



*The Improbable Adventures of  
Miss Emily Soldene*

Actress, Writer and Rebel Victorian

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*To Amber, Scarlett and Daisy*



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Emily as King Chilpéric in Hervé's operetta *Chilpéric*

## *Introduction*

Every family has their own myths and legends: the tales of supposedly famous and infamous ancestors, passed down through the generations to bring out at the annual gatherings of the tribe, the weddings and the funerals; to intrigue grandchildren or amuse new partners.

Among our forebears we allegedly had a notorious actress. According to my nanna she was grand and slightly risqué – her name was Lady de Vries. Other than that she knew no more; just that she was grand.

‘What? A real lady?’ I asked her.

‘No dear, not a lady, not a real lady at all I imagine,’ she said.

Rather prescient of Nanna as it turned out.

At the time there was no evidence for the existence of this Lady de Vries, and we had no idea how we were supposed to be related to her. She was dismissed by the family as another example of my nanna's dramatic imagination.

However, years after Nanna had passed away and the theatrical lady had slipped from the family memory, I happened across her while doing a piece of research into our family history. I had been asked to write a book about a more contemporary set of female ancestors. I made a phone call to a local historian of the ancestral village in Hertfordshire. He told me that I had a famous actress in the family, that I should talk to a renowned historian of musical theatre who lived in New Zealand. He gave me Kurt Gänzl's address. There followed a flurry of emails, and two monumental volumes of a thousand words each, kindly given by Kurt (because I'm family), which were sent halfway across the world and landed on my desk.

It seems we did indeed have a theatrical ancestor. In fact, she was my first cousin three times removed; my great-great-grandfather was her favourite uncle. She was a singer as well as an actress and she had several names (none of them de Vries), but the one she used most was Miss Emily Soldene.

With one Google click I found a photograph. Emily Soldene, singer, born in the year after Victoria became queen and dying just two years before the beginning of the First World War – a woman who had truly lived through an entire era. She was dressed in curious silk boy-britches, a low-cut kimono-style



jacket revealing a fulsome bosom and thigh, a floppy pastry cook's cap slipping off a tumble of blonde ringlets, and a face tipped heavenwards, eyes hopeful, expectant; her mouth wide in a secret smile as if communicating with a celestial friend in the firmament. Cheeky and yes, probably no lady, at all.

But what I read next really caught my attention. Not only had Emily been a star of the music halls, moving up in society to become the leading lady in light operas, but she had also started to produce and direct the productions she starred in. Then she had set up her own theatrical company. She had bought the tenancies of London theatres like the Lyceum and the rights to popular operas. Emily had even brought *Carmen* to the British provinces for the first time (with herself in the role of Carmen of course).

And there was more – like today, if you really wanted to make it big you had to go to America. Emily took her productions to Broadway, then across the Wild West to a gold-booming San Francisco and back again several times. And then she couldn't resist hopping on a boat and going across to Australia and New Zealand. These trips were long, dangerous and expensive; only a few very wealthy, adventurous ladies or actresses would have made them. These trips were Emily's biggest triumphs and her biggest disasters.

But perhaps the most surprising development in Emily's full life was her second career as a journalist. In an era when the lady journalist was a new and distrusted phenomenon, at the age of fifty-two, Emily managed to get herself a weekly column and a byline in one of Australia's largest newspapers, the *Sydney*

*Evening News*, sending dispatches from London on anything that took her fancy. Emily had that most rare of things for a woman from a working-class background – a public voice.

There was also an understudy to Emily's main role. A few more Google clicks revealed the existence of another doublet-clad ancestor, dressed in velvet knickerbockers, pantomime tights and high heels. Emily's sister, Clara Vesey, joined Emily on the stage when she was twenty years old. There is less written about Clara, although plenty of photographs – she was one of the most photographed actresses of the nineteenth century. Eleven years younger than her half-sister, Clara was rarely allowed to play lead roles – these were reserved for Emily, despite the fact that Clara was supposedly an excellent singer (and was definitely considered prettier). It seems Clara was destined to travel with her big sister's company as Emily's understudy.

At first glance it seems Emily was the main player and Clara tagged along in her slipstream, a passenger on board for the often-bumpy ride – but the story is more complicated. Sisters can be the best of friends and the biggest of rivals. Eventually Emily and Clara made different life choices, but these choices and their consequences seem to say something not just about the sisters themselves, but also about women in nineteenth-century society in general, and perhaps even women today.

Emily has faded from the limelight now, but in Victorian Britain she was a star, and together with Clara, the sisters were regular celebrities, invited to parties for their wit, gossip and

general bonhomie. The people they called friends included Pre-Raphaelites, peers of the realm, maharajahs, Rothschilds, Dickens, Gladstone, Oscar Wilde and the Prince of Wales. They did the Season with impunity, drank champagne, ate oysters and gambled on horses, somehow working exhaustive social lives around their theatrical commitments. They had close friendships they shouldn't have had, with grand men. Emily claimed to have been stalked by Jack the Ripper. I know this because Emily also wrote a book, *My Theatrical and Musical Recollections*. It was one of the bestselling books of 1898 and scandalised society. As one reviewer said:

*She has had the good fortune to know many of those whom the world calls smart people, and many of those whom the world calls smart people have had the evil fortune of meeting her. One and all these she 'gives away'.*

It's a great read. Emily has an icy wit and a literary twinkle in her eye, with plenty of mischief and just a sprinkling of spite for her few bêtes noires.

But one of the secrets of Emily's success was her awareness of the Soldene brand – and the memoir, fun as it is, doesn't tell the whole story. In fact, like too many autobiographies, truth has been sacrificed at the altar of image. The real-life adventures of Miss Emily Soldene are darker, and actually more heroic. I think she left some of the best bits out.

So I've put them back in.



Emily on her great American tour as the pastry cook, Drogan, in  
*Geneviève de Brabant*