

MORALS IN THE TWO-A-DAY

BY MARIAN SPITZER

IN all the talk and to-do about the censorship of the stage and screen, the one branch of popular entertainment that has been considered by all the authorities, self-constituted and otherwise, to be so pure that it needs no Christian supervision is vaudeville. The heir of Comstock, Mr. John S. Sumner, has not once risen up in wrath against the corrupting influence of the two-a-day, and the Baptist pope, the Rev. John Roach Straton, hasn't even bothered to mention it in his laudable and impassioned discourses. To the contrary, eminent moralists of all wings and from all over the country, both clerical and lay, have endorsed the vaudeville theatre as an almost ideal scene of amusement for the whole family, from grandma to the baby. Not long ago, indeed, a Brooklyn woman wrote a letter to E. F. Albee, president of the Keith Circuit, saying that the New York Hippodrome, open last season as a vaudeville house, was the one place of entertainment she could attend on the Sabbath and still feel that she was in direct communion with her God.

All this must be very gratifying to Mr. Albee, especially when he recalls the struggles of the legitimate stage to escape the clutches of the blue noses, and the high and mighty attitude of producers and public when vaudeville first emerged from the scarlet shadows of what used to be called variety. This Mr. Albee, now a man in his sixties, has devoted most of his life to refining and embellishing vaudeville. He has worked fifteen hours a day for more than a third of a century to bring it to its present high virtue and dignity. It is to him that all the credit must go for clean-

ing up an institution that was looked upon by our grandparents as a sewer of iniquity.

It was in October, 1885, when he was still a young man, but already enjoying a considerable reputation as a circus showman, that he joined forces with the late Benjamin Franklin Keith, who was then running a tiny store-show in Washington Street in Boston, and so began his long and eminent career. Business was then bad with Keith, and young Albee suggested that the two throw in a performance of "The Mikado" with the mermaid, the midget and the tattooed man. Five hundred dollars was raised for the production, and the little show-house was cleaned up, front and back. Thus was launched the first variety theatre in the United States that was clean physically and the first that ever made a bid for the patronage of decent and decorous people.

"Variety houses of those days," Mr. Albee has since said, referring to this historic beginning, "were filthy places. No attempt was made to beautify the auditorium or to purify the atmosphere of the stage. We were tremendous believers in plenty of soap and water, in fresh paint for the house, and in a *strict censorship of the stage*."

But it was hard work and it took a long time to convince the suspicious Bostonians that the little theatre was a correct place for the family to attend. Finally, however, the bolder spirits among the right people began to come, and after that the word variety, with its odious connotations, was banished, and vaudeville was substituted. It came from the French, as learned philologists will tell you.

II

The first real triumph of the Albee idea came with the opening of the B. F. Keith Theatre in Boston in 1894. When this house, built at a cost of more than a million dollars, threw open its doors, one of the first persons to attend was the late Mrs. Jack Gardner, a distinguished social moth of the last generation. After that the other fashionables of the city flocked in, and vaudeville was established once and for all time as correct and righteous. Meanwhile, the famous old Union Square Theatre in New York, which had been remodeled into a vaudeville house, was making rapid progress in the same direction, and E. F. Albee suddenly saw his dream fulfilled.

This fulfillment, however, did not make him relax his meticulous vigilance. He realized that if he wished to maintain the lofty standard he had set for his theatres, and to keep them free from the grasp of the censor, he would have to maintain a censorship of his own, and to that end he formulated a code of ethics to be observed by all who played in his houses. This code still survives, and it is enforced with the utmost rigor. The performers themselves, save for one or two eminent exceptions, have nothing to do with it. Mr. Albee and his associates constitute the legislature, the judiciary and the police. They make the laws and see that they are enforced. Justice is exact and harsh, and no offender ever escapes.

