

IN this age of moot points—some mooter than others, others possibly a shade less moot than some—perhaps the mootest point of any is, What is happening to the drama now that July 1st is behind us? This surely is a point of which the mootness cannot escape the most ivory-domed. It is practically Old Man Moot in person.

The pessimists say that prohibition will hand the drama something of a wallop,—or, as they slangily put it, will be extremely bad for the prosperity of the American stage. And, on past performances, it must be admitted that they have a certain amount of reason: for experience has shown that whatever happens is almost invariably bad for the theatre.

Why it should be so, it is hard to say: but the public as a body always seem to celebrate every new twist of our kaleidoscopic modern life by staying away from the theatre. It appears to be their one method of finding expression for their emotions. If there is war, they stop away from the theatre. If there is peace, they refrain from attending dramatic performances. You can't have a parade down Fifth Avenue without making a lot of people feel that it is out of the question for them to take in a show that night. It almost seems as if the blighters snatched at the slightest excuse.

Prohibition and the Drama

*Showing the Utterly
Devastating Effect
of the
Arid Régime
on the
Rialto*

By

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CONSEQUENTLY, with prohibition in our midst, people will start not going to the theatre harder than ever. They will set their teeth and really buckle down to the job. At least so the pessimists say. Consider, the pessimists argue, the vast number of plays which it is only possible to sit through with the assistance of what Ella Wheeler Wilcox would call a mild jag. There is a type of musical comedy—I have one now in rehearsal—which simply cannot be endured on ice-cream. It was written in the good old days before the drouth set in, in the happy knowledge that New York at any rate contained a sufficient number of mild inebriates to give the thing a metropolitan *cachet*. What is this sort of piece going to do when confronted with row upon row of coldly sober carpers? It will simply buckle up in the middle and expire with a gurgle.

But look! The sun is rising! In other words, the optimist jostles the pessimist aside and takes the floor. The optimist, wreathed in happy smiles, says "Nothing of the sort! Prohibition is going to be the making of the drama. Next season we shall enter upon an era of prosperity undreamed of in theatrical history. Next season plays will be almost as successful as the advertisements in the Sunday papers say they are. Next season, when we read in the Sunday paper that a production is the biggest hit in ten years and turning away howling crowds every night, it will not mean that the manager is going to take it off next Saturday after three losing weeks: it will really mean that the show is making a profit." In

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the past, say the optimists, a large number of people were wont to dine late and drink heavily with every course. The consequence was that, when half-past eight arrived and all good people should be on their way to the theatre, these revellers, shrinking from the mere idea of digging themselves up from their chairs, cursed the theatre briefly and ordered another bottle. When prohibition came in, these shirkers were compelled, as an alternative to sitting and thinking, to rush out in desperation and plunge into some place of entertainment.

So there we have the two views, and who shall say which of the two is dead on the pin and which bunkered in the sand-trap? One can only point, in support of the optimists, to the fact that certain dry towns are also excellent theatrical towns, while others in which the inhabitants rarely draw a sober breath yield a gross on the week's performances of about eleven dollars fifty. Take, for instance, Detroit, my favorite city in these United States. Detroit is dry, but its enthusiasm for the drama is not quenched. Its citizens, splendid fellows all of them, scramble for seats: and, if they can't get seats, they stand up at the back: and, if they can't stand up at the back, they come another night. They laugh merrily at your lines: they applaud your songs: and they do it all on cocoa and mashmallow-sundaes. This is the spirit that makes America what it is.

As a matter of fact, the undoubted result of this upheaval will be a reformation by the au-

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diences, who will demand a slightly more intellectual type of show. It will not be enough to hire a mixed gang of performers, scour Tin Pan Alley for a dozen songs, and turn the bevy loose on a stage under the general title of "Wow! Wow!" or "I'll Say She Did!" or something. Some sort of a connected story will be necessary. But, given a good show, people will go to see it, whether their little tummies are distended with Mumm or sarsaparilla.

A far mooter point is: Will the effects of alcohol be able to be used any more by dramatists either as a vehicle for comedy or as an aid to the punch? The War ceased to be of theatrical value almost directly the armistice was signed. Managers simply would not look at plays dealing with the regeneration of the Broadway ruin who enlisted and saved the French army from destruction. Will it be the same with alcohol!

Whatever may be said against alcohol, for purposes of comedy situations it cannot be replaced. What is to become of the farces which open with the young master coming home at break-fast-time in evening dress, unable to remember anything of what took place the night before except that he thinks he murdered someone in a fight at a restaurant? The only hope is that the chemists who are working day and night to discover the non-alcoholic substitute which, without bucking the Federal Amendment, will nevertheless possess the kick of an army-mule, will

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succeed in their experiments. Then it will be possible for the butler, discussing the hero's escapades with the maid at the opening of act one, to say that the trouble with the young master is that, while generous to a fault, he *will* put that extra raisin in his grape-juice.

IN the more serious drama, an absence of alcohol will be equally fatal. What it will amount to is that no character in a serious drama will be able to drink anything, for there is something inherently comic in a non-alcoholic drink. Why this should be so, it is hard to say: but the fact remains that, if the Japanese butler brought in a tray of soft drinks at the beginning of the big scene, no audience would take it seriously.

The American dramatist is in for a thin time. Already he is badly handicapped by the fact that people in America do not have titles. Where Pinero can call a man The Gay Lord Quex and establish his social standing and even his character by merely mentioning the name, the American dramatist has had to waste most of his first act elaborately planting the information that his Mister Quex is rich, petted by Society, and altogether more spectacular than the common run of men. And now they are going to take away his drink,—the one thing that makes men do things and say things that lead to dramatic complications. If cigarettes go too, as the reformers threaten they will, then Heaven help the poor fellow.

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