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THE

Theatre and its Influence.

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THE word rendered "revelling" in Scripture has special reference to those orgies and demonstrations in honor of the god Bacchus which were the beginning of the theatre, both in its genesis and in its history. And it has a special bearing on the things presented on the stage of our modern theatres as well.

Let it be admitted at the outset that the drama is "a fine art," and, under proper conditions, could be made the means of instruction and edification to the people. Alas! that those conditions have never been fulfilled, and there is no prospect that they ever will be. Hannah More has said, "What the stage might be under another

2 THE THEATRE AND ITS INFLUENCE.

and imaginary state of things it is not for us to know, and therefore not very important to inquire. Nor is it indeed the soundest logic to argue on the possible goodness of a thing, which in the present circumstances of society is doing positive evil, from the imagined good that thing might be conjectured to produce in a supposed state of unattainable improvement." Our inquiry is not what the stage might, could, would, or should be, but what it is. We must deal with facts as they are, and must take things as we find them. If it be true that the tendency of the stage as we find it is evil, there can be no question as to the duty of Christians not only to stay away from it, but to set their faces steadfastly against it.

Let us notice briefly the history of the theatre. It began in Greece, with the worship of Bacchus, being a development from the "Komoi," in honor of the god of wine. How shameful were the scenes witnessed at those orgies scholars do not need to be told. Through all its history the stage has been true to its origin. The theatre soon became

popular in Greece and in cities with Greek inhabitants. The chief building in the city was a theatre, and to the stage the people looked for their entertainment. They were refined people, too; there was never a better educated city than Athens. Many of the most distinguished Greek writers won their fame in writing for the stage. In those cities were no gospel preachers, with puritanical ideas, to denounce the stage and "make it worse than it otherwise would have been" by the prejudice they stirred up against it. Whatever the theatre was capable of being, we might reasonably expect to find it in Athens and Corinth and Ephesus.

What, then, was the character of the Greek theatre? Let Plato answer: "Plays raise the passions and pervert the use of them, and of consequence are dangerous to morality." Hear also Aristotle: "The seeing of plays ought to be forbidden to young people until age and discipline have made them proof against debauchery." Has any modern preacher or puritanical deacon said

more than this about the modern stage? Demosthenes could think of no more hateful thing to say of his rival, Æschines, than that he had been an actor in a theatre. Solon, Socrates, Xenophon, and others have left similar utterances. The Greek theatre, then, was corrupt and corrupting, although they presented the plays of such writers as Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and others like them.

The Romans got their stage from the Greeks, and we find the same characteristics marking the theatre at Rome as at Athens. Tacitus, Seneca, Ovid, and Juvenal unite with Cicero in condemning the stage as immoral and corrupting. Tacitus explains the purity of the German women on the ground that there were no theatres among them. Ovid calls on the Government to suppress the stage as a source of great corruption. Seneca says, "Nothing is so destructive to good manners or morals as attendance upon the stage." Cæsar, wishing to disgrace a Roman knight, Laberius, could think of nothing more humili-

ating, and so compelled him to appear on the stage and make a recitation. Smarting under his disgrace, Laberius said, "After having lived sixty years with honor, I left my house this morning a Roman knight, but shall return to it this evening an infamous stage-player. Alas! I have lived a day too long." Such was the Roman theatre in the opinion of men who knew it thoroughly, who were competent to decide, and who certainly had no puritanical notions about morality.

Will it be said that the modern theatre is much better than the ancient ones were? We will consider this question; but first I wish you to note with care and with emphasis that the ancient theatre was entirely free from the worst feature of the modern stage, viz., the exhibition of women. The Greeks and Romans allowed no women to appear on the stage; all the female parts were acted by boys dressed as women. Please note this and remember it as we proceed.

Consider also the testimony of the early

6 THE THEATRE AND ITS INFLUENCE.

Christians respecting the stage, free though it was from the most objectionable feature of the theatres of to-day. Origen, who died A. D. 253, says, "Christians must not lift up their eyes to stage plays, the pleasurable delights of polluted eyes." Gregory Nazianzen calls the theatres "lascivious shops of impurity." Cyprian, who lived in the third century, said, "The Scriptures everlastingly condemn all sorts of such spectacles and stage plays; it is altogether unlawful to be present at these plays." Tertullian, who lived earlier, testifies that "the heathen did chiefly discern who were Christians and who were infidels by the former abandoning all stage plays." The great Augustine gives no uncertain sound on this subject. Hear him: "Stage plays are the subverters of goodness and honesty, the destroyers of all modesty and chastity, the arts of mischievous villanjes, which even modest pagans did blush to behold, the cages of uncleanness, the public profession of wickedness." Chrysostom, of Constantinople, in the fourth century, says, "Nothing brings the

oracles and ordinances of God into such contempt as admiring and attending stage plays. Neither sacraments nor other ordinances of God will do a man any good so long as he frequents stage plays." Such is the testimony of men who surely knew what they were talking about, and who spoke of stages on which no women were admitted. What would they have said of such plays as are presented in our present theatres?