The average vaudeville performer, alas, is burdened with very little sense of his high moral obligation to his public. A simple man, he has only one aim in life—to make that public laugh. If it shows a disposition to laugh at a "blue" line or an off-color story or a suggestive piece of business, it is his lamentable tendency to give it just that. To restrain him there are the laws aforesaid, which fall into two categories. One applies to morals properly so called and the other merely to behavior. First of all, no avowedly immoral character may be presented on the stage of a

Keith theatre. Ladies of easy virtue are frowned upon as unsuitable for the family trade. This ruling, however applies only to characters on the stage. The private lives of their delineators are not gone into. But moral purity is not enough. Vaudeville must not only be pure; it must also be purged of every possible taint of vulgarity; it must be refined. Thus the words hell and damn are absolutely and irrevocably barred from the vaudevillian's vocabulary. If an act should employ the old song, "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here!" it would have to finish the refrain with "what the *heck* do I care!"

What the reactions of the audiences are to this particular manifestation of regard for their finer feelings I have often wondered. For the most part they seem to think it's rather cunning. They invariably laugh indulgently when some romper-clad sister act, harmonizing acutely, trips to the edge of the footlight trough and coyly warbles:

Violets in the meadow,
Roses in the dell,
I kicked my brother in the pants
And ran like [*a kittenish pause*]—well!

III

Apart from the absolute prohibition of even the most indirect and constructive lewdness, the hell and damn edict, and a general, humane rule against any reference to such personal afflictions as cross-eyes, wens, lameness and insanity, the code of ethics of vaudeville, like that of the world outside, is largely geographical. Jokes that get by, as the vaudevillains say, in Toledo, Ohio, are under a diocesan ban in Providence, R. I., while wheezes that are regarded as simply too lascivious for utterance in Lynn, Mass., are quite lawful in such Byzantine centers as Detroit, Mich. Curiously enough, it has happened more than once that an act that has toured the entire hinterland without meeting with any difficulties has come a dreadful cropper in New York—and at the Palace in Times Square, of all places!

A very interesting example of this occurred last Autumn, when the celebrated tragedienne, Mme. Alla Nazimova, having worked her way East from California in George Middleton's one-act play, "The Unknown Lady," opened at the Palace on a Monday afternoon. In this sketch Mme. Nazimova enacted the character of a poor street girl who was hired by a wealthy roué to serve as evidence in his wife's divorce suit. The play, unfortunately, was an undisguised piece of propaganda against the divorce laws of New York. It was received with wild enthusiasm by the entire Palace audience, a large section of which (particularly the Monday afternoon crowd) would undoubtedly welcome a radical amelioration of the divorce laws. But there was at least one auditor who did not cheer like the rest, and that single dissenter was no less a personage than Father Kelly, an extremely handsome young priest, who is sometimes referred to by Broadway as "Cardinal Hayes's yes man."

Father Kelly, instead, grew violently exercised over the sketch, and at its conclusion bounded up six flights of stairs to Mr. Albee's sanctum. A hasty conference was called, and that night "The Unknown Lady" did not go on. The next afternoon Mme. Nazimova was presented by Mr. Albee with a check for \$15,000—her salary for the five remaining weeks of her contract. There was no quarrel and no repining. Everything was very friendly. It was simply that Mr. Albee, on mature consideration, had agreed with Father Kelly that "The Unknown Lady" wasn't quite the thing to set before his clients. If he had known the nature of the play in the first place he would never have consented to its booking. Of course, it had played every big vaudeville house from the Pacific to the Atlantic, but Mr. Albee, who is a very busy man, somehow hadn't learned a thing about its subversive doctrine until Father Kelly brought it to his attention.

Just ahead of Mme. Nazimova on this bill was a song and dance team which

featured a ditty called "Mamma Loves Papa." The words of the chorus follow:

Mamma loves papa,
Papa loves mamma;
Everything's dandy, sweet as can be;
Nothing to hurry, nothing to worry me.
I'm so contented, mighty good reason,
Mamma loves squeezin', papa does too.
Nothing can break us,
Nothing can make us blue.
We've got a bungalow, and oh, what a time we
have!
Such wonderful bliss!
Spoonin', croonin', sweet honeymoonin',
And the secret is this:
Mamma says yes and papa says yes,
And people who yes are happy, I guess,
Cause mamma loves papa, and papa loves mamma
too.

Also on the bill was a tabloid musical comedy in which two girls sang a song entitled "Why Did She Keep Him After School?" The exact words elude me at the moment, but the song was based upon a Rabelaisian story widely circulated along Broadway. Both of these songs remained on the bill all week.

