# After Dinner Gossip

AND

## Echoes of the Week

**Plays Which Should Not Be Played.**

A considerable amount of correspondence has reached this office concerning Sudermann's so-called sensational play, "The Fires of St. John," and certain criticisms on the same which appeared in the columns of the "Graphic" devoted to drama, the bulk of the letters coming from those who had seen the play down South or in Australia. The question raised, either in the affirmative or negative, is mainly this: "Should such plays be tolerated on the public stage or no?" And be it said at once, the answer is by no means entirely easy to find. In specific instances, the difficulty would, of course, not be serious, but the danger is in creating a precedent. The censor of plays may be, would seem to be, in fact, a necessary being; but it cannot be denied that he has on occasion proved a very mischievous one to the cause of dramatic art, and that some individuals who have held the position have proved hopelessly narrow-minded, and have created a general impression that the office ought to be done away with. We of the English breed do not love censors, or at all events censors as individuals. Public opinion is the safest, best, and most effective censorship to our minds. With regard to the censorship of plays, one must admit certain plays are unplayable, and Sudermann's "The Fires of St. John" is one of these, but not because an "incident" is unprintably disgusting and obscene, for in that case you must logically rute out of court that cheap religious melodrama, "The Sign of the Cross," But the point is that in "The Fires of St. John" the "incident" and the "just in time" turning out of the lights and quick curtain, are doubly offensive, because they tre the sole raison d'etre of the play, which, as said last week, labouriously burrows its way through alternate drivel and filth to the dirty point striven after, and then crawls away from it tiresomely as ever. In "The Sign of the Cross" the "incident" between Marcus and Mercia in the act where, after locking all the doors, Marcus proceeds to pursue the lady round the stage, the intention is equally obvious, the "incident" equally indecent. Place the characters in modern evening dress, translate the place and period of the play from pagan Rome to the drawing-room of to-day, and can you honestly say one "incident" is worst than the other? Scarcely, but the extenuation remains for the "Sign of the Cross" that the "incident" is merely an "incident." The play could exist without it, and though cheap and clap-trap in sentiment enough, "The Sign" has an effect on some minds, and a good effect at that. Its ultimate lesson—what there is of it—is for good. Sudermann, on the contrary, is only fit for the sewer, so far, at all events, as "The Fires of St. John" go. But the danger of unplayable plays lies not so much in such as those we have mentioned, but in such as are really clever, and appeal to reason, to intellect, and the logical sequence of thing. Take, for example, the latest case, George Bernard Shaw's "Mrs Warren's Profession" recently interdicted in New York. There is no single "incident," no situation, in this remarkable and brilliantly written play to which exception can be taken as to those in "The Fires of St. John," "The Sign of the Cross," "The Gay Lord Quex" (one of the worst, by the way), and others. Yet for mischief it holds an infinite greater capacity, and the broadest or most careless-minded man would admit after reading it that such a play would work incalculable harm if played on the stage by a competent company. The play is brilliant, its dialogue sparkles, the logical arguments of the principal character are forceful to an almost terrifying degree, and just because of all these things it is a play which cannot, must not, be allowed to be played. In squashing its performance New York did right. For very obvious reasons it is undesirable to say much in detail of the play or its plot. Let this suffice, Mrs. Warren has amassed a fortune out of conducting or rather managing on an extensive scale what Kipling has called the "oldest profession in the world." She and her partner have "establishments" in all the principal European cities, and on their capital of £40,000 they get a return of at least 35 per cent. "even in worst years." Of all this, needless to say, one sees nothing on the stage, and save in a couple of speeches it is little alluded to in the dialogue, which brims with wit, with caustic sayings, and "very palpable hits" at society and the world in general The woman has a daughter, beautiful and innocent, and brought up at Newnham, where she is "equal third wrangler." She is a direct fine charactered English girl of 22, who is in entire ignorance of how the money has been made which provides her with everything. She has, in fact, barely seen her mother since childhood. Once she meets her "impossible" but all good-natured and affectionate parent, and some of her men associates; she dimly suspects something, but not the truth. This, however, comes out, and in the explanation and justification of her conduct the woman Warren entirely takes the sympathy of the audience. Mr. Shaw has given her one of the most terribly forceful speeches one has ever read, and the whole danger of the play lies not in anything unpleasant on the stage, not in offensive dialogue (there is not a double entendre in the play, not a single immoral situation), but in the damnable plausibility and almost convincing justification of Mrs. Warren's explanation and exculpation. This is special pleading, so intensely clever, so passionate, so half true, that it might easily send half a theatre full of girls home, with the idea that after all immorality under certain circumstances is not so shocking. A play like this would do mischief.—mischief horrible and intolerable. Whether Sudermann does much one is inclined to doubt. He is too dull. There is little harm in revolting people, if little good; but to so cleverly paint and disguise vice as to almost make it appear virtue—that, indeed, may and can work dreadful harm, and the censor would, therefore, appear still a necessity.

