

What Price the Modern Boy? XV.6. Crooked Amusements.

"That is there to do but dance?" This is the universal and crushing retort of the budding apostates who insist that the Fort Wayne diocese is all wrong about Saturday and Sunday dancing. It is a pitiable confession of mediocrity. It is quite true that if dancing is all a fellow can do he is in a bad way for amusement on Saturday and Sunday evenings. But if his stunted intelligence and jaded nerves can find no other relaxation than in the jerk and sway of the modern dance, what in the name of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is he doing in college -- particularly at Notre Dame.

Modern amusements are the product of crooked minds. Their inventors and producers are, like the rest of the world, bent on making money. They know that God endowed human nature with strong appetites, which serve, governed by reason, for the preservation of the individual and of the race. These producers know, moreover, that the appetites become hard masters when they are not held in check, that they will suck blood for satiation when reason steps down and lets them have full sway. They know that the more the beastly appetites are aroused, the more money their possessors will pay for their satisfaction. The formula is a good one; it works.

What has happened to the theatre? Fifteen years ago there were two theatres in South Bend, the Oliver and the Auditorium, with full-season bills of fine, clean shows. There was a good run of drama, with a sprinkling of melodrama, a bit of Shakespeare, an Irish singer or two; four or five police plays of the Jimmy Valence type; and half a dozen musical shows that were clean, if not particularly elevating. A popular play could run three or four performances in South Bend with its 50,000 population.

The nickelodeon brought changes. People who could have been elevated by a drama at two bits for a gallery seat rushed with their nickels to be thrilled by the new invention. Degradation came quickly; for it was found that daring things brought uproarious applause from the darkened house. Then the theatre found that it could be just as daring as the movie, that mediocre talent could make big money by being dirty. An excited populace ran from one dirty show to another; censorship blurbs were found to be the best advertising; Shuberts played to packed houses -- for three months, or until all the evil-minded people in New York, resident and transient, had seen the show. Avery Hopgood made a fortune while scarce out of college; all the budding talent followed his lead of coining licentiousness into dollars. The producers have all fallen in line.

This is the theatre of the modern boy; this, even more than literature, gives him his philosophy of life. He may have qualms of conscience when alone in his room he reads a bad book; in the theatre he finds the world applauding what his mother told him was not so much as to be mentioned among Christians. Perhaps you can't blame him so much if he can't appreciate an art gallery or a classical recital or a decent book, if he feels that ideals are Victorian and outrageously out-of-date, if he believes that every woman is at heart a wanton; that's all he's ever learned from the applause in the theatre.

The dance hall and the cabaret take up where the theatre leaves off. With degraded principles established, it is easy to turn such simple things as eating and dancing into crooked amusements. One is no smart unless he is a personal friend of the head waiter at all the five-dollar-cover-charge roadhouses and is broadminded enough to travel them with a divorced woman on his arm. Call these things amusement if you like; they are crooked amusements because they hold out a hope of something they can't give. Sin can never satisfy the soul.

PRAYERS: Tom Farrell asks prayers for his uncle who died yesterday.