

TOWARDS the end of last century good theatrical companies began to visit New Zealand. Before that we had been too poor and insignificant, and above all, too puritanical to attract much talent. Bland Holt and another company that gave us melodrama sticky with sentiment had been my sole experiences, but my husband was a born theatre fan. It happened that his work at that time took him to Wellington weekly. He would return glowing with some play he had seen and would urge me to go and see it. He took me to the Brouchs—my first real play. When it came again, *Dandy Dick* as its masterpiece, was given as a benefit for the contingent departing for the Boer War. The emotional Mrs. Brough wept copiously in giving her farewell speech. Nellie Stewart in *Peg Woffington*, *Sweet Nell*, and others opened my eyes and heart to theatre. A large party from Levin went down to that. Howard Vernon and the Castle girls brought Gilbert and Sullivan to Wellington, and it ran so long that grand opera followed. Both these I saw with my student brother, who, afraid of wasting time, studied till the curtain went up.

A SPATE of good plays followed. My sister and I had an occasional inexpensive flutter—bed and breakfast and cheap seats. She said, "I want to take you to tea, before the play, with old Aunt and Uncle S., but we must be sure not to mention theatres." This aged couple had been her neighbours—good old folk who had got rich by accident and had never thrown aside a habit or a prejudice or principle that be-

longed to their circumscribed youth.

Their house was an artless museum so full one could barely move; stuffed birds and wax flowers, lumps of coral in tall glass cases, shell and tortoise-shell boxes, ornaments made of seaweed, a map of the world on a large white umbrella, glass penholders full of sweets — everything that had only its age to recommend it.

"Pity yous be going so early. We'll come a bit with ye," volunteered our host.

"What the deuce now?" whispered my sister so that I had much ado to hide laughter in a spasm of coughing.

"Where did you say you were meeting your friend?"

Conversation halted, but they stepped out like chickens and soon we had to explain where the friend was to be met.

"Scots Pie Shop," which, as old Wellingtonians will remember, was directly opposite the old Opera House.

We all arrived there and "just as we suspicioned," no friend awaited. By then I was feeling like a soda-water bottle with the cork half removed and could not have spoken.

"We can wait, can't we, Feyther?" said the old dear.

We saw the theatre filling and heard the orchestra strike up. With a sound



An extract from the unpublished papers of
HELEN WILSON, author of "My First
Eighty Years"

like a hiccough, I said, "I wonder if h'could be waiting at the tram stop?"

"He!" cried the old lady, a young *man!*" If she had said "the devil himself" her voice couldn't have conveyed more horror. Then they drew themselves up and said a curt goodbye to their disappointing guests.

There was a sad and most moving curtain raiser and then a comedy called, I think, "Three Men and a Cab." It concerned a man who told some innocent fib to his wife and got himself so much more and more involved in wriggling out of it, that he was suspected of the worst crimes. Every time the gag, "More

lies! More lies! More lies!" was repeated, with our overstrained emotions, we were ill with laughter.

A LITTLE later a gay, attractive amusing little lady from Melbourne came to live in Levin. She smoked—at that time unfashionable or, to most people, simply shocking. She had an income of her own and an avid appetite for life and its pleasures. She tempted me to take more trips to Wellington than I otherwise should have. Under her influence I outgrew cheap seats.

"We simply must see Wilson Barrett . . ." or "So primitive of us not to see Julius Knight; I'm sure he would need our patronage."

I had at least the remnants of a frugal mind. The best seats were never more than five shillings, but it was necessary to stay the night and hotel bills were another matter.

I found a decayed gentlewoman of overwhelming respectability who would give us bed and breakfast for—I forget, but some ridiculous amount. I would say:

"I'll go if we stay at Mrs. Musdale's."

