

ABOUT THE THEATER.

HERRICK JOHNSON, D. D.



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A PLAIN TALK
ABOUT THE THEATER.

BY

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ABOUT THE THEATER.

The demands of Christianity have been construed as an insult to intelligence. It has been sought to make the claims of Christian faith appear as an unwarranted encroachment upon the domain of reason. And multitudes have believed that the religion of Christ called for a blind credulity and surrender of intellectual freedom. A sad and wicked perversion of God's truth, and a blasphemous assumption of authority and power, seeking its intensest expression in the dogma of papal infallibility, have undoubtedly done much to warrant this belief. Men, on peril of ecclesiastical censure, or under threat of anathema, or in the very agonies of inquisitorial torment, have been forced to yield assent to that which their reason flatly contradicted and their better nature abhorred. Even in freer lands than those of Torquemada and the Pope, the tyranny of intolerance and bigotry have made themselves felt in matters of religious belief, so that designing and unscrupulous men, in the professed interest of free thought and mental independence, have made use of these perversions of the spirit of Christianity, and have sought, by them, to represent the entire evangelical church as opposed to free investigation, and in an attitude of open hostility to the use of reason.

So far, however, is this from being true, that the very opposite is true. Christianity invites investigation—demands it. Ignorance and darkness, superstition and credulity, are not conditions of its best growth. Where intelligence is fullest orb'd, there are its worthiest achievements and most enduring fruits. When it first came, it appealed confidently to its credentials. The Bereans are on record as more noble than those of Thessalonica, because, while they received the word of the apostles with all readiness of mind, they searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were so. We find Peter urging Christians to be always ready to give an answer to every man that asketh them a reason of the hope that is in them. And Paul is heard enjoining men to

PROVE ALL THINGS,

and to hold fast that which is good. The evidences of the Christian faith not only, but the doctrines and convictions and prevailing opinions of the Church, are thus open to the freest investigation. An error may be advocated with vehemence, zeal and plausibility. It may marshal to its support an array of great names. It may wear the venerableness of antiquity. The mere fact that it has been upheld by good men, ordained by councils, accepted by the Church, and thus invested with a kind of sacred authority, does not necessarily make it true; does not exempt it from free inquiry and most searching examination. This is one of the glories of Christianity. As against superstitions and false religions, seeking to bar out free discussion, and making their mysteries and mummeries too sacred for the scrutiny of common eyes, Christianity says, "Prove all things." Put everything, even Christianity itself, to the test. Synods and councils are not infallible. Accept no opinion at the disregard of reason, or the suicide of it. By whomsoever held, or by whatsoever authority indorsed, examine it, test its soundness, prove its metal.

If it bear the test, if it be found genuine, if it be the truth, then embrace it and hold it fast. This is the dictate alike of reason and of conscience. This is Christianity's law.

THE CHURCH OPPOSED TO THE THEATER.

Now, it is well known that the Church is opposed to the theater. Theatrical performance on the public stage is condemned by the great mass of those who believe in the morals of the New Testament. The play-house is regarded as inimical to the best interests and truest moral welfare of the community. This is my own settled conviction. I am firm in the persuasion that the theater is hostile to public virtue, and, as an institution, pernicious and corrupting in its influence. I believe that to many a young man, and, alas! to not a few young women, these garnished and glittering establishments, with their sensuous attractions, have been gateways leading down to moral ruin and death. There are several of these establishments nightly open in every large city. Their entertainments are everywhere thrust upon the public notice. Flaming hand-bills on every street announce the brilliant attractions. Their advertisements head the amusement columns of every daily paper, and almost every issue of the press has editorial notice of their varied performances. Beyond a doubt, hundreds of young men are drawn every night of the week to enter these play-houses. Hence, the fitness of the present discussion. I have entitled it, "A Plain Talk About the Theater." I wish to make it just that. It would be easily possible to declaim, in a denunciatory way, and to fill the hour with a great zeal and vehemence of talk about the dreadfulness of the influence of dramatic performance. But I invite you, rather, to a test with me of the worth of the stage in the light of history, of reason, of Christian morals and of common sense. If it bear the test, well. In the spirit of apostolic injunction, then let us hold fast to it, and give it our

countenance and active support. But, if it fail in the test—if it prove to be bad instead of good—inimical to virtue, and a school of immorality, then let us have nothing whatever to do with the unclean thing.

TESTIMONY AGAINST THE THEATER.

This is no new question. You are doubtless aware that the Church, with remarkable unanimity, in successive generations and in different branches, has pronounced against the stage. An English writer, in the time of Charles I, made "a catalogue of authorities against the stage," which contains almost every name of eminence in the heathen and Christian world. It comprehends the united testimony of the Jewish and Christian Churches; the deliberate acts of fifty-four ancient and modern general, national and provincial councils and synods, both of the Eastern and Western churches; the condemnatory sentence of seventy-one ancient fathers and 150 modern Catholic and Protestant writers. Since that time the Christian Church has been just as clear and decisive in her convictions concerning the evils of the stage. Conferences and assemblies, and synods, and associations, have alike, and successively, and with one voice, pronounced against the theater. So has Plato, saying: "Plays raise the passions and pervert the use of them, and of consequence are dangerous to morality." Aristotle and Tacitus, and Ovid, it is said, are on record to the same effect. Rousseau, resisting the introduction of the stage into Geneva, calls it "a monument of luxury and effeminacy." Dr. Johnson, speaking of Collier's "View of the Immorality of the English Stage," says: "The wise and pious caught the alarm, and the nation wondered that it had suffered irreligion and licentiousness to be taught openly at the public charge." Some of you may be surprised to know that the American Congress, soon after the Declaration of Independence, passed the following:

WHEREAS. True religion and good morals are the only solid foundation of public liberty and happiness ;

Resolved, That it be and is hereby earnestly recommended to the several States, to take the most effectual measures for the encouragement thereof, and the suppression of theatrical entertainments, horse-racing, gaming and such other diversions as are productive of idleness, dissipation and a general depravity of principles and manners.

Now, I admit that this mass of testimony, varied as it is from heathen and Christian sources, running through the centuries, is not decisive of the case. No list of authorities and catalogue of great names can be absolutely conclusive. Error has been cherished for centuries on other points, and it is barely possible that the great and good of all ages, and these numerous assemblages of men, whose special office it is to look after and promote the moral welfare of the community, have been mistaken. But, surely, the testimony against the stage, pronounced so long and with such unanimity, is entitled to consideration. It certainly raises a doubt as to the moral effect of dramatic entertainments. But if, upon testing the matter and putting the theater to the proof, we find it to be a safe and healthful amusement, conducive to morality, and a school of instruction, then I grant that the long array of adverse testimony amounts to nothing. The Church must acknowledge herself to have been mistaken, and, as a lover of morals, I must patronize and indorse what I have hitherto shunned and condemned.

DEFENSE BY DAILY PRESS.

It is to this that the ministry and the Church are occasionally summoned by articles in the daily press, and sometimes by writers more than ordinarily able, courteous and critical. With an evident desire to reform the more glaring abuses of the theater, and with manifest candor, they present views that challenge consideration. Not long since, in a widely-circulated and most-respectable daily paper, I read one of these articles that opens thus:

The stage is a serious affair. It is an institution. For good or for bad it must stand. It will live with civilization. It is a great popular pulpit. To the great mass of men and women it is, perhaps, the prominent social instructor. Theologians cannot destroy the stage, but their mad controversies with it have often buoyed up its pruriency. And this fact adroit purveyors very well understand. It is only necessary for a licentious and brazen playwright to put filth on the boards, that critics and the pulpit shall denounce it into pecuniary success. In this way the stage has reached that point of degradation which Dr. Johnson deprecated and Byron deplored, and which Mr. Boucicault and the manager of Drury Lane have so lately avowed and indorsed in the columns of the *London Times*: yes, shamefully and defiantly indorsed; their logic being that, as the standard drama will not draw, something else must. And the mountebanks are not very particular what that "something else" shall be, provided always that the public and the laws of the land will tolerate their disgraceful descent into the darkest ages of the drama, when the stage was a place for the orgies of satyrs, and its songs were the music of infernal sirens.

Two leading facts are deducible from these premises :

First—Religionists and moralists, who cannot destroy the stage, must go about to reform and sustain it with zeal and sense. These persons, to be dutiful, must admit what is true and denounce what is false about the drama, in a spirit of serious, moderate, judicial criticism. . . . As a public institution the stage demands a cultivated and stern and liberal guardianship, and the fostering care of all whose posts are in the lines of education of any sort, whether religious or secular.

I have quoted thus at length from this defender and advocate of the stage, to show you the line of defense, to exhibit the extravagant claims, to point out the specious logic, to note the damaging admissions, and to make answer to this demand upon us for an effort to reform and sustain with a "cultivated guardianship" and a "fostering care" what religionists and moralists have hitherto denounced and sought to destroy. To the proof, then. Let us put this matter to the test. I speak as to wise men. Judge ye what I say.

LAME LOGIC.

Let me notice, in the first place, two or three steps in the logic of this defense. "The stage is an institution," it is said. "For good or bad, it must stand. Theologians cannot destroy it. Therefore, they must go about to sustain it with zeal and sense." The

protracted existence of an institution, then, is a reason for our sustaining it, good or bad. It only becomes us to make the best of it. But because warfare against an evil for centuries has not succeeded in destroying it, must we, hence, change face and advocate it? Who shall say—who has a right to say—how long an experiment is needed to prove that any given institution will live while civilization lasts? Human slavery is an institution far older than the theater. Religionists and moralists have opposed it for centuries, and now it is dying out, and has about passed away all over the earth. But suppose they had stopped their opposition, according to this lame logic, and sought to reform its evils only. Millions to-day, now free, would have sighed in bondage and moved to the clank of chains.