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**Shadow-Catching.**

The man without a hobby must find life pretty miserable. How he fills in his time I don't know. The men of my acquaintance who are hobby-less are very helpless specimens of the human kind, and would in all probability be most unsatisfactory people to live with. Woman seems created to spend her enthusiasm on a variety of interests, and if she has a pronounced hobby she is apt to ride it to death and become tiresome. Man is such a vacillating mortal that he wants a pretty keen hobby to give him a rallying point, as it were. Those compass-less mortals who up till now have wobbled through the world without a hobby should make a vow this very summer to wipe out the stain and join the ranks of that vast army which will never need compulsory conscription which "Bobs" is advocating from the housetops for another and more belligerent army, I mean, of course, the noble army of "shadow-catchers," or photographers. Buy a camera and be busy—and perhaps even happy. At all events you will be less nuisance to your friends—unless you persist in wanting to take their portraits, in which case you will probably make more enemies than you did in your ante-camera days. Don't be deluded into becoming the embarrassed possessor of the most expensive instrument on the market, with about half a hundredweight of accessories and chemicals, the names of which you will forget as soon as you have learned them. Just buy a cheap quarter plate stand or box camera, and never mind whether the lens is homocentric or any other "centric." Just potter about with your "cigar-box and bit of window glass," as your superior friend with the twin-lens or the aristocratic reflex will dub your humble weapon, and you will be surprised what a lot of fun and pleasure you can get out of it—profitable pleasure. The day you buy a camera marks a new era in your appreciation of Mother Nature. Looking at the world through a photographic lens seems to widen instead of restrict one's vision, and the study of light and shadow, which photography demands, educates the eye to see things in land and sea and sky which you never dreamed existed. Colour and form and lighting are no longer meaningless terms, but cover a field of fascinating beauty, of which you regret you had been so long ignorant. By all means buy or beg a camera. If you once start the odds are pretty good that you will never cast it aside, or if you do it will only be to take on a more expensive and elaborate one. Also, if you get anything specially good send it along to "The Graphic" and have the pleasure of seeing your handiwork embalmed in all the glory of the wonderful half-tone process.

# Wise and Otherwise

Yet another inducement to go on the land. Longfellow has made one familiar with a banner bearing a strange device, but "Excelsior" is quite eclipsed as regards strangeness by a banner or sign I saw displayed outside a hall in one of the suburbs of Auckland, upon which was emblazoned this cryptic message, "Sow alcohol, reap drunkenness." A friend of mine, who occasionally looks upon the wine when it is ruby, invariably replies to solicitous friends inquiring after his health: "Only so-so." I believe now that "so-so" should be spelt with a "w;" but even so, how would one set about the operation? I have attempted "planting" alcohol on a small scale, but that ended disastrously—it was only a small flask too, which I tried to secrete from the vigilance of two old-maid sisters who were so intemperate as to be fanatics on the question of total abstinence. However, to leave the difficulties, and look, as would dear old Dr. Pangloss upon the bright side of things, the harvesting should be easy work. I have heard of "self-raising flours," and since drunkards are invariably cut off early (to borrow from our prohibitionist friends' vocabulary) I presume the crop is "self-reaping."

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Having introduced the name of America's great poet at the opening of this matter, I cannot do better at the close, than try to show how one of his best-known poems might read if used for purposes of party politics —

There is a Reaper who, as he walks
Through fields of golden grain,
Heeds not their heavy laden stalks,
But searches with might and main

For flowers to deck a waning cause,
Fit tribute to the dead,
And, questioned, answers without a pause,
In search still, with down-bent head.

"I'm not after grain to-day not me,
But chaff and a flower or two,
And if any grog blossoms you should see
Down your way, let's hear from you."

I see that the "Legion of Frontiersmen" under the presidency of Lord Lonsdale has been established in London, and it is to be hoped that the legion that never was listed will soon have both colours and crest, and with all my heart I offer the toast—

Then a health—we must drink it in whispers—
To the wholly unauthorised horde,
The flue of our dusty "voerloopers,"
Our gentlemen rovers abroad.

The secretary, Mr Roger Pocock, will probably be known to many readers as the author of "The Frontiersman" and a frequent contributor to the principal London magazines. His book tells a portion of his own life to a period of about three years ago, when I had the pleasure of being a fellow-passenger with him homeward bound from Capetown. On board he acted as secretary to the Sports and Amusements Committees, of both of which I was chairman. I never met a man of more amiable character, nor one more truly a gentleman. He had just completed his term of service with the National Scouts in South Africa; but prior to that had spent a considerable time in the North-western Provinces of Canada and Alaska, as member of the redoubtable North-western Mounted Police, as a miner and as a missionary and doctor amid a tribe of Indians with not another white man within some 200 miles. He was a charming companion and most skilful raconteur. I have most pleasant memories connected with the last evening we spent together after dining at that famous old inn, the "Old Cheshire Cheese," in Fleet-street. Now that he is again within reach of the postman I hope to have some interesting news for my readers with reference to the "Legion."

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I note that an insurance company having its head office in Dunedin has been sued lately in another centre for the amount of premiums paid, with interest, over a period of five years. The insurer was assured that at the expiration of the term mentioned she would be able to draw in cash the surrender