When the Nazimova play was canceled it was replaced by a comedy sketch of long standing and great popularity, called "The Cherry Tree." It details the adventures of one George Washington Cohen, who cannot tell a lie. Five years before, almost to the day, Harry Green, star of the act, had been canceled at the Palace after the Monday matinée for presenting George Washington Cohen as conversing with St. Peter at the gates of heaven.

A few weeks after the cancellation of "The Unknown Lady," an eminent moving-picture actor came to the Palace in a one-act play which consisted mainly of a monologue in which he described graphically the betrayal of his boyhood sweetheart and her subsequent life of shame. But it wasn't considered immoral, apparently because the scarlet woman was only talked of. She didn't actually appear.

Speaking of scarlet women recalls a rather deft little one-act comedy in which a popular star of the legitimate stage made her vaudeville début. It was canceled after two weeks because, although the heroine

argued that although she wasn't exactly scarlet, she admitted that she might be "a little pink." Another time a well-known dance director produced a girl act at the Palace. Among other things was a scene in which a well-proportioned damsel posed in the altogether, immersed in a bath of fire consisting of strips of orange tissue paper blown upward by an electric fan. According to the lighting plot of the act, the maiden was supposed to be bathed also in very dim lights, so that her outlines would not be too definitely revealed. But there was a slip-up in the directions, or else the electrician had a sense of humor, for instead of being chastely suggested, the girl's form was sharply silhouetted in the glare of a bright white spot. The audience seemed to enjoy it, and gave no indication of having sustained a shock, but apparently it was too much for the booking heads. Within twenty-four hours an edict went forth declaring that from that time on, forever more, all women playing the circuit must wear stockings.

IV

All provincial vaudeville managers, on scrutinizing their shows on Monday afternoons, are authorized to delete at their own discretion anything that seems to them immoral or unrefined. A record of these deletions, or cuts, as they are called in the profession, is sent to the New York booking office, where they are filed for future reference. A glance at some of the cuts on record is most interesting, although rather unenlightening as to what motivates the deletions.

In Pittsburgh the manager asked a well-known blackface comedian to cut the line, "Catfish don't have kittens." The same manager requested an equally well-known jazz singer, 90 per cent of whose charm lies in her engaging vulgarity, to omit the line, "There's nothing out there you can't get in here," from a song entitled "Mamma Goes Where Papa Goes, or Papa Don't Go Out Tonight." The chorus, which the

singer was permitted to use, undeleted, runs as follows:

Cause mamma goes where papa goes
Or papa don't go out tonight!
Mamma goes cause mamma knows
You can't be trusted out of her sight.
Mamma's got a feelin' that she must be near,
Just to help her papa keep his conscience clear,
So mamma goes where papa goes
Or papa don't go out tonight!

Oh, I've had plenty daddies and you ain't the worst,
But your mamma here believes in safety first.
Any married woman will admit I'm right,
A husband in your home is worth a dozen out of sight!
So mamma goes where papa goes
Or papa don't go out tonight.

A monologist in Troy, N. Y., was asked not to use the words "Ferry Street."

In Toledo, Ohio, spitting on the stage is considered to be not in good taste.

In Cincinnati the aforesaid song, "Mamma Loves Papa," was deleted in its entirety.

Boston doesn't permit the simile, "as weak and helpless as a German mark."

At the Palace, in New York, an act was ordered to omit the line, "Washington is famous for its marble domes."

In Pittsburgh an act was ordered to "substitute dickens for devil" and to omit the line, "I've been studying abroad."

In a Brooklyn theatre an act was requested to modify the line, "Give us this day our daily bread, yo ho ho, and a bottle of rum!"

In Louisville it is considered vulgar to use the word "nightshirts". Also "hot dog" is vulgar.

In a number of theatres an acrobatic dancer was advised to "please keep your hands away from your seat after the fall," but in the same towns a famous female headliner, whose maneuvers with her caboose are frequent and various, was paid a thousand dollars a week for doing just that and little else.

Thus vaudeville grows purer and purer every day. Even burlesque, its humble neighbor, has started an official drive for refinement, taking its tone from that of

the two-a-day. A few weeks ago there was made public a letter from Sam A. Scribner, head of the Columbia Burlesque Wheel, laying a stern interdict upon vulgarity in his theatres.