The house of the strange woman is an "institution." Long before Æschylus and Sophocles wrote the first Greek tragedies, Solomon warned against this institution as "the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death." It has existed ever since, and exists to-day. Shall we, therefore, say of it, "For good or bad it must stand. It will live with civilization. Theologians cannot destroy it. That is proved. Hence, they must give it a stern guardianship and fostering care." No; this kind of logic would forever perpetuate tyranny and lust, and every persistent and giant wrong. We are to make no truce with evil. The only way to reform an evil is to destroy it. If the theater be a bad thing, whose essential tendencies are downward, and whose inevitable influence is demoralizing, then its long life is no argument in its favor. Our ill-success in destroying it must not stop our effort. If it be an evil, it will go by-and-by, or there is no truth in God's Word.

DENOUNCING FILTH INTO SUCCESS.

Here is another specimen of the logic of this defense of the stage: "Controversies with the stage have buoyed up its pruriency. It is

only necessary for a licentious and brazen playwright to put filth on the boards, that the critics and the pulpits shall denounce it into pecuniary success." Note, in the first place, the damaging confession that filth is put on the boards, and is given pecuniary success—and this is what the writer calls "the great popular pulpit," "the prominent social instructor." And the success comes because the pulpit and moralists denounce the filth! Was there ever lamer logic? As if the best way to get rid of filth is to let it alone! As if to stop denouncing evil is to kill it! Or, as if the pulpit's condemnation of the shameless and corrupting license of brazen playwrights makes the pulpit responsible for the disgraceful exhibitions that fill the treasuries of our theaters! This is the very argument. "In this way," the writer goes on to say, "in this way, the stage has reached that point of degradation which Johnson deprecated and Byron deplored," and that "disgraceful descent into the darkest ages of the drama, when the stage was the place for the orgies of satyrs, and its songs were the music of infernal sirens." The present degradation and disgraceful descent of the drama is all owing to the opposition of the pulpit! Can intelligent men be deceived by such a glaring sophism? Clear it of its surroundings, and the simple statement is sufficient to show its absurd and wicked fallacy. Yet, in this way it is sought to parry the force of the damaging admissions advocates of the theater are obliged to make.

And now let us look at these admissions. They are that the stage is now degraded; that this degradation is avowed and shamelessly indorsed by Boucicault, a popular writer of plays, and by the manager of Drury Lane Theater—one of the best of London; that it is a degradation that had its counterpart when Johnson and Byron deprecated and deplored it; and when the stage was the place for the orgies of satyrs and when its songs were the music of infernal sirens. The stage has a history, then; and that history is dark with

the record of repeated and disgraceful degradation. All this is the confession of the friends of the theater—its constant patrons and defenders.

THE HISTORY OF THE STAGE.

I am thus brought to consider the history of the stage—the rise and course of dramatic performances. Surely, from this we may gather some knowledge of its prevailing characteristics, and some estimate of its value as a means of moral reform or rational amusement. This historical review must necessarily be the briefest; and, through it all, let us carry the distinction between the drama and the stage. The drama is a department of literature and valuable as such. Shakespeare, and the great masters of Grecian tragedy, no scholar would care to dispense with. “No question could be more easily decided,” says Foster, “than whether it be lawful to write and to read useful and ingenious things in a dramatic form; but it is an altogether different question whether the stage is a useful means of entertainment and moral instruction. So different a question is it, that the stage may be as injurious as the drama is beneficial. A young man may wisely and consistently value the drama, reading it and studying it with discriminating criticism, and yet wisely and righteously denounce the theater. There are the excitement of scenic effects; the evil associations; the overwhelming appeals to the sense; the gloss put upon impurities, and very much else, making up the difference. The study of anatomical plates, for scientific purposes, is quite another thing from the exhibition of those plates to a mixed assembly, some of whom may find in them a stimulus to the basest passions.” No man of delicacy would even read the entire plays of Shakespeare in his own family. Then, again, the attempt to realize on the boards what has been conceived and written, often degrades the very scenes and events represented. Even a Michael Angelo could not successfully paint the judgment scene, though the Bible

describes it. Nor can we suppose that Biblical drama, in eight acts, called "The Redeemer of the World, or the Passion and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ," recently sought to be put upon the boards, with all scenic attractions, in one of the theaters of New York, would have had any other effect than to degrade the Scriptural representation. Thanks to the indignant protests of a Christian public, that effort failed. Keeping in view, therefore, the distinction between the drama, as a department of literature, and the stage, as a place of theatrical performance, let us briefly look at the history of the theater.

Dramatic representation had its origin among the Greeks, with a troop of bacchanalians, in rude and boisterous songs, interspersed with dances, conducted with a high degree of licentiousness, both in language and action. Then came Thespis, introducing tragedy. The stage is said to have been a cart; the chorus a troop of itinerant singers, and the actor a sort of mimic. Subsequently, Æschylus appeared, "who carried the Greek drama at once to nearly its highest perfection." He was followed by Sophocles, called the ancient Shakespeare, who introduced a third and even a fourth actor into his plays. Then came decline under Euripides, exhibiting degenerated taste and loose morality. The transition to comedy was easy, originating in the licentious sports of the villages, and popular in proportion as it was personal, abusive and low. The comedies of Aristophanes are an illustration at once of the "depravity of the poet, and the libertinism of the spectators." His wit was coarse and vile—a mixture of buffoonery and positive filth. Theatrical exhibitions became a popular amusement among the Romans, just as they lost their stern love of virtue, yielded to luxury, and grew weak and effeminate. The best authority states that the law of deterioration, in dramatic representations, has been illustrated among the Hindoos, even as among the Greeks. Connected, in their origin, with religious observances, they have invariably degenerated.

The European stage is no exception. This grew out of "The Mysteries" of the Middle Ages, a sort of sacred drama performed by monks, in which the devil always played a conspicuous part. Of these, Hannah More says: "Events too solemn for exhibition, and too awful for detail, were brought before the audience with a formal gravity more offensive than levity itself." "Celestial intelligences, uttering the sentiments and language, and blending with the buffooneries, of Bartholomew Fair, were regarded as appropriate subjects of merry-making for a holiday audience." This was the foundation of the modern British and American stage, which has risen only to degenerate, until now many of its exhibitions outrival, in licentiousness and filth, the darkest days of the drama, even on the confession of its friends.

In China, theatrical entertainments are greatly popular. But neither there nor in Japan are women allowed to perform. It is a disputed question whether women were ever even present in the ancient theater. It is undeniable that the actors were invariably men, and few in number, and yet these theatrical entertainments contributed to the downfall of the Grecian state. They had their origin in a corrupt state of morals, and they tended to deterioration. As it has been, so it is now, and shall be. Our early Congress, in the sterling virtue of those days of the Republic, took action against the theater; but who imagines that, in this time of widespread corruption and venality and licentiousness and crime, Congress could be led seriously to consider such a resolution? History is all one way in testifying to the worthlessness of the stage, as a school of virtue, or a means of rational and elevating amusement. The clear verdict of the past is that the theater is an institution, "*which has,*

WITHIN ITSELF, THE SEEDS OF CORRUPTION,

and which exists only under a law of degeneracy." Respectable men have again and again gotten ashamed of its accumulating evils, and

more and more unblushing indecencies; and, from time to time in its history, announcements have been made of establishments, opened as fit temples of the drama, with the expectation and purpose of maintaining a high intellectual and moral character. I tell you the simple truth when I say that, however sincere such efforts have been, they have invariably failed. Such is the nature of theatrical representation, and such is human nature, that deterioration is inevitable. The moral and religious portion of the community, except in a time of spiritual decline and degeneracy, cannot be generally persuaded to support the theater. Make it fit for them, and the majority of its present patrons would vacate it and seek the desired excitement elsewhere. Plays, to be popular, must be a representation of active passions. "Silence, patience, moderation, temperance, wisdom and contrition for guilt," it has been well said, "are not virtues, the exhibition of which will divert spectators."

REFORM IMPOSSIBLE.

The stage, therefore, can never be made "a mirror of Christian sentiments and morals." Garrick, in the experiment, met with utter failure. This cry of reform and this effort at reformation is no new thing. It has been tried over and over again. The centuries have heard of it. Under Cromwell and the Commonwealth—in those stern but pure times—(times for a long while railed at and lampooned as bigoted and boorish, but now deemed the glory of England)—in those stern but pure times, the theaters were deemed so corrupting that they were closed. With the dissoluteness of morals that followed the Restoration, they were soon in full activity. Read Macauley, if you want a picture of that era. "Tragic passion" gave way to "cold-blooded bombast," and for "comic wit and fancy," was substituted "coarse licentiousness"—"an obscenity," says a recent literary critic, "so foul, so diseased, that it seems inconceivable

that men could ever have borne to write, to listen to or to see such things." It was the age of such play-writers as Wycherley and Congreve. Macauley says of Wycherley: "The only thing he could furnish from his own mind in inexhaustible abundance was profigacy." Congreve was "the champion of the most shocking descriptions of vice." Leigh Hunt calls the superior fine ladies and gentlemen of Congreve's plays, "a pack of sensual busy-bodies like insects over a pool." Do you say these plays must have been condemned for the licentiousness of their genteel vulgarity? Not so. Gilded vice had its defenders then as now. Hardly another English author has been so praised by the men of his time as William Congreve. Dryden, the most distinguished literary man of that day, ranked him with Shakespeare! And Pope dedicated to him his Iliad!

It is no wonder that the English nation ere long woke again to the immorality of the stage and wondered that it had suffered irreligion and licentiousness to be taught openly at the public expense. Later, a committee of the British Parliament, after a full investigation of the subject, reported that the only way to reform the theater was to burn it down. And now, Mr. Boucicault and the manager of Drury Lane, London, avow and indorse the present degradation, and shamelessly declare their purpose to cater to it and perpetuate it by "Black Crooks," "Formosas" and the like.

REFORM EXPERIMENTS IN AMERICA.