Reluctantly she agreed, but as soon as we were in the train she would begin speculating on the people we might meet at the Royal Oak (all farmers stayed there), and then:

"Oh, but we aren't going to stay at dear old 'Oakly Poky,' we are to stay at Mrs. Mustibones. Do you really enjoy carrying smelly candles up spooky stairs instead of lights, fires, smart waiter with sherry, etc.?" And then if I was not very wide awake she'd say to the cabman, "Royal Oak please."

ONCE when my economical will had prevailed she came into my room after the play and sat talking beside my bed for an hour or more, I nothing loth. She was always interesting. In the train on our way home she said:

"We can never go to Mrs. Mustibones any more."

"How's that, Lady Luxury?"

"She doesn't like you—she disapproves."

"I suspect it's the company I keep that she doesn't like," I laughed.

"No! Not now. You see I left all my cigarette butts in your candlestick and took mine, nice and white, to my room. She knows now that it's the tall dark one that is fast and bold."

And it was true. The next time we applied to the lady she regretted "no room."

Of course, we did not see all—or even all the best—of the plays that came to New Zealand, but I am always glad I had that orgy, for during most of the years that followed play-going was impossible. The stage has changed quite as much as most other things have changed in my long lifetime. How gay it was then, how rich—plush, velvety and luxurious. No social-problem plays such as those of Ibsen and later G.B.S., which pressed real life on to our consciousness. It was pure entertainment. The men wore tails and the women their gayest gowns and jewels. It was surely right for that day. Two world wars and the shadow of another have induced the thought that it behoves us to consider the problems of our world.

(Solution to No. 557)

G	A	R	D	E	N	S		G	A	P	E	S
A		E		Y		A		L		O		A
L		U	C	R	E		P	R	O	T	E	S
L		R		S			P	R		T		I
E	R	I	N		S	E	D	I	T	I	O	N
R		M		S		R		O		C		
Y	O	I	C	K	S		Q	U	E	L	L	S
	N		I		S		S		J		A	
C	H	A	T	T	E	L	S		I	C	O	N
A		T		T			Q		C		E	D
R	A	I	N	I	N	G			H	E	N	N
E		O		S			A		I		C	L
T	E	N	T	H			N		U	C	L	E

Clues Across

1. Distorted charm, early in the year.
4. Cautious.
7. 6 down winks.
8. "The sixth age shifts
into the lean and — pantaloon."
("As You Like It," Act 2, Scene 7).
10. Hi! cream!!—no, it's only a wild-
cat scheme.
11. This bird (or any other oviparous
creature) could easily be early.

12. See 24 across — and don't accuse
me of — you on!
14. Castor and Pollux.
17. "it is a tale
Told by an —, full of sound and
fury" ("Macbeth," Act 5, Scene 5).
19. Rare gin in this
form goes to your
head.
21. Effluence.
22. Tune.
23. Hearten (anag.).
24. We often read that
this 12 across is
being explored.
- | | | | |
|----|--|---|--|
| 1 | | 2 | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| 7 | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| 10 | | | |

Clues Down

2. Snake, crocodile, turtle, lizard or tortoise?
3. Heats in a hurry.
4. South American 2 down.
5. Rebuff.
6. See 7 across.

No. 558 (Constructed by R.W.C.)

A 25x25 crossword puzzle grid. The grid is black and white, with black squares indicating non-letter positions. Numbers 1 through 24 are placed in the starting squares of the words. The numbers are located at the following coordinates (row, column):

- 1: (1, 1)
- 2: (1, 3)
- 3: (1, 5)
- 4: (1, 7)
- 5: (1, 9)
- 6: (1, 11)
- 7: (2, 1)
- 8: (2, 5)
- 9: (2, 23)
- 10: (3, 1)
- 11: (3, 9)
- 12: (4, 1)
- 13: (4, 5)
- 14: (4, 9)
- 15: (4, 11)
- 16: (4, 13)
- 17: (5, 1)
- 18: (5, 3)
- 19: (5, 7)
- 20: (5, 9)
- 21: (6, 1)
- 22: (6, 11)
- 23: (7, 1)
- 24: (7, 9)