The modern theatre began in Italy, whence it made its way into France and over all Europe. Greene, in his admirable "History of the English People," tells of the origin of the British stage as follows: "The first public theatre was erected only in the middle of Queen Elizabeth's reign. The earlier dramatists, such as Nash, Peale, Kyd, Greene, or Marlowe, were for the most part poor and reckless in their poverty, wild livers, defiant of law or common fame, in revolt against the usages and religion of their day, 'atheists' in general repute, holding Moses for a juggler, haunting the brothel and the ale-house, and dying starved or in

tavern brawls. But with their appearance began the Elizabethan drama." It was in France, in the early part of the seventeenth century, that women were first allowed on the stage, an innovation not tolerated in England till a generation later.

Take the opinion of earnest men whose business it was to study questions of morality, and who, so far from being Puritans, regarded them with mingled contempt and disgust. Bishop Collier said, "Nothing has done more to debauch the age in which we live than the stage plays and the playhouse." Hear Archbishop Tillotson: "The playhouse is the devil's chapel, a nursery of licentiousness and vice, a recreation which ought not to be allowed among a civilized, much less a Christian people." Archbishop Usher says that those who attend theatres "show their neglect of Christian duty and their carelessness in sinning, whereas they willingly commit themselves to the snare of the devil." Will any one say that these men are preachers, and preachers are always opposing people's enjoying themselves? Then

listen to men who are not preachers. Addison condemns the theatre in language too strong for me to quote. Campbell, who, like Addison, hoped the stage might be reformed, calls it "the school of dissoluteness," and adds, "Here the youth of both sexes may get rid of that troublesome companion, modesty, intended by Providence as a guard to virtue and a check to licentiousness. Here vice may soon provide herself with a stock of effrontery for effectuating her designs and triumphing over innocence." Edmund Burke, telling of the excesses in Paris in the French Revolution, says, "While courts of justice were thrust out by Jacobin tribunals, and silent churches were only the funeral monuments of departed religion, there were no fewer than twenty-eight theatres, and all of them crowded every night." Never did the stage have more undisputed sway than when religion and justice alike were banished from Paris. I believe it will always be found true that the prosperity of the churches and that of the theatres are in inverse ratio.

While there is a revival of religion in any community the attendance at the theatre greatly declines.

Wilberforce gives it as his opinion that "the situation of performers, particularly of those of the female sex, is remarkably unfavorable to the maintenance of and growth of the religious and moral principles," adding that the theatre is a "place where decorum and modesty and regularity retire, while riot and lewdness are invited to the spot, and invariably select it for their chosen residence." This is not the off-hand opinion of an ascetic or a fanatic. Rousseau was an infidel and was lax in his ideas of morality. No one can charge him with any sympathy with puritanical notions. Rousseau says, "I observe in general that the situation of an actor is a state of licentiousness and bad morals; that the men are abandoned to disorder, that the women lead a scandalous life. . . . In all countries their profession is dishonorable; those who exercise it are everywhere contemned. . . . This contempt is strongest wherever the

manners are most pure, and there are countries of innocence and simplicity where the trade of an actor is held almost in horror. These are incontestable facts. You will say they result only from prejudices. I agree to it, but these prejudices being universal, we must seek for a universal cause, and I do not see where we can find it except in the profession itself."

Will anybody say that Sir Walter Scott was a puritanical fanatic? Yet he condemned the theatre in language I am unwilling to repeat. Sir John Hawkins was an infidel, yet he saw the evil of the stage and said, "Although it is said that the plays teach morality, and of the stage that it is the mirror of human life, these assertions were mere declamation and have no foundation in truth or experience. On the contrary a playhouse and the regions about it are the very hotbeds of vice." I could weary you with similar testimony from those who have a right to speak of the stage.

Will you tell me the stage must not be

condemned as a whole just because there are some bad actors? I answer, I have not been guilty of that mistake. Those whose testimonies I have given have not spoken of isolated cases on the stage, but of the stage as a whole. They fail to find enough good in it to justify its existence. The theatre was "born at the shrine of Bacchus," and it has ever been true to its origin. At no time in its history have moralists failed to condemn it. No one has studied it from the standpoint of morality without condemning it. This is not the result of prejudice or fanaticism, but of serious thought on the part of those whose aim was not to amuse themselves, but to weigh things in the scale of right and wrong.

