

top hat and tails, along with cane, gloves and scarf. His major rival, "The Great Vance" (real name Alfred Peck Stevens) also sang songs about such stylish places, including the Zoological Gardens. It was Vance's song *Walking in the Zoo* that popularized the shorter word "Zoo" – which truly offended the Royal Zoological Society. With leonine whiskers, monocles and fancy dress, these entertainers were known as *lions comiques*. They deliberately parodied the behavior of upper class "toffs" in Victorian music halls for escapist amusement.



*The song that brought about the use of the word "Zoo"*

However, George Leybourne's song *Lounging in the Aq* failed to work the same magic for the word Aquarium. "They all Aq'sd for you at the Zoological Gardens" just wouldn't have cut it anyway.

**LOUNGING IN THE AQ.**

STANDARD & SON  
Alfred Lee  
COMPOSED BY  
Pr. 3/4

WRITTEN BY  
**T. L. CLAY,** SUNG WITH THE GREATEST SUCCESS BY **ALFRED LEE.**  
**GEORGE LEYBOURNE.**  
LONDON: CHARLES SWEARD, 192, HIGH HOLBORN, W.C.

*They All Aq'sd For Who?*

One can see why the Victoria and Albert Museum has called these *lions comiques* "the heart throbs of the Victorian era". They satirically sang about the virtues of idleness, womanizing and drinking. "While their songs boasted about being seen at the most fashionable places, their attitude was distinctly laddish."

Leybourne did have another claim to fame. He wrote the song *If Ever I Cease To Love* for "Bluebeard", described as "a Burlesque in One Act". English dancer-comedienne-actress Lydia Thompson (February 19, 1838 – November 17, 1908) came to New Orleans to sing the

fanciful love song. Born Eliza Hodges Thompson, Lydia was a leading performer on the London stage, and she introduced English burlesques to American audiences in 1868 with her troupe known as the "British Blondes".



*Lydia in Tights*



*The Grand Duke Alexis*

*The New York Times* in 1868 called Lydia "a blonde of the purest type, saucy, blue-eyed, golden-haired and of elegant figure." Her biographer, Kurt Gänzl, wrote, "her skillful management, her adept casting of her troupe, her knack for publicity, her own charms and talents, and the fact that she spent the most blooming of her blooming years on the American stage, built a special place for her in American theatre history."

Although twelve years younger than the captivating burlesque queen, the Grand Duke Alexei Alexandrovich of Russia noticed Lydia, too. In New Orleans he's remembered as the Grand Duke Alexis. Whether he came to see Lydia, (or another chanteuse of the day) upon his visit to the Crescent City, is open to debate. But in the process, Rex "The King of Carnival" paraded for the very first time in 1872, and New Orleans got a fanciful and memorable Mardi Gras anthem.

Rex's eponymous krewe was organized that year, not only to put on a spectacle in honor of the Grand Duke's visit, but also as a way to attract business and tourism to the city in the years after the American Civil War.

Jules Léotard died August 17, 1870, at the very young age of twenty-eight from an infectious disease, believed to be smallpox. Lydia and the Grand Duke Alexis both died the same year, 1908 - Lydia in London and the Grand Duke in Paris.

In New Orleans, the names of Lydia Thompson and the Grand Duke Alexis are forever remembered in connection with that farcical, silly, yet rather infectious tune. Its first verse and chorus:

In a house, in a square, in a quadrant,  
In a street, in a lane, in a road,  
Turn to the left, on the right hand,  
You see there my true love's abode.  
I go there a-courting and cooing  
To my love, like a dove,  
And swearing on my bended knee,  
If I ever cease to love,  
May sheep's heads grow on apple trees,

If I ever cease to love,  
If I ever cease to love,  
May the moon be turned into green cheese,  
If I ever cease to love.

As for men wearing tights, actor and New Orleans native son Bryan Batt (author of "she ain't heavy, she's my mother" and "big, easy STYLE" and famous for his role in the AMC series *Mad Men*) related a memorable moment he experienced while joining the ladies of *The View*. Reported by Dave Walker in the *Times-Picayune*, Bryan described the scene where the ladies were looking over his family photographs:

"They couldn't get over the crazy outfits we would dress in for Mardi Gras," he said. "First, they thought we were touched, this crazy family. I said, 'No, no, no. This goes on in every home in New Orleans. At Mardi Gras, men wear tights and boots and tunics and sequins and wigs, and no one bats an eye.'"

**NED HÉMARD**

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"Men in Tights" to "Men in Krewes"  
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