

# **POPULAR AMUSEMENTS**

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Popular Amusements by Henry Ward Beecher

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BY

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Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou, that for all these *things* God will bring thee into judgment. Eccl. xi. 9.

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## POPULAR AMUSEMENTS

I AM to venture the delicate task of reprehension, always unwelcome, but peculiarly offensive upon topics of public popular amusement. I am anxious, in the beginning, to put myself right with the young. If I satisfy myself, Christian men, and the sober community, and do not satisfy *them*, my success will be like a physician's, whose prescriptions please himself, and the relations, and do good to everybody except the *patient*,—he dies.

Allow me, first of all, to satisfy you that I am not meddling with matters which do not concern me. This is the impression which the patrons and partners of criminal amusements study to make upon your minds. They represent our duty to be *in*



*the church*,—taking care of doctrines, and of our own members. When more than this is attempted; when we speak a word for *you* who are not church-members, we are met with the surly answer; “Why do you meddle with things which don’t concern you? If you do not enjoy these pleasures, why do you molest those who do? May not men do as they please in a free country, without being hung up in a gibbet of public remark?” It is conveniently forgotten, I suppose, that in a free country we have the same right to criticise pleasure, which others have to enjoy it. Indeed, you and I both know, young gentlemen, that in coffee-house circles, and in convivial feasts nocturnal, the Church is regarded as little better than a spectacled old beldam, whose impertinent eyes are spying everybody’s business but her own; and who, too old or too homely to be tempted herself, with compulsory virtue, pouts at the joyous dalliances of the young and gay. Religion is called a nun, sable with gloomy vestments; and the Church a cloister, where ignorance is deemed innocence, and which sends out querulous reprehensions of a world, which it knows nothing about, and has professedly abandoned. This is pretty; and is only defective, in not being true. The

Church is not a cloister, nor her members recluses, nor are our censures of vice intermeddling. Not to dwell in generalities, let us take a plain and common case :

A strolling company offer to educate our youth ; and to show the community the road of morality, which, probably they have not seen themselves for twenty years. We cannot help laughing at a generosity so much above one's means : and when they proceed to hew and hack each other with rusty iron, to teach our boys valor ; and dress up practical mountebanks, to teach theoretical virtue ; if we laugh somewhat more, they turn upon us testily : *Do you mind your own business, and leave us with ours. We do not interfere with your preaching, do you let alone our acting.*

But softly—may not religious people amuse themselves with very diverting men ? I hope it is not bigotry to have eyes and ears ; I hope it is not fanaticism, in the use of these excellent senses, for us to judge that throwing one's heels higher than their head a-dancing, is not exactly the way to teach virtue to our daughters ; and that women, whose genial warmth of temperament has led them into a generosity something too great, are not the persons to teach virtue, at any rate. Oh ! no ; we are told, Christians must not know that all this is

very singular. Christians ought to think that men who are kings and dukes and philosophers on the stage, are virtuous men, even if they gamble at night, and are drunk all day; and if men are so used to comedy, that their life becomes a perpetual farce on morality, we have no right to laugh at this extra professional acting!

Are *we* meddlers, who only seek the good of our own families, and of our own community where we live and expect to die? or *they*, who wander up and down without ties of social connection, and without aim, except of money to be gathered off from men's vices?

I am anxious to put all religious men in their right position before you; and in this controversy between them and the gay world, to show you the facts upon both sides. A floating population, in pairs or companies, without leave asked, blow the trumpet for all our youth to flock to their banners! Are they related to them?—are they concerned in the welfare of our town?—do they live among us?—do they bear any part of our burdens?—do they care for our substantial citizens? We grade our streets, build our schools, support all our municipal laws, and the young men are *ours*; our sons, our brothers, our wards, clerks, or apprentices; they