What is the history of such reform movement in America? When the charms of the new and gorgeous edifice have worn away, and the novelty is gone, the first-rate house degenerates into a second and third rate, less and less care is had to please the æsthetic few, and finally the low level of all the other boards is reached, and the degraded popular appetite is fed with what is an offense to mor-

als and an insult to intelligence. The standard drama is only now and then thrust in, to keep up a show of respectability, and to secure the countenance and support of those who are disgusted with spectacular nonsense and impurities. This is the course of the theaters in our chief cities. It has been so in Philadelphia, to my certain knowledge. There each of the principal theaters originated in a throe of reform. The determination of the management to present only the higher class of plays in an artistic and wholly unexceptional manner, was published far and wide. But in every case, each theater that began with the purpose of the utmost respectability, in the use of the standard drama, soon catered to the degraded popular taste, with the cheap sensational and the vile burlesque of the blondes.

In New York, the same record has been made. Booth's Theater, that brilliantly garnished establishment, that was to be sternly held to the chaste and splendid exhibitions of histrionic art, has again and again had filth upon its boards. It was not long ago that I read in one of the best of the New York dailies, that Wallack's Theater the night before was the scene of "one of those pleasant festivals of thought and feeling, which, in their intermittent occurrence, keep it in public affection and respect as the favorite theater of the land." "The audience was remarkable for its refined and tasteful aspect and intelligence." "Such occasions," the writer goes on to say, "serve to refresh in the thoughtful public taste our interest in the affairs of the drama, which a contemporary stage, overloaded with frippery and filth, and often grossly mismanaged by licentious and mercenary bucksters, has done very much to diminish or destroy."

Now, what is this exceptional play, that, according to this writer, has furnished an intermittent festival of thought and feeling, and drawn together an audience remarkable for its refinement, and is in such contrast to the frippery and filth of a cotem-

poraneous stage? Why, this very writer describes it as an intricate web of intrigue, where two women love the same man; where a husband incriminates his wife, whom he has just led from the altar, and where there is "an appeal for sympathy with handsome feminine wickedness," together "with occasional equivoke," or double meaning. And when it comes to pass that in the favorite theater in the land, on an exceptional occasion of thought and feeling, at an intermittent spasm of protest against frippery and filth, this is the kind of exhibition that is made upon the boards, I ask what kind of place has it gotten to be for any respectable young man or woman? If this be done in the green tree, what may we expect in the dry? If this is the best to be gotten in the favorite play-house of the great metropolis, what must we expect and what do we get from like establishments elsewhere?

HENRY IRVING.

I am not ignorant of the experiment being made in London. I know that Henry Irving, with all the instincts and convictions of a gentleman, and with grace and power of acting, perhaps, unrivaled to-day in the dramatic world, is undertaking to have a theater of unexceptionable morals. But I know, too, that it requires all the histrionic ability and painstaking toil and expenditure and peerless gifts of his genius, to make that experiment even a temporary success; and that with his decadence his clean place will grow foul, as inevitable as water will find its level. This consummate actor recently gave an address before the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution of Edinburgh, Scotland, on "The Stage as It Is," in which he said: "The stage is intellectually and morally, to all who have recourse to it, the source of some of the finest and best influences of which they are respectively susceptible." And in saying this he expressly declared that he was "speaking not of any lofty imagina-

tion of what might be, but of what is, wherever there are pit, gallery and foot-lights."

I face this statement with the facts of history. I appeal to the record of every one of these glittering and garnished establishments. I hold up in contradiction the efforts at reform that have so often been made and as often abandoned. I call to the witness-stand the director of the city prison in Paris, M. Bequerel, who says: "If a new play of a vicious character has been put upon the boards, I very soon find it out by the number of young fellows who come into my custody." I summon the New York *Evening Post* to testify—a paper conducted by no prudes or Puritans. In a recent editorial on "Our Stage as It Is," it says:

There has probably been a greater mass of meretricious rubbish set on the New York stage during the last ten years than during the whole of its existence. We do not, of course, refer solely to pieces that appeal to the baser instincts, but to the whole body of sensational or emotional products—to the feverish slop of a French melodrama, etc.

Now, all this proves beyond all doubt that the reformation of the theater is out of the question—that the ideal stage is simply an impossibility! I say it again, fearless of sustainable contradiction, and supported by the record of the past and present, by the very nature of theatrical representations, and by the necessities of the case, that the stage, as an institution, "*has within itself the seeds of corruption, and it exists only under a law of degeneracy.*"

EFFECT ON ACTORS.

How can it be otherwise? Take the actors themselves. How can they mingle together, as they do, men and women, and make public exhibition of themselves as they do, in such circumstances, with such surroundings, with such speech as must often be on their lips to play the plays that are written, in such positions as they must sometimes take, affecting such sentiments and passions—how can they do this without moral contamination? That it is done, as

an exception, does not disprove the law of degeneracy. A Garrick and a Mrs. Siddons and some others of equal or approximate fame, and some others of far less reputation, may sustain on the stage a moral character above reproach; but who can deny that the tendency of all theatrical engagement is strongly and sadly, and, alas! generally successfully the other way. Now, if the theater be a school of morals, how does it happen that the teachers so seldom learn their own lessons? How does it happen that these teachers so seldom take part in any moral enterprises when their stage dresses are off? How many young men of clean, pure homes would care to have their sisters tread the boards? The point I make, is, that if to the actors themselves theatrical representation is injurious, tending strongly and almost inevitably to immorality and corruption, placing them where we would be ashamed to have a brother or sister, son or daughter, placed, and giving them a social ostracism, which only transcendent genius, like Booth's, or Kemble's, or Irving's, can overcome, then the institution demanding that state of things, and making necessary that moral exposure and social banishment, is inherently and essentially bad, and neither you nor I have a right, nor has any one else a right, to support it or countenance it.

EFFECT ON AUDIENCE.

But the evil does not stop with the actors. It extends to the audience. What cannot be done without a tendency to moral harm, cannot be seen without a tendency to moral harm. Corrupt tastes are formed at the theater—false views of life are inculcated, false standards of honor. The plain and sober and ordinary duties of life are not brought out at the play-house. Love is commonly represented as a romantic passion. Religion in its purity is too tame for the demanded excitements of the stage. What better can I say on this point than what Mrs. More has said:

It is generally the leading object of the poet to erect a standard of honor in direct opposition to the standard of Christianity; and this is not done subordinately, incidentally, occasionally, but worldly honor is the very soul and spirit and life-giving principle of the drama. Honor is the religion of tragedy. It is her moral and political law. Her dictates form its institutes. Fear and shame are the capital crimes in her code. Against these all the eloquence of her most powerful pleaders, against these her penal statutes—pistol, sword and poison—are in full force. Injured honor can only be vindicated at the point of the sword; the stains of injured reputation can only be washed out in blood. Love, jealousy, ambition, pride, revenge, are too often elevated into the rank of splendid virtues, and form a dazzling system of worldly morality in direct contradiction to the spirit of that religion whose characteristics are charity, meekness, peaceableness, long-suffering, gentleness and forgiveness.

There is no quashing that indictment. And hence it is that even loose and abandoned men, who abhor the religion and morality of the Church, take delight in and applaud to the echo the morality on the boards of the theater. I bring to the witness-stand the writer who edits the "stage" department of the Philadelphia *Daily Press*. He says:

The gallery, though not always patronized by the most moral of our citizens, invariably is thronged when the moral drama is produced, and the gentle youth who would pick your pocket without the slightest qualm of conscience, wildly applauds when virtue is triumphant over vice, and the heavy villain meets with the just reward of his crimes.

I need not ask you whether the morality getting that kind of indorsement is the morality commended of heaven; or, whether the morality thus presented and thus approved would be likely to elevate the character of those who witnessed it, and the general tone of society. You all know better.

POSITIVE IMMORALITY.

There are other objections to the theater—important, and deserving notice; but I pass, to speak briefly and finally of this—the positive immorality of the stage—the openly, and sometimes, grossly pernicious exhibitions which make it a teacher of vice. How few

plays are acted which have not some form of immorality in them, and that are utterly free from impurity—that have not the oath, or the double-meaning, or the covert suggestion, or the lascivious gesture, insinuating often what is not actually expressed. There is one whole class of dramas called “seventh commandment plays,” for the obvious reason that they deal in crimes forbidden by that law. Macready, one of the celebrated English tragedians, would not permit his daughters to attend the theater. His judgment and affection as a father were in conflict with his tastes and interests as an actor. His habits, love of fame and desire of gain, bound him to the stage; but a regard to the welfare of his daughters prompted him to guard them against it. There is scarcely an evil incident to human life which may not be learned at the theater. If this be not so, how comes it about that we must have an expurgated edition of even the prince of dramatists, in order that his entire plays may be read aloud in a social circle composed of the two sexes? If this be not so, what of the vast mass of plays put upon the boards of even our best theaters, some of which, in the very language of an enthusiastic defender of the drama, are “a murderous assault upon all that the family-circle holds most holy and sacred?” If this be not so, why is it that some of the worst classes in the community are the constant patrons of the theater? If a man is known by the company he keeps, is not an institution known by the audience it draws? And, granting that there are respectable men and women in that audience, come to witness some admirable rendering of character, or to listen to some choice or elevating music, that is not the entertainment nightly drawing the crowd. There must be something answering to and gratifying the tastes of the depraved and dissolute and the immoral, to bring them so constantly to the play-house. And there is. Such characters are not seen regularly, and in any numbers, at the church, at the concert, at the lecture, at any

place of rational amusement; but you will always find them at the theater. The patrons of the grog-shop are the patrons of the theater. The patrons of the house of the strange woman are the patrons of the theater. The patrons of the gambling-hells are the patrons of the theater. And they go there because they find what they want there; because their depraved appetites are whetted there. It matters not that others go, of different and far better standing. Those go because their tastes are met and catered to, managers conducting their theaters as other people conduct their business, with a view of making money. If the theater were a school of morals, they would not go. If it were a popular pulpit and a virtuous social instructor, they would not go. If it were a place of entirely innocent amusement, they would not go. They give wide berth to such things. In Paris, in the bloody days of the Revolution, how was it? "While courts of justice were thrust out by Jacobin tribunals, and silent churches were only the funeral monuments of departed religion, there were, in Paris, no fewer than twenty-eight theaters, great and small, most of them kept open at the public expense, and all of them crowded every night."