"There is going to be no room on the Columbia Wheel for any producer or performer who cannot give a strictly clean entertainment," said Mr. Scribner. Among the words forever banned were hell, damn, God, cock-eyed liar, son-of-a-gun and son-

of-a-Polack. Shimmy dancing which shakes the breasts is now out of burlesque, but so long as it is confined to the shoulders it is all right. Thumbing the nose is out, too.

Burlesque, obviously, is taking a leaf from the book of vaudeville. Pretty soon there'll be nothing left for people who want to enjoy a good old-fashioned rough-house evening save the high-priced Broadway revues.

AMERICANA

ARKANSAS

DISPATCH from the up and coming Arkansas town of Stuttgart in the *Little Rock Gazette*:

The Rev. Dr. M. M. Culpepper, pastor of the Grand Avenue Methodist Church, in discussing National Music Week at the request of the local Musical Club, scored the members for devoting their time to the study of grand opera, which, he said, "no one can understand, and if they did, it would do them no good."

SOCIETY note from the instructive *Little Rock Daily News*:

Much improvement was shown in the condition of Diamond Joe Sullivan today, according to a physician's report, and his complete recovery is believed assured. When attendants report him completely out of danger, Governor McRae is expected to fix the day of his execution.

COLORADO

SWEET, juicy and affecting words of the eloquent *Denver News* when the Kiwanis Clubs came to town:

The strangers within our gates, coming under their banners of Blue and White, symbols of Idealism and Purity, are well worthy to hold the keys to this, the Halfway House of the Continent. They are engaged in a great undertaking.

They are raising a structure to the Known God which all who love their fellows may worship without question. Its cornerstone is Fair-dealing; its archstone is Charity, which is Love. Its pillars are Comradeship, Service, Tolerance, Helpfulness. Those who would view the Kiva which Kiwanians are building must have their mortal eyes opened, their vision cleansed, their minds made responsive to what the building stands for, otherwise they are blind and cannot see it, much less enter it. To appreciate the work being done the spirit must be aroused in man. This temple is not being constructed of dead brick and stone and of timber that must decay. The material which we have in mind is of a different character and, strange to state, it grows stronger with the years and the added weight which it may be called on to carry. It is a structure being built of good deeds with humanity's trowel. The cement is not of blood wrenched from the suffering of the weak and oppressed. The bindery is all-embracing, delicately made of generous deeds and the heartbeats of man toward his fellowman. Within it are rods of steel made of the muscles of heroes. The spans are of the handclasps of Kiwan-

ians and the spans are not dead but living, ever-expanding, having no limit to their reach.

In the Holy of Holies is an Altar to Childhood. It is veiled with gossamer robes of Charity. It is for the one who by the laws of Karma is born into the world with a handicap for which it cannot be held responsible. On that Altar grown man enters his heart purified to remove the handicap upon the child and give it a start in the world. When he enters the sacred place he becomes as a child himself, with the heart of a child, and it is good for him to be there.

The temple-builders are not of one nation or of one blood. They believe in Internationalism that does not take away the right kind of patriotism. They believe in the day "when man to man the world o'er brothers shall be and all that."

Within the temple they gather in a spirit of perfect equality. Their businesses and professions are many, but they are as one under the Kiwani banner. They have come together to know one another better, to make life more cheerful, to give encouragement to the weak and faltering in a true spirit of fellowship and comradeship.

Not that men are poor;
All men know something of poverty.
Not that men are wicked;
Who can claim to be good?
Not that men are ignorant;
Who can boast that he is wise?
But that men are strangers!

The International Convention of Kiwanis Clubs represents a power for good in this world that has lost in recent years several of its sociological props. We ask that Denver give to the Kiwanians this week what the Kiwanians would do as Kiwanians to one another, and to man his brother wherever the Kiwanian hand-clasp can reach.

ILLINOIS

New questionnaire for the detection of 100 per cent Americans, prepared by the Americanization committee of the Chicago Klavern of the American Legion:

Do you tell the truth about your income tax?
Do you patronize bootleggers?
Are you a motor speeder? If so, when you get "pinched," do you try to "fix" the cop?
Do you do your duty at the polls?
Do you try to evade jury service?
Would you volunteer for another war?
Have you applied for a reserve commission?