



"TURN TO THE RIGHT"

If you do, and are a crook, peaches from the orchard and from the village will be yours—and a cottage on the backdrop for the bride.

Shifting Tastes of the Theatregoers

Decline of European Influence Has Been Followed By "the Sub-American Drama," with East Side Flavor Dominant and Crooks as Leading Characters

By JOHN CORBIN.

A THEATRICAL manager lately remarked, (as others have remarked before him:)

"The reason the public goes to the play is to see itself on the stage."

"I know it," answered his interlocutor, sadly; "and that's why I've cut it out. In a modern audience I have to keep one hand on my wad and the other on my watch. It cramps my sense of humor."

There have indeed been times when it seemed that our theatre was wholly given over to "crook" plays—plays in which the hero and heroine are of the underworld, and the villain a detective. In an earlier day, Harry B. Smith exclaimed: "Let who will write the songs of my countrymen, if I can collect the royalties." The up-to-date playwright has paraphrased this pious wish. Let who will crack the safes of his countrymen, if he can write the crook dramas. Even when the life depicted is not actually of the underworld, the moral tone is the same. Clever trickery wins delighted applause, while the ancient law, moral as well as statutory, is scorned and derided.

The phenomenon is interesting and rather disquieting. There is deep truth in what the manager said. Like government, the drama is best when it is of the people, by the people, and for the people. As the literary critics say, it should portray the life and express the mood of its time. Yet the American drama of today has largely reversed Lowell's apothegm. It pays to call old notions fudge and bend our conscience to our dealing. The Ten Commandments love to budge, and fortune ever follows stealing.

The vogue of the crook play is doubtless due superficially to the fact that it affords unequalled opportunity on the one hand for exciting action, melodrama, and for popular comedy on the other. An electric flash on a darkened stage, and pistols and handcuffs on a lighted one, have never yet failed to thrill an audience—and probably never will. The contest between crook and bull is rich in opportunity for clever turns and laughable surprises. There is, however, a serious difficulty. Easy as it is to enlist the interest of an audience, and to promote hilarity, the case is altered when it comes to the final curtain; for even the most loose-laced audience insists on bestowing sympathy together with

interest and laughter, and indeed at least a semblance of moral approbation. "Give me three boards and a passion," said the elder Dumas, "and I will give you a play." The need of the crook dramatist, though as definite, is simpler. He must have a pail of whitewash.

In "Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford" the audience thrilled with delight while the hero trimmed the boobs, and rocked with laughter when it turned out that the promotion which he had put through as a fake was in reality a sound and profitable operation. But what about the moral and happy ending? When the original stories appeared in The Saturday Evening Post the issue was honestly met. For Wallingford the ultimate wage of crime was the ruin of his life, and his abilities—jail, in fact; and for his wife it was heartbreak.

Would Mr. George M. Cohan dare such an ending? Nothing of the kind! In spite of Wallingford's triumphant career in crime, he discovered that virtue was not its only reward, and resolved to reform while the reforming was good. And in spite of the fact that he had unflinchingly outwitted the detectives, he employed the poor

simps to watch him and see to it that he stayed good. The laughter with which the audience greeted this dénouement was more than half at itself, and at the cleverness of Mr. Cohan's flim-flam, but it was real laughter, and so the play was saved.

In "Within the Law" the author, giving an admirable example of preparedness, set out with whitewash pail in hand. Jane Cowl, as honest a working girl as ever shone in the drama of Third Avenue, was falsely accused of theft by a villainous employer, and tyrannically jailed by an even more villainous detective. She emerged from behind the bars an adept in crime, and turned the engine of oppression against her oppressors. Through the rest of the play she led the most exciting and amusing life of crookedness "within the law," and ended by marrying the goo-goo son of her villainous employer.

The flim-flam here, of course, consisted in presenting what was at best an individual case of miscarried justice as a blanket indictment of all legality. Bad as our courts may be, the one thing certain worse is anarchy. But many or

most in the audiences, and especially the very young, took the play as a highly moral preaching—a fact which may be very seriously regarded in a land where the prevailing vice is disregard of law. On moral grounds the frank levity of Mr. Cohan is infinitely to be preferred. But as an artist with the whitewash brush Mr. Bayard Veiller is undoubtedly champion.

He is pushed hard, however, by the author of "Turn to the Right." Here the crooks are striving to reform at the outset and are thwarted by the village Shylock. To the cause of reformation \$125 is needful, and they crack the Shylock's safe. In subsequent transactions, all in the cause of virtue, they light-finger the wad from the old codger's waistcoat and, still in the interest of virtue, return it, much to the victim's consternation and to the general delight. Throughout, the audience has its pie while eating it.