NATURAL AFFILIATIONS.

See, too, how the saloon and the grog-shop naturally and invariably drop down at the doors of the play-houses. Is there no connection between them? Ah! my dear reader, sharing with me in the duties and destinies of life, is a warning necessary after all this? Need I bid you, in the name of morality and religion, and, as you value character and manhood, to let the theater utterly alone? But I hear it said, "God has planted in my nature a taste for dramatic representation, and it can be gratified at the theater; and I may go there when the higher plays are rendered by true talent, with great dramatic power, and be gratified and do no harm." That

is possible; but is it all? "Julius Cæsar" and Tennyson's "Queen Mary," Jefferson's "Rip Van Winkle," "Hamlet," "Macbeth"—in hearing these are you not doing far more than gratifying a proper dramatic taste? Are you not putting yourself where appeals may be made and doubtless will be made to your lower, as well as to your higher nature? The very after-piece put on the boards in the wake of the sublime tragedy you have gone to witness may be a gross travesty of our holy religion; an indecent and insulting caricature of something pure and sacred. And the most of what is exhibited on that stage, month in and out, has in it that which tends to degrade and demoralize. Quips and jests and exposures are allowed and applauded there that would be deemed insulting in our homes. And you are the open and inevitable, though it may be indirect, patron of all this. For your money supports the institution—it goes to swell the receipts of the house where these things are enacted night after night. And though, on the particular night when you go, nothing may appear to offend the strictest sense of propriety, yet, I ask you, if you have any right to gratify your taste at the expense of making yourself directly and knowingly a countenancer and patron of an institution whose common and most characteristic features are offensive to purity, to religion and to God?

TAINTED AND VICIOUS.

There the house stands, and it is largely given up to wretched sensational plays, tricked up in the tinsel of cheap art. There vile burlesque and idealess buffoonery may be witnessed. Night by night scenes are enacted there of the grossest indecency and impurity, suggestive of all uncleanness. You know, as well as I, the dreadful influence of all that. You know, as well as I, that every theater in this city is more or less given up to plays whose atmosphere is tainted and vicious. As one of the better class of these

plays, take "Adrienne Lecouvreur," as rendered by Bernhardt. It is a play to which no modest man should take a modest woman. One who has examined it, says: "It is immoral by its intrigue, immoral by the maxims uttered by the actors, and immoral by the compromising situations in which the principal personages find themselves at different stages of the piece." One of the theatrical press writers of Chicago said of it: "The plot abounds in surprises and intrigues so thoroughly Parisian that it is quite as well the words were in an unfamiliar tongue. The atmosphere of the play is fetid and unwholesome." If it be said that only a woman like Bernhardt, who is reported to be what social decency does not name, would take the part, let it be remembered that Modjeska has played it on the Chicago boards, and that Rachel, "the inimitable Rachel," made it historic by her gifted personation of its leading part.

GILDING VICE.

Here, then, is an institution—the stage, the theater—that is gilding vice; an institution that is making young men and women familiar with adulterous liaisons, and at home with almost absolute nudity; an institution, that, since the advent of the "Black Crook"—which I very well remember was met with a kind of shock and general protest—has gone on and on, until now the bulletin-boards on our public streets flaunt the shameless exposure in the very faces of every passer-by, and the thing is taken as a matter of course, and not a voice is heard in remonstrance; an institution that is frequently exhibiting "seventh commandment plays," for the delectation and incitement of our young men and women; an institution, that, in the very language of its defenders, is guilty of "a murderous assault upon all that the family circle holds most holy and sacred." But one day in the week, or one week in the month, or one month in the year—no matter as to exactness—all this is changed.

The house is put in order, and, under the same management, with almost the same actors, in the same place, a play is brought forward divested of every trace of impurity, and without a hint or suggestion to which a respectable man or woman could take exception. What of it? Does not every instinct of our better nature and every voice of reason say: It is wrong to darken the door of an institution, three-fourths or nine-tenths of whose influence is pernicious and poisonous?

What if the manager of one of these low concert saloons should build a splendid music hall, and gild it with every possible attraction, and behind it put a gilded brothel; and what if the exquisite melody and rhythmical flow and very thrill and passion of music and song were to be had in that hall every night accompanied with those incidents and incitements adapted and designed to lure to the brothel behind it; and what, if one night in the week, or one week in the month, or one month in the year—no matter as to exactness—all this should be changed; and, under the same management, with the same orchestra and same chorus, with almost the same singers throughout, and in the same place, a concert should be given, exquisite and refined in its nature, suggestive of nothing evil, and as wholesome and inspiring in its effects as the sublime strains of "The Messiah?" What of it? Would you be found there?

Well, now, I do not say, for I do not believe, that there is a brothel behind the theater; but I do say, fearless of successful challenge, there are, sometimes, and often, scenes and situations and exposures and suggestions on every stage in this city, and on every stage in this land, tending and adapted to make patrons for and victims of the house of the strange woman. And the one dollar or three dollars given at the box office is just so much toward sustaining the establishment where these things are allowed and encouraged.

FINAL APPEAL.

Christians! Christians! remember this, I beg of you—you who have been baptized with prayer, and who profess to think something of the decencies of home and the purities of religion and the sanctities of a Christian profession—remember this when you are tempted to cross the threshold of a theater to see some splendid play—that your presence there is countenancing and helping to support a place, an agency, an institution, that openly dishonors God by much that it gives to the public; that as openly caricatures the religion of your Lord; that, in this city, at least, openly tramples on His Sabbath with loud revelry and insolent scoff; and that suggests, if it does not exhibit, more or less that is morally leprous and impure.

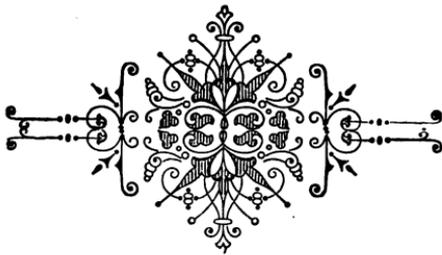
“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” Surely the theater does not bear this apostolic test. As an amusement, it is too unwarrantably expensive, if there were absolutely nothing else against it. The receipts of the New York theaters are greater than the expenses of the churches, of the schools and of the police, combined. And when just one kind of amusement for a city costs more than to police it and educate it and teach it religion, it is a wicked and shameful extravagance. But the expense of the stage is the least objection to it. It is a disseminator of evil. It has a false code of morals and a false standard of honor. It arouses sensibilities of a high sort only to dull and deaden them. It arouses sensibilities of a low sort only to have them clamorous for evil gratification. It has been to hundreds upon hundreds the outer circle of a maelstrom, sucking in and down to perdition. Its history proves that a radical reformation is impossible. It is hopelessly bad.

Young men, and young women, too, and readers all, I urge you, as one who speaks not without reasons, as one for whom the dramatic in action and speech has a peculiar fascination, and as one who has felt the charm and witchery of it in actual experience, yet who

is principled against indulgence at the price of morality and a pure manhood and womanhood—I urge you, in the interests of pure, sweet lives, in the interests of sacred homes, in behalf of the Sabbath and of the Name that is above every name, shun the theater! “Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away.”

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A PLAINER TALK ABOUT THE THEATER.

My "Plain Talk About the Theater" has not been relished in certain quarters. Of course not. Smite any iniquity, and it will hiss and spring, and sting if it can. I purpose now, if possible, a plainer talk. There is crying need of it. "A theatrical review," in the *Inter Ocean*, December 31, furnishes the occasion. It gives a list of the performances in the four leading theaters of Chicago the last year. Let any one go down that list of a column and a half, with any knowledge of the character of the plays and the players, and he will find it mainly a record of trash, vulgarity and filth that more than justifies the severest things said in "A Plain Talk About the Theater," and that should make every thinking man and woman in this city tremble at the effect upon public morals of these vapid, prurient and often vicious exhibitions.

At McVickers, the year was opened (January 4), with two weeks of Bernhardt, in "Adrienne Lecouvreur," "Frou-Frou," etc., and closed (December 24) with two weeks of Raymond, in "Fresh." Of "Adrienne Lecouvreur," a theatrical press writer said: "The plot abounds in surprises and intrigues so thoroughly Parisian it is quite as well the words were in an unknown tongue. The atmosphere of the play is

FETID AND UNWHOLESOME."

Of "Fresh," a press writer said: "It is unmitigated and unmitigable bosh from beginning to end. It is crammed full of the slang

of the period, gathered from the street, the saloon, the race-course—everything in fact. Some of the ladies' costumes are rich and handsome; but rather short-waisted at the top." When such exhibitions begin and end the year, is it at all likely that the intervening months will be crowded with high moralities? When a book opens with pages of "immoral intrigue," and "immoral maxims" and "compromising situations," and closes with pages of "bosh," and "slang" and immodest exposure, who will believe that the balance of it is an inspiration to everything that is sweet, and pure, and noble?

And McVicker's Theatre is first-class. *Ex uno disce omnes!*

Let me be more definite. I have gone over the plays of the four leading theaters for the three months of September, October and November, 1881, taking these months simply because they immediately preceded the "plain talk." At Hooley's, thirteen evenings were given to the so-called standard drama (Keene), and seventy-six evenings to trash. At McVicker's, twelve evenings were given to Miss Anderson, six to Joe Jefferson, twelve to Denman Thompson, and forty-eight to trash. At Haverly's, eighteen evenings to the standard drama (McCullough), and fifty-one to trash. At the Grand Opera, all the seventy-nine evenings to trash, unless "Patience," or the "Pirates of Penzance," may be otherwise regarded.

NOT A PALPABLE FALSEHOOD.

