

Renaissance of the Masher and Swashbuckler

By BENJAMIN DE CASSERES

NEW YORK threatens to go on the loose for the next two years—in spite of our Volsteads and Crafts.

A perfect jamboree of romantic immorality is threatened. The leaden lid of "Thou Shalt Not" has been hammered down on us so tightly that the explosion of our suppressed healthy animality may become a classic example of Dr. Freud's dictum, the way to revitalize an instinct is to suppress it.

Don Juan, d'Artagnan and Bluebeard have invaded New York from beyond the artistic three-mille limit. I hear in film circles that there is talk of screening the life of that philanthropic highwayman, Robin Hood. It is also whispered that Gil Blas and Benvenuto Cellini may be glorified in celluloid.

Lord Byron, who once put a deep dent in the armor of British respectability, will soon land at the Battery in the shape of John Barrymore. In fact, it is said there will be two Lord Byrons in town this Winter. And Arnold Daly is in training for Rostand's "Don Juan." As there are fifty-seven varieties of the Don Juan legend, you may as well lay up for a hard and immoral Winter.

The movement of revolt against Things as They Are may go so far—they say—as to cause Lionel Barrymore to put on Falstaff, if some one will write a drama for him around that Old Soak. And what's the matter with Marie Dressler or Fannie Brice as Jezebel?

Henry VIII, lately looked over the Old Town in a "movie" called "Deception." Catherine the Great, with all her suppressed complexes aired, was given a private showing recently in the projection room of a large moving-picture concern. A scenario writer has retired to his bungalow in the Orange Mountains to do a Jesse James. An Italian film corporation is screening the life of Europe's "Huck" Finn, Gabriele d'Annunzio.

If there is anybody missing, I haven't heard of him. Satan? He lately passed this way in a personally conducted tour ciceroned by George Arliss.

It is rather portentous, not to say comic, this artistic renaissance of all the scoundrels, fire-eaters, rakes and Old Soaks of history. Reminds me of one of the climaxes in Flaubert's "The Temptation of St. Anthony." That grand old ascetic, who lived in a desert worse than the Middle West or the South, thought he had Satan pretty well floored at the end of the seventh round and had, in fact, counted ten on him, when Little Old Nick looked up at Anthony with a naughty grin and said, "I'll come back through your imagination!"

Is America trying to play St. Anthony? It looks that way. But Nick is coming back through the back door of the imagination. He smiles from the glittering point of Doug. d'Artagnan's sword, he peeps from the feather in the hat of Don Tellegen, he winks from Bluebeard's whiskers (or mustache), he gambols in Gertie's garter. We shall soon see his fiery breath in "Ten Nights in a Barroom" (to be screened), where, as Joe Morgan, he may die but never resign.

It's a long way back to the psychological and problem drama. What the human race wants is not "truth" but romance. It may be that romance is the living breath of

"truth." The demand for romance on the stage is in inverse ratio to the supply of it in our daily lives. Digging for the rent hasn't much of the make-believe about it. Neither has ginger ale. At night we rush

all sorts of wild adventures began. "The Mirrors of Washington" and "The Mirrors of Downing Street" will not substitute for the mirrors of New York. They have become "movie" screens and stage



"Don Juan, d'Artagnan and Bluebeard Have Invaded New York."

out to seek it—not ginger ale, but romance. Like sympathy, it is now to be found only in the dictionary—at least in America.

New York's own little idea of the Spirit of Adventure in the past had been founded on the idea of gayety. Now, there can be no "Gay New York" (or gay anything or gay anywhere) without the presence at least of Bacchus and Gamberinus. When the cabarets, dances, cafés, saloons and seagling hacks were in their flower the New Yorker found the Spirit of Adventure floating around every corner. After theatre he set sail for the great voyage across the sea of wine, beer, highballs, jazz, conversation (not the dead exchange of canned smiles and dreary commonplaces you hear now at tables), casual acquaintances and taxis that whirled him to some strange "little place" that some other fellow knew.

The sea is dried up. "Gay New York" has become a myth. The night, like the day, is cut and dried. A New Yorker now schedules his pleasures after dinner as he blueprints the cares that infest his day. The old devil-may-care spirit of New York is now rounded in a "movie." The romance of night life is gone.

Nothing happens. Whatever is is blight. Lewis Carroll's Alice one day, if you remember, stood on the mantelpiece and after looking at the large looking-glass intently it turned into mist. Alice walked right through it into Topay-Turvy Land, where all sorts of strange adventures befell her.