Will you point me to the cases of Mrs. Kemble, Mrs. Siddons, and others like them, as proof that the stage is not corrupt or corrupting, since these were pure women? You will observe I have been speaking of the stage, not of individuals. So that it is no answer to show that here and there may be found a player who is not vicious. Mrs.

Kemble herself said, "Acting is the very lowest of arts." And again, "How I loathe my most impotent and unpoetical craft." In her reminiscences she says, "I wish some law were made shutting up all the theatres and allowing only two dramatic entertainments every year — one of Shakespeare's plays and one of Mozart's operas, at the cost of the Government and as a national festivity." Was Mrs. Kemble, herself an actress, prejudiced against the stage?

Is the theatre any better to-day than it was in the past generation? Let us see. A prominent actress gave as a reason for keeping her marriage a secret, "An artist is less marketable when respectable than when she is not." So we are to understand that virtue is a positive drawback to success on the stage, and that if actresses obtain success and maintain their integrity, their success is marred and would have been greater had they cared nothing for morality. What think you of that, my Christian friends? And, mind you, this is not what I say, but what an actress says,

who wished to be virtuous, and felt it necessary to conceal it in order the better to succeed on the stage. We all know that the lack of virtue in the performer is no hindrance to success on the stage. In our leading cities women of notoriously unsavory reputations make unseemly exhibitions of themselves on the stage, and the papers report the house "filled with our most fashionable people." In studying this subject I have sought to know something of the private life of players, and I have found that very many of them make not the slightest pretension to virtue; many of them are divorced or suing for divorces; and many are far away from those to whom they are married, in circumstances quite significant of impropriety. The plays—I have read many of them—are for the most part presentations of marital infidelity and vice made attractive. In a recent account of a play in one of our most fashionable theatres the writer laid special stress on the scene in which the wife was attempting to escape with her lover. Not only in the low

variety theatres, but in those that are most fashionable, the plays gild vice and set forth the soiling of a chaste life as a pleasant thing. The scenes are made sensuous and alluring to the animal nature. And this is done, not occasionally, but week after week, month after month, and year after year. Recently a man was killed by an abandoned woman in the Northwest, and the daily papers—which surely will not be called puritanical—told of his career, and said that his downfall was caused by his getting access behind the scenes in the fashionable theatres. Things must be very corrupting behind the scenes if it ruins a young man to gain access there; and remember that those who are before the scenes are the ones who support by their presence and their money what is done behind the scenes.

Will you tell me that all the plays are not bad, and that many of them are good, and it is only the good ones you go to see? Then you are very seldom seen at a theatre. Even the plays of Shakespeare contain

many things unfit to be presented before a mixed assembly. The aim of the great master of the drama was not to elevate or reform mankind, but to paint life as it actually existed around him. Since this life was wicked, the picture he drew was, of course, dark. Some persons seek to excuse the presentation of vice on the plea that it is true to life. "Realism," they call it. So far from this being an excuse, it is the very reason why such presentations should not be made. If there was no such thing as actual vice in the world, then the presentation of vice would do less harm; but because there is vice, and it is so easy to become vicious, no exhibition of vice should be made. Because filth exists is no reason we should handle it, except with spade and shovel, to clear it out of the way. But very few of the dramas offered are Shakespeare's, or as clean as his. In an alley in the rear of a fashionable theatre there stands a house which rented for \$20 a month as a residence, and for a time was empty. It occurred to a man that, being immediately in the rear of

a theatre, it was a good place for a drinking-saloon. He cheerfully paid \$100 a month to secure the house for this purpose. If a fashionable theatre is a pure place, why can a man afford to pay five prices to get a saloon immediately in the rear of it? But I need not multiply cases. I know young men who came to the city from pure Christian homes, free from vice and innocent of evil, who have gone to the bad, and the beginning of their downfall was theatre-going. That was their first step in the downward path.

Edwin Booth said, "I would not be willing for my wife and daughters to attend the theatre unless I had first ascertained the name of the play and the actors." He evidently regards the average theatre as corrupt and corrupting. And if he does not know, who does? Mr. Henry Quilter, a well-known dramatic critic, says of the modern stage, "To whatever theatre we cast our eyes, the same result stares us in the face—music-hall songs, pointed with allusions of questionable decency and un-

questionable bad taste, accompanied by a display of pretty limbs and faces, of these there is no lack." Then, describing the four sorts of old plays, he goes on, "These four varieties of drama have passed away and their places have been supplied by the opera bouffe, the farcical comedy, and the French drama, for the most part connected with adultery, real or attempted." Lamenting the decay of the early stage, this critic declares, "The tragedies which maintain their place upon the English stage do so despite the prejudices of theatre-goers, by sheer power of their literary merit and the popularity of the actor or actress who occasionally insists upon undertaking them. But their number has not been added to for many years by even a single example. Capitally acted, execrably written, and conceived with a foul boulevard cynicism that is a thousand times more pernicious than the open immoralities of earlier times, plays of this kind have gradually debauched the palates of our theatre-goers till relish has been destroyed for less highly spiced enter-