It won't do to call this another specimen of "palpable falsehood," or "deplorable ignorance" on the part of the pulpit, and written either by a "knave" or a "fool." Out of their own mouths shall they be condemned. A theatrical press writer in the *Times* said late in November last: "With an occasional exception, Chicago has been regaled all the season thus far with the thinnest sort of theatrical diet;" "once in a long time an exception to this dull vacuity

appears ;” “but, nevertheless, trash of the most unadulterated description has largely taken possession of the stage.”

I wish it were no worse. But to call the stuff thus put on the Chicago theater boards “trash,” is not to tell half the truth. Trash may be clean, though vapid and shallow. It may be an insult to intelligence and an offense to taste, but not an affront to morals. But this trash of the theaters is all three. Very much of it is vile and vicious, appealing to what is base in human nature, and foul in its origin, exhibition and inspiration. Let me again make good my words by appealing to the record. The comments are from the leading daily press :

At Haverly’s—“Twelfth Night”—given twelve nights ; Shakespeare “emasculated ;” “a drunken knight, and a foolish simpleton, heroes of the play.” “Patience,”—twelve nights ; as given at Booth’s, one of the chief æsthetic maidens again and again guilty of

“OUTRAGEOUS INDELICACY,”

and the wonder expressed “why the manager of a respectable theater permits such an indecorous, disgusting exhibition.” “Strategists,” six nights—“a gigantic farce,” based on these propositions : “It’s a wise child that knows its own father ; it’s a stupid wife that doesn’t know her own husband.” “Michael Strogoff,” twelve nights—“feminines in scantiness of apparel were neither more nor less shapely than usual.”

At the Opera House—“Daniel Rochat”—given three nights—characterized as “vile.” “Felicia,” eight nights—mother reveals her life of shame to a bastard son. “Mother and Son,” six nights—“coarse and vulgar Madame Coterel.” “French Flats,” seven nights—“adaptation of an original play as nasty and unpleasant as it was possible for a French dramatist to put upon the boards.” “Olivette,” eight nights—

“FASCINATING, DEMORALIZING, LEGGY,”

as rendered by Miss Lewis, noted chiefly for “The Lewis Fling,” or “Katharine’s Kick,” which has “given her a national reputation.” “Madame Favart,” seven nights—“the questionable, or, rather, unquestionable, salaciousness of Madame Favart.” “A good deal of decidedly suggestive dialogue.” “To say nothing of the more or less shapely figures of a large number of young ladies;” “considerable economy in the use of toilet material;” “the uncalled-for display of feminine figures which runs through the whole evening, and in some junctures trembles along the verge of the positively shocking.”

At McVicker’s:—“All the Rage,” twelve nights—“humor strained;” “wit coarse;” “ground-work flimsy;” “introduction of cheap slang.” “The World,” twelve nights—“after the stock model of the spectacular;” stripped of “accessories of the carpenter, tailor and milliner, it would not live a week.” “Member for Slocum,” six nights—“compromising situations;” “a sport decidedly blasé;” said to be an almost literal translation of a French farce. And these weeks at McVicker’s were sandwiched with such Sunday performances as “Cuckoo,” “Boccaccio” and

“MEMORIES OF THE DEVIL!”

At Hooley’s:—“Birds of a Feather,” seven nights—“What it needs is to be entirely re-written, without the retention of any feature of it as it is to-day.” “The Amateur Benefit,” seven nights—“Pretty Nellie McHenry is as jolly and as frolicsome as ever.” “49,” eight nights—“One-half given to semi-pictorial representation; the other half made up of nondescript supposed to be slang of mining camp, embellished with drinking and gambling-house rows, and padded with occasional platitudes to tickle the upper circle.” “Danites,” six nights—“Strong points, kicking the Chinamen, and his ‘demme,’ and the expression ‘infernal cuss.’”

Such are the exhibitions given night after night in the four leading theaters before the men and women and youth of our city. Nor is even this all. Often interjected in these exhibitions are quips and jests and exposures and gestures meant to

APPEAL TO THE LOWER ELEMENTS ;

interpolations of "unprovoked and gratuitous profanity and double entendre" and vulgarisms that are not down in the plays!

These statements are not born of a heated clerical imagination. This is the voice of the daily press, going all these months past unchallenged. It is the press that speaks of this vile trash I have named as the "later spawn of lirts and kickshaws which an easy public has permitted to be paraded." It is the press that calls the present condition of the theater a "disgraceful descent into the darkest ages of the drama." It is the press that alludes to a "contemporary stage overloaded with frippery and filth, and often grossly mismanaged by licentious and mercenary hucksters." It is the press (*New York Post*) that says "there has probably been a greater mass of meretricious rubbish (interpreted as 'appeal to baser instincts,' 'feverish slop,' 'nauseous twaddle,' etc.) set on the New York stage during the last ten years than during the whole of its previous existence!" It is the press (*Chicago Times*) that says "trash of the most unadulterated description has largely taken possession of the stage." It is the press that says, "Twenty-five years ago such an exhibition as is nowadays nightly made in this class of amusements (modern comic opera) in the most matter-of-fact way, would have gone nigh to landing the whole party

IN THE POLICE STATION!"

But are there no clean plays? Yes, there are clean plays and clean players. But they are like Gratiano's "two grains of wheat

hid in two bushels of chaff." Plays must be sensational to be effective; must be a representation of active passions to be popular. There is a whole class of plays that turn on criminal passion between the sexes, while murder, abduction, marital infidelity, injured honor and revenge abound in the drama. Even "Pendragon" hinges on adultery; and, pure as the character of Arthur is, it must have, forsooth, the foil of his wife's shame and dishonor. So the proof of Arthur's most honored Knight's guilt is found in the woods, and the Knight himself is caught in Arthur's wife's bed-room. Adultery is bad enough on trial before a court, where it is necessarily arraigned for punishment. But it is immeasurably worse in its demoralizing effects as set forth on the stage, where the story of the iniquity is often told with voluptuous heat of illicit love, and amidst thrill of music and gorgeous scenic surrounding.

This is no new thing.

EVER SINCE EURIPIDES.

play-writers have delighted in the representation of criminal and unnatural passions. It is true, villainy is commonly punished in these plays, but the villainy is often given such dash and daring and bravado, and is so set round with attractions and is pursued with such utter abandon and intoxication of delight that many a youth is led to prefer the way to destruction and the devil, because the journey can be made in such a blaze of glory. Take "Led Astray" for example, and, though the crime is followed by the penalty, the whole tone and coloring show that "the treatment is that of a hater of the penalty, and not that of a hater of the crime."

Christians of Chicago, moral men and women, lovers of clean homes and pure, sweet lives, what do you think of all this? Look at the record! Face the facts! And judge ye!

THE INDICTMENT.

I charge that the theater is often “a murderous assault upon all that the family circle holds most holy and sacred.”

I charge that it strips young women of their ordinary attire, and exhibits them to the public gaze so clad that to the eye of the audience they seem, and are meant to seem, almost naked! You do not need to be told why that is done.

I charge that the shafts of wit flung across the stage are often feathered from very obscene fowl.

I charge that the theater is the channel through which the filth and pollution of lewd and lascivious play-writers is poured into the minds of young men and young women, thus poisoning the very springs of our social life.

I charge that the great mass of what has been put upon the boards of Chicago’s theaters the last year has been trash of the most unadulterated description, often passing into the realm of

THE FILTHY AND THE VICIOUS.

And off the hand-bills of the theaters and out of the mouths of theatrical press writers, I have brought the proof that these charges are true.

To all this it may be said that these same witnesses testify to much that is excellent and praiseworthy on the theater boards—that these citations are “disjointed and disconnected utterances without reference to the context.”

But I would like to be told how purity on the stage justifies pollution, and what effect any “context” can have on

“PROFANITY,” OR “DOUBLE ENTENDRE,”

or “immodest exposure,” or “nauseous twaddle,” or “appeals to baser instincts?” For instance, I have said a theatrical critic speaks

of a certain play as exhibiting an "uncalled-for display of feminine figures which runs through the whole evening, and in some junctures trembles along the verge of the positively shocking." Can any "context," however chaste and pure, wash out that foulness or palliate that appeal to lust? When a man swears he swears, doesn't he? He may put reverent speech alongside his oath, but that "context" does not make it any the less an oath.

Let us not be blinded to the real issue in this case. When a book opens with pages of immorality and filth and closes with pages of indecency, and is interlarded here and there with oath and obscene jest, who will believe that moral and Christian men and women ought to be buying that book because some of its pages contain only pure thought and speech, and are even freighted with a heavenliness of matter.

How long would Christian patronage be given one of our churches whose officers by any possibility should prevailingly fill its pulpit with Ingersolls, even though here and there they should pad the pulpit ministrations with an angel Gabriel? And if a Christian man denounced for its gross infidelity the church, the Christian institution, that did this thing, and called upon all Christians never to darken its door, what kind of an answer would it be to say: "My Dear Sir, your assault is indiscriminate—you forget our intermittent Gabriel.

NOT AN INDIVIDUAL MATTER.

This is not a question at all as to an individual actor or play, but as to an institution. The theater is not a man. And the theater, in the very language of theatrical press-writers, is "overloaded with frippery and filth, and often mismanaged by licentious and mercenary hucksters;" "trash of the most unadulterated description has largely taken possession of it;" scenes of "outrageous indelicacy," "disgusting," "positively shocking," "demoralizing," are

often on its boards; "twenty-five years ago such an exhibition as is nowadays nightly made (in modern comic opera) would have gone nigh to landing the whole party in the police station."

Where all this is true, it makes no difference whatever else is true. Spirits are being soiled with uncleanness; everything sacred in society is being assaulted; passions are stimulated; lust is begotten, and candidates are being made for the house of the strange woman.