These are the greatest moral crooks on earth—or they were until the recent production of "A Tailor-Made Man." Here the crooked hero, though not technically a crook, lies, steals, and bluffs his way divertingly through three acts, and in the fourth is unblushingly likened to Abraham Lincoln, while the audience applauds with patriotic fervor.

Does any one doubt the permanence of all these reformations? If such there be, every scruple is allayed by having the crooks appear in the last act unctuously clad in what they denominate full dress suits—apparel which, incongruously enough, has hitherto been the badge of melodramatic villains and dramatic critics. But when a reformed crook wears evening dress it is different. In retrospect upon Wallingford's shining shirt-front, one wonders that Mr. Cohan thought it necessary to employ a detective to keep him from risking the return to stripes.

In the latest crook play, "De Luxe Annie," the redemption of the heroine is managed without whitewash. The program calls it "a psychological play of mystery." The mystery is how so sympathetic and charming a young woman as Jane Grey can be so skillful a crook. One really does wonder. The explanation is scientific and reasonably sound. Just what it is, is best left to the author. Suffice it to say that, though possibly not as hilarious as some plays of the sort, "De Luxe Annie" is by far the neatest,

most intelligent, and most skillfully managed.

There are other branches of the new American drama, as for instance Broadway versions of Third Avenue masterpieces on the theme of why women sin. Jane Cowl is the favorite heroine. In "Common Clay" it was because she was bored with home life and decided that the world owed her a good time. When the young man went back to college she had a grievance against Society quite as convincing to the audience as that in "Within the Law." Well, she became an opera singer and possessor of a full dress suit. Or, if it lacked anything of completion the deficit was made up by a towering bazoo in her hair. Arrayed in this, she returned to the very house of her downfall and confronted the author of it. It appeared that he had never ceased to love her. As usual his father was the villain. Eugenists will please take note of the operation of heredity on the stage. So the working girl had her revenge. They were married and lived happily ever after, in full dress suits.

What does it mean, this new American or sub-American drama? More, perhaps, than appears on the surface. Deeply as the moralist may deplore the subjects of our plays and the mood of our audiences, the observer of things theatrical finds hope in the fact that we really have a drama that is of the people.

We have not had it long. In the days of the old stock company, which men still extant well remember, the number of native plays produced could be counted on one's fingers. The theatres, which centred in Union Square, were few and the supply of foreign plays abundant. It used to be said on Broadway that while it took a man of talent to write a play it took a genius to get it produced. And if we hark back to the output of the lion of that time, Dion Boucicault, it appears that the genius who got the play produced was not always the talented author.

Then came the days of the so-called syndicate. The stock companies had been "resident," rarely going on tour. Only the prompt book traveled, being produced in each city by the local stock company. But with the increase of inland centres of note, and the development of railway facilities, it became possible to send the entire production on the road, playing highly profitable engagements with short and inexpensive journeys from stand to stand. It was the heyday of trade combinations, and a powerful and able group of men gained control, not only of the chief theatres through the land, but of the output of the chief foreign playwrights. The New York theatrical district, which had shifted uptown to Herald Square, became the producing centre of an industry the distributing plant of which extended along all the main arteries of the continent.

This era of the syndicate, with its larger field of operations, gave scope to a group of native playwrights. William Gillette became master of polished farce and melodrama. Augustus Thomas and Clyde Fitch, while less even and sustained in the major technique of their craft, delved deeper into the ideas and characteristic life of their countrymen, and so advanced further into the fields of comedy and drama. The work of these three still marks the high water of our native output, but already the era which produced it is closed.

The new era, which today shows such confusion of moral and artistic values, was brought on by the theatrical war that shattered the control of the syndicate. The heavy artillery in this conflict was playhouses. In New York, the theatrical centre of which had shifted to Times Square, the producing houses of the syndicate were duplicated within the space of a year or two; and throughout the land, so to speak, the pipe line was paralleled. Literally hundreds of stages, from the Tenderloin to the Barbary Coast, yawned to be filled. The need was acute, for it was at this time that the moving pictures asserted their rivalry.