A beautiful allegory of old New York before the renaissance of the romantic, swashbuckling "movie" and play. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers used to stand every evening with mystical potions before them looking intently at a wall lined with mirrors. And, just as happened to little Alice, in a short while the mirror turned to mist and soon they had entered a country where

settings. The shimmering veils of the cocktail and the wine bottle are rent. Doing the best we can in the circumstances, we work out our suppressed complexes vicariously—through the antics of the romantic daredevils and "vamps" of history.

So New York is going on the loose this Winter and next in the only way left to us—through the imagination. This reaction was bound to occur in a city where bandits and clubbing cops are the only ones who enjoy any degree of liberty. Join a crime-wave or get on the force if you desire a little tang in your daily existence.

Of course the greatest outlet for the personal liberty complex is to get a job as a prohibition enforcement officer. But prosperity comes so quickly, so meteorically, so to speak, to this small surviving band of libertarians that they do not live long enough to taste the fullness of their lives as d'Artagnans and Don Juans.

Returning to Art (sic), which is the only form of living that the Middle West, the South and Penn Yan have left to New York City, there is the case of "The Three Musketeers." What is to be said (as Dr. Straton would say) of an American audience that will sit night after night and revel in thrills, shout its approval and listen unashamedly to the still small complex in its spine whisper, "That's the life!" to the doings of a half-soused crack-head who would run you through for a thimble of cognac?

Where are the days of Little Eva and the old oaken bucket? Doug. Fairbanks's d'Artagnan is really a glorious and bloodthirsty bit of work. To look at it puts civilization back on its peaks.

You feel while sitting in your seat the density of the Dark Ages out on Forty-second Street. The Great White Lights are only jack lanterns for boys. Trolley cars, automobiles,

telephones, railroads, "Pussyfoot" Johnson and all the other triumphs of civilization—including Imperial Wizard Simmons and corn on the cob—what are they compared to the liberty of living in a time when every other building was a rathskellar, when maidens with the voice of the bulbul trilled in your ear when you fought a duel, when the wheel spun, the sword flashed, and the gendarmes paid you to stay off their beats?

It's a curious paradox that we approve of actions and characters on the stage and screen that we condemn in reality. The paradox is all the more greater when we remember that they are more "dangerous" when portrayed under forms of art than if they had a reality.

It is true, Europe has its d'Artagnan. His name is d'Annunzio. But in New York—or even in wild and wayward Harrisburg—a d'Artagnan or a d'Annunzio is as inconceivable as an original idea in the House of Representatives.

At the opening night of "The Three Musketeers" I jammed my way into the box occupied by Doug. and Mary, Charlie Chaplin and Jack Dempsey—probably four of the most famous beings who are now doing sketches on the back of Old Mother Earth—and shot a question at Doug. which I had pinned in my hat while Charlie and Mary were tearing Ricardo's Theory of Rent to tatters: "Mr. Doug., what do you think would happen to d'Artagnan if he landed at Ellis Island?"

"Under the present immigration law he'd be the last man over above and beyond the month's quota. But it would take a battleship to get him back to Gascony," replied the Gilbert K. Chesterton of the somersault and handspring.

Whether Lou Tellegen lasts or does not last in "Don Juan" it makes very little difference. As I indicated above, there are fifty-seven varieties of this famous masher on

the way. The only actor I could discover who was not looking over a Don Juan part this year is Raymond Hitchcock.

"I am not a victim—and have never been—of suppressed corner ogling," he said to me haughtily, as he stalked toward a Nedlick nectar. Recondite, but pointed.

I wonder whether there are a few graybeards like myself that can remember the Don Juan of Richard Mansfield? It was a flat failure. There was a reason. In that time the American was free to live as he chose. Don Juan was looked on as a piker.

At that time I was a corner masher myself in Wilmington, Del. So, like the rest of the young men of the country, I saw nothing extraordinary in Mansfield's way with the gals. But time elapses and changes (as Hall Caine pithily says somewhere), and now in the Bored Republic we applaud anything on the stage or the screen that gives us a taste of the forbidden.

I asked Lou Tellegen—in my wanderings for sociological data—what would happen to the Don if he piled his ogle in New York today.

"The Morgue or Ludlow Street Jail," came back the sententious reply as he went back in the first act to teach one of his pupils in mashing to climb a leafy garden escalator.

That artistic times in America are most shamefully out of joint is proved by the revival of "Little Lord Fauntleroy" on the screen by Mary Pickford. While hubby Doug. cries "Back to Fee-Fi-Foo-Fum!" his gentle wife quietly points the way back to sanity. A house divided against itself—but still tiding over the income tax.

Fauntleroyism is the reigning legalism in America. But the Invisible Empire of the Instincts look on and approve of d'Artagnan, Don Juan and Bluebeard.

Watchman, what of the Blue-Law Night?