What if it be also true that this dark programme of the theater is padded here and there with the so-called standard drama, to win the countenance and patronage of the most respectable and decent? I do not need to be told that to some extent it wins them. But neither do you need to be told, moral and Christian men and women of decent and cleanly homes, thus drawn to see an exceptional play of high and chaste form and tone, that you are quoted and paraded as friends and supporters of the establishment—an establishment three-fourths or nine-tenths of whose influence is pernicious and poisonous. Your patronage goes to swell the receipts of, and to give countenance to, the house whose common and most characteristic features are an offense to purity, to religion, and to God.

Now, while it would be utterly without warrant to assume that reputable patrons of the theater are all on the road to destruction, it is no assumption whatever to say that their patronage is giving sanction to an institution that, throughout every year, is sending scores and hundreds on their way to destruction. And my appeal is to this class—and I make it again with all possible earnestness—to go not in the way of this evil thing.

THE CRY OF REFORM.

Now and then is heard a cry of reform. But a radical, permanent reformation of the theater is a phantasm—a dream.

The ideal stage is out of the question. It is out of the question, just as pure, chaste, public human nudity is out of the question—i. e., with men and women as they are now constituted. The nature of theatrical performances, the essential demands of the stage, the character of the plays and the constitution of human nature, make it impossible that the theater should exist save under a law of degeneracy. Its trend is downward; its centuries of history tell just this one story.

The actual stage of to-day—the stage as it now exists—is a moral abomination. In Chicago, at least, it is trampling on the Sabbath with defiant scoff. It is defiling our youth. It is making crowds familiar with

THE PLAY OF CRIMINAL PASSIONS.

It is exhibiting woman with such approaches to nakedness as can have no other design than to breed lust behind the on-looking eyes. It is furnishing candidates for the brothel. It is getting us used to scenes that rival the voluptuous and licentious ages of the past. Go to Naples, and look on the gathered proofs of Pompeii's profligacy and lust, if you would see whither we are swiftly moving. It is a startling question asked by one of the theatrical play-writers of the times: "To what extent will a continued progress in the same direction take us in the next twenty-five years?" To what extent, indeed! Good citizens, is it not full time we caught the alarm at these assaults on decency with which the very streets are now placarded? Is it not full time for every respectable man and woman to withhold countenance from the unclean thing, and to enter indignant protest against its gross immoralities?

OPEN LETTER FROM THE HON. E. C. LARNED TO THE
REV. HERRICK JOHNSON.

[*Chicago Tribune, January 31.*]

THE REV. HERRICK JOHNSON :

My Dear Sir—I have read with interest your discussion of the question whether Christian people ought to attend the theater. My conclusion upon this question was reached years since, and I take the liberty of stating it to you and the reasons upon which it is based :

1. It is clear that there is nothing which is essentially evil in dramatic representations themselves. The evils which sometimes attend such representations are due to abuses which do not necessarily form any part of them, such as bad plays, immodest dressing, dances, and the like.

2. The taste for dramatic representations has existed for a very long period, and is so deeply planted in human nature that it may be said to be ineradicable.

Such being the facts, the proper remedy for the evils and abuses alluded to is not to abolish the theater, which is not only unnecessary, but an impossibility, but to reform, elevate and refine it.

This can best be accomplished by good men giving their patronage to the theater when it offers dramatic entertainments which are unexceptionable in every respect, and declining to give it at any other time. Those who furnish this class of amusements are governed of course by pecuniary interest. They will give what will pay them the best. If the moral and religious class of the community will give them their patronage when they furnish what is moral and refined, it will soon become the interest of the proprietors of theaters to furnish nothing else, as that class would then furnish their largest support. If, on the contrary, good people

refuse to go at any time, no matter how unexceptionable the entertainments offered may be, they thereby render it for the interest of the theaters to pander to the tastes of the evil and the vulgar, who would then constitute their only patrons.

You yourself have applied the same principle to another kind of amusement—dancing—and advise your people to engage in those dances which are free from objection, and discountenance and decline the others.

This is the course which seems to me to be the judicious one with respect to the theater, and which to my mind seems the most practical and effective way of doing good in this direction.

That such a course would ultimately be attended with beneficial results is evidenced by the fact that the plays which of late years have had the greatest run, and have drawn the largest audiences, are those which have been the most free from all the objectionable features to which you allude, and in which there has been nothing immoral or indelicate, either in the play itself or in its acting: such plays, for instance, as "Hazel Kirke," "The Shaughraun," "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Rip Van Winkle," "Rosedale," "The Two Orphans," "Edgewood Folks," "Joshua Whitcomb," and others.

And the acting of such plays as Bulwer's "Richelieu," "The Lady of Lyons," and "Money," and the Shakespearean dramas, "Hamlet," "Julius Cæsar," "Macbeth," and "The Merchant of Venice," by such actors as Booth, Barrett and Irving, have not only been entirely free from anything wrong or objectionable, but have furnished intellectual entertainments of the highest order.

If the course which I have indicated was generally pursued by the better class in the community, and more especially the religious class, and they steadily and persistently gave their support to the theater when it furnished entertainments of an entirely unexceptionable character, and refused to attend any others, it would, in

my judgment, be but a short time before everything objectionable either in the plays which were produced or in their mode of representation, would entirely disappear from the stage for the reasons before stated, and by that means there would be secured to a community whose intense business life certainly greatly needs the benefit of such recruiting influences, harmless pleasures affording delightful relaxation to overtaxed brains. And not only so, but the potent influence of a patronage so important as this would soon effect the suppression of all *Sunday* theatrical and operatic performances.

Standing in the hostile position to the theater in which you seek to place the entire religious community, its wishes could have no weight or influence whatever to suppress any of these evils, but constituting as it might (if the views I have suggested were carried into effect), the theater's most valuable support, its influence over it for good would be a most potent one. The voice of such a public would be feared, its approval desired, and its requests complied with.

The theater thus conducted would become not only one of the most delightful of entertainments, but also an educating influence of much value.

For further evidence in support of the position that such an improvement in the condition of our theaters may reasonably be looked for from the course I have suggested, I refer to the drama in Germany. An article upon the subject in the *Atlantic Monthly* a few years since showed that the theater there was universally attended by the very best class of people in the community, and that the very best plays were rendered by actors who were persons of character, who had a high social position, and were universally respected and held in equal honor with the members of the other professions.

It seems clear to my own mind, therefore, that the course which I have followed is the better course to pursue, having the best good of the community in view, and I shall deem it my duty to continue it until I can be fully convinced that I am mistaken.

Very respectfully,

E. C. LARNED.

OPEN LETTER FROM THE REV. HERRICK JOHNSON
TO THE HON. E. C. LARNED.

[*Chicago Tribune, February 7.*]

TO THE HON. E. C. LARNED :

My Dear Sir—I have read your open letter about the theater. I recognize the frankness and courtesy of the discussion. Your known character and position make it impossible to believe that you have not the best welfare of society in view. It is the more to be regretted, therefore, that in this instance you are seeking that welfare by such mistaken method. That it is mistaken let me try to show.

I have charged and proved that the theater is often a murderous assault upon all that the family circle holds most holy and sacred ; that it exhibits young women in grossly immodest and indecent approaches to nakedness ; that the shafts of dramatic wit are often feathered from very obscene fowl ; that lewd and lascivious playwrights make nests of unclean birds, and then use the stage upon which to make exhibitions of their foul progeny ; that the great mass of theatrical representations in our city the past year has been trash of the most unadulterated description, often passing into the realm of the filthy and the vicious.

This is a terrible indictment. There is no quashing it. No one has attempted to quash it. The proof is out of the mouths of theatrical press-writers, word for word, and is unchallengeable. Constant theater-goers by the score have admitted it to be true. I understand that you, sir, admit it to be true, for you distinctly state

that "bad plays, immodest dressing, dances and the like," sometimes attend dramatic representations.

If that indictment were brought against a *man*, and sustained, charging him with publicly flouting filth, and prostituting morals, and exhibiting indecency, he would be socially ostracised. Respectable society would not tolerate him. But wherein is the man worse than the institution?

Two replies are made to the indictment; not in denial of its ruth, but to break its terrific force:

1. "There are good as well as bad plays;" clean as well as dirty players. Of course there are. But what of it? The same institution mounts the good and the bad plays. The same management pockets the profits. The same theater-board welcomes alike the clean and the dirty players. If a witness lies half the time and tells the truth the other half, his truth-telling makes him none the less a liar. If a man is vulgar, obscene, immodest and licentious four days in the week, and chaste and decent the other three, will you rush to his bosom the three days, enamored of his immaculateness? "Let the filth flow over the boards," says the theatrical management. "Crack your quips and jests at things sacred, ye profane players. Dress as near to nature as you please, young women. Indulge in 'immoral intrigues' and 'immoral maxims' and 'adulterous liaisons.' Welcome, *Camilles, Adriennes, Felicias*, females of easy virtue! This is the season for the world, the flesh and the devil." And so the carnival of filth and lust goes on. But presto! at intermittent occasions all this is changed. And the same theatrical management is heard saying, "Come, now, good Christians, come to my theater. This is the moral drama." Comment is superfluous.

2. The second reply to the indictment is this! "There are bad actors, but there are bad ministers!" I do you the justice to say that this reply is not yours. It came, I am ashamed to acknowl-

edge, from a so-called minister of the Gospel. But the reply was made. It is often made. One of the actors (Florence) made it in the *Tribune*. But the very words in which he stated it showed its utter absurdity. "See the church trials," he said; "the ministers convicted of immorality." Ah! Whoever heard of theater trials convicting *actors* of immorality? This is just the world-wide difference. The church deals with her badness, tables charges against it, and, if she can prove the charges, convicts and punishes by suspension, excommunication or deposition. The theater allows her badness to flaunt itself in the face of the public, glories in the shame of her filth, welcomes and applauds the men and women who get into "compromising situations," and would receive with a wild guffaw the young innocent who should suggest a theatrical "trial" in the interests of decency.

