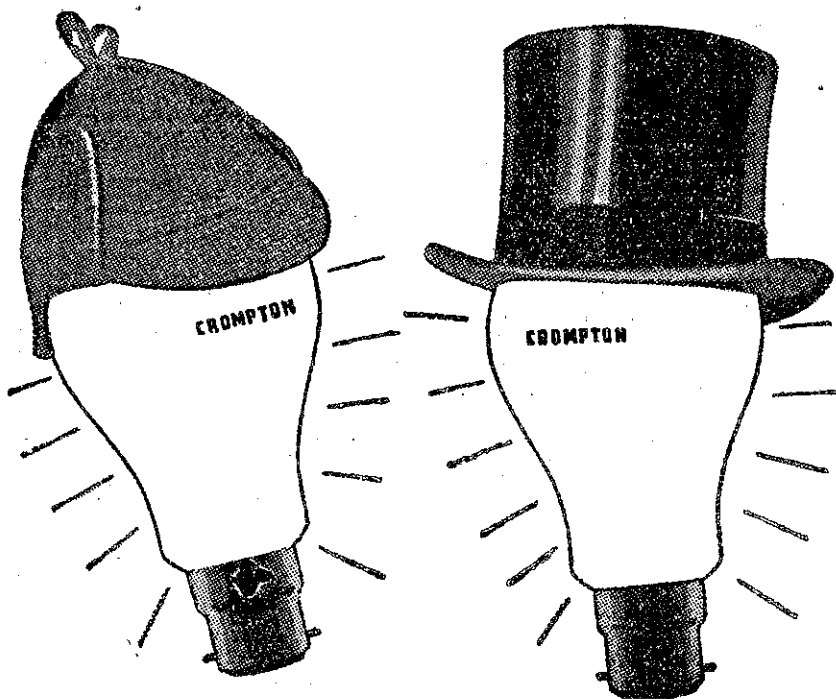


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IMMORTAL MELODRAMA

(Continued from page 12.)

considered a star part for any actress. Although mortally wounded, the pious uncle is allowed to live long enough to bless his nephew and ask forgiveness for his murder.

ANOTHER murder play in which the Government showed an interest, although of a different sort, was "The Gamblers," which was produced at the Surrey Theatre in Blackfriars Road in 1824. The murder with which the play dealt was of such recent date as still to be the talk of the town. The play itself was a poor affair, but its attraction lay in the fact that there was to be seen on the stage the very gig in which the murderer escaped, the identical sofa on which he slept on the night of the murder, the table at which he had supped with his intended victim, and the jug out of which the unsuspecting victim had drunk punch with his murderer-to-be. These "props," vouched for as authentic, drew crowds to see the play; but not for long. The Lord Chamberlain intervened and threatened to close the theatre unless both the play and the offending properties were immediately withdrawn.

MANY of these old melodramas were, as the name suggests, accompanied by appropriate music. For example, in the "Red Barn scene" in "Maria Martin," there was "weird music, agitate forte, to open scene," and "weird music again" to herald in the murderer, Corder. Maria's entrance was preceded by "music like a shriek and a fierce howl of wind." And when Corder exclaimed, "'Tis your fate to die here to-night" there was a "crash of chords." The scene ended with "hurried music."

Despite all these sanguinary villainies, between those who played and those who went to see them there existed a strong bond of affection. John Bradshaw specialised in heavy villain roles, and although he was roundly hissed at every performance he was familiarly known to the audience as "Jack." One night a playgoer in the front row of the gallery stood up and raised above his head a huge stone bottle of beer, and shouted "Hi, Jack! Us and my pals 'ere is going to drink to yer blinkin' good 'ealth." He next demanded silence and proceeded solemnly to circulate the bottle among his companions. Then, having drunk, they all rose in their seats and shouted "Gawd bless yer, Jack!"

MODERN audiences are perhaps a little less responsive, but thousands of English theatre-goers love Tod Slaughter, melodrama specialist, whose company, on perpetual tour, plays to crowded houses all over the British Isles. Tod has been heard over the BBC, too, and has radio fans innumerable. "Maria Martin," "Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street," and several others of the Slaughter repertoire have been put on the air.

And yet a last fact—stranger than any that has gone before. Melodrama to-day defies modernisation. The secret of Tod Slaughter's success is that he plays his parts in traditional fashion. His competitors have tried to bring blood and thunder up to date—and have gone out of business.

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