

A NIGHT IN THE MILLION DOLLAR SLUMS

WHEN this "drama critic" was a boy growing up on the East Side, he usually spent his Friday night in the gallery of one of two disreputable burlesque houses, Miner's or the London Theatre, both on the Bowery.

Other nights, after sweating through a ten, twelve and even fourteen hour day for the Adams Express Company, juggling 1,000-pound crates of machinery and the like, the author's Guardian Angel might have discovered him (had that derby-hatted, slimy-winged, double-crossing, racketeering heeler of a Tammany God ever cared) in the dirty cellar gymnasium of a Catholic church.

With his gang of seventeen-year-old savages, here the future critic boxed, wrestled and otherwise received his "lumps." It was that period of adolescence when a healthy boy is infatuated with his own muscles and body. Your critic, during those formative years, had no higher prayer than to grow up into as good a scrapper as clean little Frankie Burns, later to become a lightweight champion,

but who then labored in the same branch of the Adams Express as our hero.

Our author, little knowing the literary fate before him, had also no use for books. He hadn't read one since graduating from the same public school as Gyp the Blood, a gunman of yesteryear. The author laid the foundations of his culture by studying the sporting pages, and as a faithful weekly worshipper of the chorus line in the burlesque houses aforementioned.

The admission to the gallery of these theatres was ten cents. There were no seats, only tiers of splintery wooden steps to sit on. One went with one's gang, because there was always sure to be some serious fighting. The squads of gallery bouncers earned their pay; for the roughneck audience always made it a point of honor to see how much one could get away with. They yelled insults at singers and dancers who did not please them ("You stink!" was a favorite critical epithet); they threw beer bottles or took a punch at neighbors who had offended them by daring to exist in the same world.

After the show the boys often drank a great many beers, and some continued their education by visiting one of the numerous Tammany temples of feminine physiology where the admission was fifty cents. Well, it was all sordid, physical, brutalizing, but it was all we knew, and there was some fun and vitality in it, anyway. At least it did not pretend to be anything it wasn't; and no chattering slummers like Gilbert Seldes as yet had come from Harvard, and Santayana, and Matisse and Gertrude Stein, to discover this gutter life, and deepen its degradation by that foulest of all bourgeois degeneracies, the aesthete's delight in the "picturesque" side of mass poverty.

With these introductory remarks I will confess to hav-

ing attended recently a performance of the Ziegfeld Follies. The intellectual drama critics of New York have surrounded these shows with a great deal of glamor; they write of such Broadway spectacles with high aesthetic seriousness: it is obviously a drama critic's duty to appraise these revues; and for the sake of the *New Masses*, I went to one.

Report: There was an underwater ballet, à la poor dead Pavlova, with a sweaty baritone singing a sentimental ballad on a bridge. The fake waves shivered, and there was pseudo-Egyptian music. Then a young Broadway imitation of a man, a hooper with patent-leather hair, hoofed it with a good-looking chorine and sang a fake love ballad, with a refrain something like this: "I Like the Likes of You." The chorus came on; fifty athletic girls in silver hats and gold pants. They danced and sang something. Another hooper danced a few variations on the old buck-and-wing, that only a Negro boy knows how to dance; all others are bleached and tasteless imitations of the real thing. A satire on the country "tryout" theatres so numerous last summer, the chief humor being about the fact that the farmer sells both tickets and eggs; also some cracks about a nudist colony, and the key to the outhouse.

One good line: "This is a society play, no belching here, just rape and adultery."

Climax: "I want you to meet my husband": and the heroine lifts a window and reveals the rear end of a horse.

Song: A tall drugstore blonde in white rayon decorated with a large gold cross sings a sob song about "suddenly" being a stranger to the man she loves, and fifty good-looking broads in gold and silver and platinum

dresses suddenly dance on and sing and dance the same song, "Suddenly."

Another sappy love duet by another patent-leather hair hooper and girl; then another big blonde beauty with a hard face comes on and struts around exhibiting *her* rear end. A brisk young Englishman delivers a monologue, in the old stammer style; a few good lines: "America as a nation is too laxative"; "While one is keeping the wolf from the door, the stork flies in"; "Yes, you are a great nation, you have built yourself up from nothing to a state of extreme poverty"; and there was a Barber College Glee Club, which sang a really funny oratorio, pretentious and solemn, on the theme of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf." During this, the chief comedian kept looking down into the beefy breasts of one of the lady singers, weighing them with his hands, etc. (Laughter, applause.)

The chorus appears, dressed in another variation of gold and silver; some humor about homosexuals in a Greenwich Village scene; five more repetitions of the stale young love and hoofing duet; a skit about George Washington and the cherry tree; the reviewing stand of a New York parade, with a trace of satire: "It was seven lawyers who covered Wiggin"; then that good old clown Fanny Brice as the Countess Olga sings sadly about her lost grandeur in Russia, and now she has been reduced to doing a nude fan dance in Minsky's burlesque show; then a false sentimental pacifist song, "You got sunshine, you got life, why must you fight and die?" etc.; and a male dancer in a gold trench helmet and gold tights waving a gold flag at the climax; more chorus girls in tinsel, silver and gold, again and again, trotting on and off.

"You're so lovable, you're so kissable, your beauty is

unbeatable, to me it's unbelievable," they sang, and a chorus boy dressed in gold satin and lace of a priest married them in front of Franklin Simon's upper-class department store, and there was a Maxfield Parrish art tableau to follow, and the tall, mean, slouchy blonde truthfully sang to the audience:

*"You're still seduced
By marcel waves
And not by
Marcel Proust."*

In the audience one sees all the big sellers and buyers of New York and the Tammany lawyers and Yale-Harvard boys and their enameled sweethearts; and business Napoleons with severe horse-faced wives from the suburbs; *Saturday Evening Post* writers (in the chips), stock brokers, politicians, clothing bosses, hotel owners, sheriffs, on visits from Georgia and Montana; race track bookies; high powered steel salesmen and shoelace promoters; white shirt fronts, evening gowns; cold, beautiful, empty faces, vivacious dumb faces; hard empty male faces, senile old rounder faces; young sleek worthless faces; the faces of those who "succeed" in New York—New York, to which all the successful exploiters and parasites of America come once a year to see the Follies.

This is the peak of their art and culture. The show I saw was no better or worse than all the other shows of its kind. In fact, it was the same show with a few variations. It was the same show, more or less, that I once saw as a boy for ten cents on the Bowery; and many of the jokes had not even been changed for this audience, though some of them paid \$6.60 for their seats.

On the Bowery we had access to nothing better; but these people had every door to life open and could have made a deliberate choice. And this was their choice, this brainless, soulless parade of sterility. This was what they wanted, and it was given them. It was beautiful in its overlavishness, its vulgar parvenu attempt at gold and silver luxury. In this glittering temple a smelly corpse was being worshipped. The audience did not believe in its own laughter; the actors in their own performance. It all meant nothing. It did not amuse. It was inhuman as any robot. Its satire was that of the coward avoiding any politically dangerous theme; its sensuality that of the courtesan; false love, false music, false golden glamor.

This bourgeois form of art for art's sake is no longer worthy of one's comment or attack. It has only one useful purpose that I can still see: it numbs the minds of the exploiters. Let them continue to support it and be stultified. But I hope they raise the pay of the chorus girls, who, poor kids, are as skillful, disciplined, and overworked as the men on Ford's conveyor belt.