You hold that the proper remedy for these fearful evils and abuses is "not to abolish the theater, but to reform, elevate and purify it." And you say, "This can best be accomplished by good men giving their patronage to the theater when it offers dramatic entertainments which are unexceptionable in every respect, and declining to give it at any other time." In favor of this course, you urge that it will compel clean plays on the ground of pecuniary interest. Theater managers "will give what will pay them best." And further on you say: "The plays which of late years have had the greatest run and have drawn the largest audiences, are those in which there has been nothing immoral or indelicate either in the play itself or in the acting." But how is this? If "Hazel Kirkes," and "Rip Van Winkles," and the like clean plays are having such runs and getting such audiences, why are we not having an uninterrupted succession of "Hazel Kirkes" and "Rip Van Winkles?" If this is the way to reform the theater, why doesn't it reform? It is getting worse and worse we all know. He that runs may read that. In this country, its ex-

hibitions of woman were never so shameful, and its appeals to lust were never so frequent and so vile. Yet you say the way to reform the theater is to patronize clean plays, and "of late years" clean plays "have had the greatest runs and the largest audiences." Are you not "hoist with your own petard?"

Still, with what seems to me a sad, blind, optimistic confidence, you persist in the judgment that if "the religious class" would "steadily and persistently give their support to the theater when it furnished entertainments of entirely unexceptionable character, and refused to attend any others, it would be but a short time before everything objectionable, either in the plays produced or in their mode of production, would entirely disappear from the stage."

I marvel at your confidence. With what a smile it has been met. It is honest, I doubt not; but it is born of a theory. Let me prick the theory with a few pointed facts. I bring you face to face with the witnesses.

A dramatic critic of this city says: "There never was a prior time in its (the theater's) history when it had the support and encouragement of the brilliant, educated, moral and religious people it now enjoys." A Christian editor of this city says, editorially: "There are thousands of people in Chicago as much in favor of sobriety, modesty and Christian progress as Dr. Johnson, *who are regular theater-goers.*" Mr. McVicker speaks in a personal letter to me of "his friends of the church." I happen to know, and to my sorrow, that there is too much truth in all this. I have lived in large Eastern cities, and I have never known anything like such prevalent Christian patronage of the theater as here.

Now clearly, on your theory, we ought to be seeing some signs of reform. Such large, brilliant, constant Christian patronage ought to be producing some fruit. But what are the facts? These. I call again the dreadful, inescapable witnesses, the theatrical press writers,

quoting their very words. They speak of this "later spawn of lilt and kickshaws which an easy public has permitted to be paraded;" of "the American appetite of late years for dramas in which the female characters are chiefly conspicuous for a lack of chastity;" of the present "disgraceful descent into the darkest ages of the drama;" of a "contemporary stage overloaded with frippery and filth, and often grossly mismanaged by licentious and mercenary hucksters;" of "trash of the most unadulterated description" as having "largely taken possession of the stage;" of "exhibitions nightly now made" in comic opera that "twenty-five years ago would have gone nigh to landing the whole party in the police station." And all this, though "there never was a time in the theater's history when it had the support and encouragement of the brilliant, educated, moral and religious people it now enjoys!"

My dear Sir, do not the facts play the mischief with your theory? Christian men and women of Chicago, what do you think of this fruit of your patronage of the moral drama? Look at the vile things that greet every passer-by on the bulletin-boards! Consider that a man was arrested the other day for selling obscene pictures, and afterward discharged because the pictures were proved to be advertisements of a play about to be brought out at one of the theaters! Think how the filthy and polluting streams continue to flow from these theatrical fountains; giving us, since the new year opened, "Camille," of which a press writer says: "It is an objectionable play, not merely because of its assumed indecency, but for the greater reason that it parades the indecent without justification;" giving us "Only a Farmer's Daughter," whose "dialogue and incidents," according to a dramatic critic, "are disgusting when not ridiculous," and whose leading character is "handled with a coarseness that degrades the actress, and should shock an audience;" giving us "Felicia," of which a theatrical press writer says: "It is a very

Frenchy French play," which means a play "noted for indelicacy of plot, and general laxity of morals, on the part of the leading characters."

Deeper and deeper the theater is going into the mire, and still you hold it to be the duty of good men to support the theater! To what fathomless depth in the pools of indecency, obscenity and lust, must the theater go before a Christian conscience shall be evoked that will nail dramatic instinct to the cross of ungratified desire, and let it die there, rather than bring the sanction of a Christian name, and trail the garment of a Christian profession through the portals opening to such uncleanness!

But your proposed method of reforming the theater will no more bear the test of mathematics, than it will the test of Christian principle. The really religious people, who really want "everything objectionable" swept off the stage, so that there shall be nothing whatever in the play or the acting indelicate or unchaste or trashy, are but the merest fraction of the vast, mixed masses that make up the population of the city. Yet, you say this class will give the theaters their patronage "when they furnish what is moral and refined. It will soon become the interest of the proprietors to furnish nothing else, as that class would then furnish the largest support." *Mirabile dictu!* Will two and two make five? Will one-tenth outweigh nine-tenths? If it were a question of character, yes. But it is a question of dollars at the box-office. And I can imagine the theater managers puzzling their heads over the problem how the patronage of one-tenth or one-twentieth of the population is going to run up the profits far more than the patronage of nine-tenths or nineteen-twentieths. It is evident, therefore, that the figures play as much mischief with your theory as the facts.

You refer to "the drama in Germany" in support of your position. But if we may judge from the German drama in America,

as given at McVicker's, the support is a broken reed. We hardly want continental theaters, and continental Sabbaths, and continental morals, if they are going to give us such performances as "Cuckoo" and "Memories of the Devil" on Sunday nights! I question whether the theater in Germany is the cleanly and sweet thing you are led to believe, when G \ddot{o} ethe and Schiller, "twin sons of Jove," joined their genius in a determined effort to elevate it and make it clean, and confessedly failed.

No, my dear Sir, history should teach us that a radical, permanent reformation of the theater—with men and women as they are now constituted; with such passions wakeful and clamorous in many bosoms, and sleeping in many more—is as much out of the question as pure, chaste, public, human nudity is out of the question. When the devil is gotten out of the heart of man, and "Paradise lost" is "regained," we may have the one as we can have the other.

The stage, meanwhile, from the necessities of the case, will be "a school of morals" and *immorals*. "You can't make a play strong," says Mr. Golden, the actor, "without introducing all sides and phases of the questions and motives and the elements of character and life." "The play would be worthless," says another actor, "if it did not depict the very features condemned." "The most popular plays," says the *Inter Ocean*, "take life as it is seen about us. Men and women are portrayed as nearly like what they are in the social conditions of real life as the requirements of the stage and the ability of the authors will allow." This is the very difficulty. The mirror ought not to be "held up to nature." Some "sides and phases" of life ought not to be reproduced on the stage before a promiscuous assemblage of decent men and women. That which is vile and vicious gets publicity enough without being flung with scenic attraction and sensuous music into the face of a great audience. What matter though virtue be placed alongside of vice and

be given the victory on the stage? It will not help virtue to victory in the hearts before the stage. See the effect of "Daniel Rochat." I have it from an eye-witness. This blatant infidel roars out his insolent and infamous scoff at God and religion, and the theater roars with applause, while the few Christians in the audience hang their heads with very shame. If a decent publishing house will drop the *North American* for flaunting Ingersollism from its pages, shall a Christian public patronize a theater that allows the defamation of everything a Christian holds sacred?

Reform it by discriminating patronage when it has within itself the seeds of corruption, and exists only under a law of degeneration! Impossible!

Rome issued edicts in the interest of theatrical reform, but the decline of the empire and the decline of the stage went on together. Goethe and Schiller battled for reform in Germany, but Goethe was ingloriously dismissed from the charge of the Weimar Theater because he would not furnish vulgar dramatic entertainment. He saw and confessed at last that he had been struggling vainly against the stream. Reform movements have been organized again and again in England, and again and again they have ended in defeat. Under the Commonwealth the theaters were at one time closed, but under the dissolute reign that followed they were opened again, and grew worse than ever. Hannah More, whom Garrick called "The Tenth Muse," wrote plays of a high character, that won warm commendation from the famous men of her day. But despairing of the reformation of the stage, she withdrew and renounced her dramatic productions in any other light than as mere poems, her own words being that she did not "consider the stage in its present state as becoming the appearance or countenance of a Christian."

And so it has been evermore for over two thousand years, in every age, under every clime, by every agency. Solons, emperors,
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poets, actors, parliaments, managers, play-writers, ministers, statesmen, all have found, as they have sought to realize the ideal stage, that the ideal stage is a phantom—a dream. If it were otherwise, surely its advocates and defenders should be able to point to one clean, chaste dramatic house that has stood the test of time without allowing filth on its boards. There is not one on earth—not one.

Yours, respectfully,

HERRICK JOHNSON.

THE HON. E. C. LARNED'S SECOND OPEN LETTER.

[*Chicago Tribune, February 9.*]

THE REV. HERRICK JOHNSON :

Dear Sir—I have read your letter in the *Tribune* of the 8th in reply to mine.

Permit me before writing further to express the high esteem and respect in which I hold you personally.

I am very sure that the sole purpose which we either of us have in this discussion is to arrive at just conclusions.

I have examined your letter with care, and am unable to perceive that it furnishes any satisfactory reply to the views previously advanced by me.

In the first place, your letter does not deny the two propositions upon which my former argument was based: (1) That there is nothing essentially evil in dramatic representations. (2) That the taste for them has existed for a very long period, and is so deeply rooted in human nature that it may be said to be ineradicable.

These positions being admitted, the conclusion seemed to me to follow that the best course for religious men to take in regard to the theater was to strive to reform and purify what they could not destroy, and to redeem for the benefit of the community what was not

in itself evil, and when thus improved might become a means both of harmless recreation and useful instruction.

I stated that the possibility that such an improved condition of the theater might be brought about was evidenced by the fact that the best plays and those the most entirely unobjectionable in every respect were the ones which had had the longest run and received the largest patronage. I instanced among others "Hazel Kirke," which had been run for many hundred nights to crowded houses, and still retains its hold upon the public favor. The facts so stated by me are not questioned by you and are not deniable.