Fortunately for the managers, the artistic standards of the public had de-



GET-VIRTUOUS-QUICK WALLINGFORD

When this hero conceived the plan of hiring a detective to keep him straight in the enjoyment of his crookedly won millions, it opened an era in the Sub-American Drama.

clined as theatres multiplied. In the Union Square period, frequent revivals of the classics kept good taste alive, and the fine art of acting. Such new plays as were produced came from the ablest European dramatists. Even the gallery gave a judgment that was largely artistic. But as a whole the theatre was exotic. It lived in a world apart—the world of Europe. The public had not the least idea of seeing its own life mirrored. In the Herald Square period, our theatre was still mainly European. Dramas of square-set English life and of the Continental triangle were swallowed with equal avidity. Morality was a matter of geography—and of geometry. In theatrical technique the standard was still high; the traditional intelligence survived. It is no doubt largely because Gillette, Thomas, and Fitch had to compete with European dramatists that their work still stands apart. But if they were file closers of the old epoch, they were pioneers for the new. They brought the

public to know the greater interest and pleasure to be found in plays of its own life.

Early in the Times Square period the market for Continental plays, even for English plays, suddenly collapsed. Our public has long been without a standard in classical speech and acting; and now it is without the standard of a modern drama seriously devoted to the representation and interpretation of life. The present period is remarkable alike for the number of productions and for their artistic mediocrity. Much less than talent is now required to write plays—and the genius is not yet discovered who can keep them from being produced. Yet at their worst they are an expression of our native mood and character.

The business of the theatre, apparently so overextended, has been saved from collapse by several unrelated accidents. The time has been one of astonishing growth in population and wealth. Even against the moving-picture competition



JANE GREY IN "DE LUXE ANNIE"

This heroine makes \$50,000 a year at the badger game, yet all the time she is really virtuous and respectable. How it is managed is the secret of "A Psychological Play of Mystery."

there have been people able and willing to fill the many two-dollar houses. Failures in the world of managers have been astonishingly few.

The prosperity, meantime, which was so favorable to Broadway, proved fatal to the theatres of the lower east side. These nourished a strong, if crude, native drama. In the Yiddish theatres there had long been intense and serious pieces ranging in subject from the decline of family religion and family life to the rise of the white-slave traffic. The English-speaking theatres of Third Avenue had been devoted to popular melodramas of the order of "Why Women Sin" and "The Working Girl's Revenge." Both the Bowery and Third Avenue suffered keenly from the movie competition and from the tendency of the new generation to frequent the more luxurious theatres uptown. Managers and playwrights followed their public, and from the start exerted a strong influence on the spirit of Broadway. The need of new plays has been largely supplied by de luxe editions of east side drama. The first result was an irruption of white-slave plays. That found little response in the country at large and soon passed; but the spirit of the lower east side is still strong on Broadway, and is growing. When the lighter mood prevails, as in the Potash and Perlmutter series, the east side, from the old Thalia Theatre to the Bronx, is temporarily depopulated.

Together with boom times and first aid from the Bowery has come an influence which is deeper, more important, and, as it seems, more abiding. There has been an enormous increase in low-priced magazines, the circulations of some of which are numbered by millions. It is the custom of one and all to give preference to stories of native life. "As a nation we are now accustomed to the portrayal of familiar incident and character. Thus the playgoing public has come into a possession potentially more valuable in developing a drama of note than either a knowledge of the classics or a standard in modern dramaturgy. It has discovered itself. In the theatre today the popular American spirit reigns alone. That is why our drama is so promising—and so disquieting.

Does the prevalence of such plays argue anything as to our national regard for rectitude, statutory and moral? One confesses to uncomfortable memories as to domestic grafting, and as to practices in foreign trade which so long kept us out of markets where we should have triumphed. And, though the high seriousness of our professional feminists is not open to question, it may be doubted whether, in their sense of vital values, they are so very much in advance of the rebellious heroine of "Common Clay." How much of their vogue with us is due to the fact that they have been arrayed from infancy in full dress suits and pompons?

The dramatic critic is absolved from such dubious questionings, if only by the virtue of being permanently arrayed in one of these open-faced affairs. For him the important fact is that our drama, such as it is, has become racy and of the soil. From Sandy Hook to the Golden Gate Americans at last demand of the theatre that it shall speak to them in their own language of their own people. And out of the ruck of artistic mediocrity now and again there arises a piece which is as excellent in its kind as it is full of native flavor. In the heyday of Gillette, Thomas, and Fitch was there any play more skillful, more delightful, than "Seven Keys to Baldpate"; any more true in social tone and more witty than the two pieces from Clare Kummer?

The classical standard is, of course, long forgotten, and our attempts at the play of social and moral enlightenment rise little above the level of "Within the Law" and "Common Clay." But at last we are moving forward, though unconsciously, on the right path, and with the vigor of a giant's stride. Never before have conditions been so hopeful for a genuine native drama of serious moral tone and artistic quality.