tainment." After speaking of the "sickly sentimental sensualism" of the stage, and quoting Mr. Bancroft, of Haymarket, as saying, "My first business is to make the house pay," Mr. Quilter goes on to say, "The scene in dramatic literature is the change from an art to a trade, and the results are of a corresponding nature." I have shown you from the testimony of competent witnesses what the stage of the past has been. Now Mr. Quilter laments the great descent into iniquity of the modern stage below the position of years ago; what, then, must our modern stage be? My friends, will you fairly face these facts I have laid before you, and in the fear of God ask what is your duty? Would you be willing your sister or daughter or your mother should be an actress? Then will you encourage other women to be actresses, while professing to believe in the golden rule? The stage is one of the most powerful enemies the home has. The influence of the drama is clearly seen in the increased ease and frequency of divorces and in the many

scandals which occupy so large a part of the daily press. I beg you to think seriously of these things and be sure that no responsibility rests on you for this state of affairs.

You may tell me that you have attended theatres many times, and are not conscious of receiving any moral injury. We are not always conscious of the moral injury we receive. It does not come upon us with a shock like electricity, but insidiously, in the dulling of our moral sense, the dimming of spiritual vision, and the deadening of our soul's sensibilities. Men are never conscious of the process of moral decline, and they seldom realize it at all until they repent. The vilest criminal may believe he is after all as good as any man in the State. Your not feeling that you have been injured is no proof that you have not been so.

If you knew that a person was fond of going to the theatre would you have the same confidence in his piety as if he never went to see a play? What would you think of a clergyman if you should see him at a theatre? Are not all Christians under the

highest obligations to let their light shine so as to win men to Christ? And should they not most carefully avoid whatever mars their influence for good? You well know there are many persons who are injured by the plays presented at the theatres. By attending yourself you encourage them to do what injures them. The Master said, "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." Offend here means to cause sin, and the little ones which believe are those whose faith is weak. We must endure the greatest suffering and disgrace rather than take on ourselves the devil's own work of tempting people to sin. Of many cases under my personal knowledge I cite one: it is that of a young man who is now dissipated, and who denies that there is any truth in religion. This young man was deeply impressed during a protracted meeting, and a certain prominent church member talked to him about being a Christian and giving up

all for Christ. Not long afterward he saw that church member at a theatre, and it so disgusted him that he turned away from all thought of being a Christian. You will say that the young man reasoned badly and acted wrong. Admit it; but the facts remain the same. The church member's going to the theatre turned that young man back from the way of salvation. Are you sure you have never turned any one back?

You will bear me witness that I have not indulged in denunciation and abuse. The strongest language used was quoted from theatre-goers, the friends of the stage, and even from players themselves. I leave the matter with your own conscience. Will you, by your money and presence, support those who live the lives of the majority of players? Will you mar your Christian influence and perhaps lead others to go wrong? Will you run the risk of injury to your own soul by coming in contact with such a thing as I have proved the stage to be by the best possible evidence? Rest assured you cannot come in contact with

evil without being affected by it. For myself I do not hesitate to say that I could not go to a theatre to see a play acted without being seriously injured morally. I never saw but one play in my life. It was before I became a Christian, and I would not see another on any account.

The men who founded this Government were wise and good. Anxious for the preservation and purity of the nation they had founded, the Continental Congress, knowing that free institutions cannot long exist without public virtue, on October 12, 1778, passed the following resolution: "Whereas, True religion and good morals are the only foundation of liberty and happiness, Resolved, That it is hereby recommended to the several States to take the most effectual means for the encouragement thereof, and for the suppressing of theatrical entertainments, horse-racing, gaming, and such other diversions as are productive of idleness, dissipation, and general depravity of principles and manners." Such was the opinion of those noble men who for the first time in history

established a Government that was really free. Shall their warnings fall on heedless ears? But One far greater than they has told us not to be conformed to the world, to abstain from every evil, to let our light shine, to keep ourselves unspotted from the world, and to do whatever we do for the glory of God. And He is to be our Judge at last. Will you not act now as you will wish you had done when you stand before the Judge of all the earth? It is not a question of your doing or refusing to do what "the preachers say," but of your living according to His will, to whom you must give an account for "every idle word" as well as for "the deeds done in the body." Will you, for the sake of a questionable pleasure, set at defiance God's will? I beg you to stop and consider how short is life, how sure is death, and how long, oh! how long is eternity!

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