I also instanced the present condition of the stage in Germany. I asserted that the course which I deemed the wise one of having the moral and religious part of the community attend the theater when its performances were unobjectionable had been carried out there to the fullest extent, and the result had been that the theater there was unexceptionable; the best plays were produced and the actors themselves were persons of excellent character, who were generally received in the best society. For the truth of these statements I referred to a well-considered article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, appearing to have been written by a person thoroughly cognizant of the facts. These facts have since been further confirmed to me by the statements of an intelligent Christian lady of this city who resided for some time in Germany and attended the theater there frequently with the greatest pleasure and satisfaction.

The only reply which you make to these statements (which, if correct, certainly have a most important bearing upon the question) is to guess that they can't be true because Gæthe and Schiller nearly a hundred years ago attempted unsuccessfully to reform the literature of the stage there.

You further allude in this connection to some German plays which have been produced in this city. I have never seen or read the plays

you name, and am not able, therefore, to express any opinion as to the character which you ascribe to them. But whether the plays which the German companies have acted here are good or bad does not alter the fact that the theater in Germany is universally attended by the best classes in that country with the results which I have stated.

If, then, these facts are as stated, they show not simply that the reform which I anticipated from the course I have been advocating is probable, but that it has actually been realized.

You, however, object to moral and religious people attending the theater when it produces what is unobjectionable, upon what seems to me such an extraordinary method of argument, that I can hardly persuade myself you are in earnest.

You gravely contend that it is impossible there should be good things at the theater at *any* time, because there are bad things sometimes. You say, "If a witness lies half the time, and tells the truth the other half, his truth-telling makes him none the less a liar. If a man is vulgar, etc., for four days in a week, and chaste and decent the other three, will you rush to his bosom the three days?"

Is, then, every actor to be chargeable with all the sins and vices of every other actor? If Sara Bernhardt panders to licentiousness, by acting unclean French dramas, do Lawrence Barrett and Henry Irving thereby become immoral and unchaste? Institutions are not persons. Each actor and each theatrical representation stands or falls upon its own merits or demerits alone.

If you should undertake to carry out the same principle, in the same way, to other institutions, the absurdity of it would be at once apparent.

Does it follow, because in one church an atheistical free-thinker like Miln, denies the existence of God and of immortality, and the efficacy of prayer from its pulpit, that, therefore, we shall be con-

taminated by hearing other ministers pray to God, and proclaim His praises from the same pulpit, or by attending the Fourth Presbyterian Church, and hearing Dr. Johnson preach the pure principles of the Gospel ?

The press is another institution which utters forth both evil and good. Shall we refuse to read at all, because of the evil which it publishes ? Shall I not read your letter, denouncing the theater, because in the same paper there may be found vile and obscene reports of cases of adultery and other abominable offenses ?

The press is also constantly pouring forth works of fiction. Can there be a reasonable doubt that the vile productions of this class—the “yellow-covered literature” of the day ; the licentious and obscene publications of the French school—are doing more to corrupt our youth than all the theaters in the land ? Shall I, therefore, refuse to read Scott, and Dickens, and Thackeray and Miss Edgeworth ?

It is to the theater alone you seek to apply a different rule, and to insist that, because some theaters at some times produce bad plays in an improper manner, therefore, it is wrong to attend any theater, though it may produce good plays in an unexceptionable manner.

The ground upon which you seem to base so illogical a conclusion, in respect to the theater, is your own assertion that the theater cannot be improved or refined, and that good men are following a vain delusion in attempting it.

This seems to me a complete begging of the question. It is taking for granted the very point in controversy.

You have indulged in an extravagance of language in respect to the evils and abuses of the theater which is largely due, no doubt, to your entire want of any personal knowledge of the subject.

I have attended several of the theaters of our city with the ladies of my family on many occasions, and have never at any time seen the

“shameful exhibitions of woman,” or heard any of “the appeals to lust” which you say are so frequent and so vile. On the contrary, upon such occasions we have not discovered anything objectionable either in dress or in language. There was, so far as I was able to perceive, nothing which could offend the taste of the most refined and virtuous woman.

In truth, I think that most ladies who have attended the best productions of the drama at our leading theaters will agree with me in the opinion that there is much more of indelicacy in expression and in suggestion in some portions of your letter than in anything which they ever heard on such occasions. You have either obtained the second-hand information upon which your argument and your vehement phillippic against the theater is so largely based from critics who attend low theaters or have gathered them from their criticisms upon specific plays of an objectionable character, and it is highly probable that the very criticisms from which you quote to some extent expressed the public dissatisfaction with the performance, and were not unfrequently the means of rendering the play unpoplar. You have produced no such criticisms upon the dozen or more plays which I specified, and to which I could add scores of others equally unobjectionable.

Nor is it, in my opinion, correct, as stated in your letter, that the theater is “going deeper and deeper into the mire,” or “that we all know it is getting worse and worse.” So far from this being the case, every man at all familiar with the subject knows that there has been a steady improvement in its condition during the last thirty or forty years. When I was a young man, every theater had its bar where liquors were sold, and its “upper tier” the open and notorious resort of disreputable women. No respectable theater has either of these to-day, and no careful observer can fail to see that the plays which now chiefly attract the public are those which are the most

unobjectionable. What immoral or indecent plays have had any such run as "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Hazel Kirke," "Rip Van Winkle," or "The Shaughraun?"

I fully sympathize with you in your detestation of low theaters, and of their vile handbills, nor have I words to express the indignation and loathing with which I regard the infamous concert saloons, of which hundreds exist in our city, where our youths are lured into habits of drunkenness and debauchery, but shall I therefore decline to attend a concert of the Beethoven Society at Music Hall?

Now, the improvement which I contend has taken place in the theater has been effected under only a very limited application of the principles for which I have contended.

While it is true that a portion of the moral and religious class have attended the theater when its performances were unexceptionable, and to this is doubtless due some of the improvement which has been gained, it is also true that under the influence of such teaching and preaching as yours upon this subject, by far the larger portion of the religious people have not done so, and so the great power of reform and purification of the theater which ought to have been brought to bear upon it by the united action and influence of this class has not been secured.

If the moral and religious portion of the community, *as a whole, with ministers and people*, would give their support to the theater when it produced unexceptionable plays in an unexceptionable manner, and, at no other time, its influence to refine and elevate the theater would, in my opinion, be absolutely irresistible, and every abuse and evil would rapidly disappear before it.

For I trust that you cannot be really in earnest in estimating the proportion of the moral and religious class in our community, who would desire to promote such reform, to be only in the proportion of one to ten!

It were indeed a sad state of things if this were a true estimate. If, indeed, the moral and religious people constitute but "one-tenth" of our population, and the low and vicious nine-tenths, I should have no hope of reforming the theater or anything else in a community like that. This estimate of yours does, as I think, great injustice. I, on the other hand, believe that the moral and virtuous portion of the community constitute the larger part, and certainly of that portion of our citizens who have the ability to attend the theater, they would constitute so much the greater proportion that their patronage would be of more value to theatrical proprietors than that of any other class in the community, and their united opinion and action could undoubtedly exert a controlling influence upon the theater.

And, then, it is undoubtedly true that the power of the moral and religious portion of our community to bring about such a reform, has been greatly impaired by their not being sufficiently careful and conscientious in acting upon the principle which I have advocated. They have allowed themselves too often to go to the theater when the plays which it produced were not unobjectionable, and when their representations were attended with some of the improprieties to which you have alluded. In so doing, they have given their influence in support of what is evil and immoral in the theater, and, instead of promoting reform, have done much to delay and prevent it.

If religious people pursue the course which I have recommended of attending the theater when it presents unexceptionable plays in an unexceptionable manner, they must bear in mind, that they have a grave responsibility, not only to their own conscience, but to the community, in respect to the course which they pursue in this regard.

They must be extremely careful, and conscientiously scrupulous in their actions. They must carefully inquire into the character of the plays which are offered; and, when there is even a doubt in

respect to them, must decline to attend. In this way only, can they exert any beneficial influence in favor of the desired reform.

This is a community of intense and engrossing business life. As a rule, we are heavily overworked, and bear burdens and responsibilities which are trying and oppressive. Is it not desirable that such a community should have relaxation and amusement? Nay, is it not indispensable to its best life? What amusement more delightful than a good play, or what affords a more complete respite from care, or brings to jaded and overtaxed nerves a more refreshing and tranquillizing influence?

And if, when properly conducted, there is nothing essentially evil in the theater, and, on the contrary, it may produce much beneficial and helpful results, is it worth while to give up such an institution to the devil? Is it not desirable to make all possible effort to purify and elevate it, and so reclaim it to the service of humanity?

I do not believe you will find that any real good will come from the wholesale and indiscriminate abuse of an institution which is so deeply rooted in human nature as the theater, and which it is not in the power of the pulpit to overthrow. While I, on the other hand, entertain a confident hope that when the views which I have expressed shall have become more generally and more conscientiously acted upon by the moral and religious classes of our people, it will not be long before the theater, freed from the evils which now often attend it, but which do not of necessity inhere in it, will become as harmless as it is agreeable, and will afford a most useful and valued means, both of entertainment and of instruction to our community.

Having thus replied to the chief points made in your letter, and stated my views more fully, the discussion, so far as I am concerned, is closed, and I am quite content to leave the issue to the enlightened judgment of thoughtful and discriminating minds.

Very respectfully, yours,

E. C. LARNED.

DR. JOHNSON'S SECOND REPLY.

[*Chicago Tribune, February 16.*]

TO THE HON. E. C. LARNED:

My Dear Sir—The exceeding rarity of gentlemanly courtesy in this theatrical discussion makes your exhibition of the grace refreshing. The amenities are consistent with intense convictions, and I would not be understood as bating my estimate of your motive in further, and with all possible emphasis antagonizing your method.

And now to your letter. You say I do not deny your two propositions: 1. That there is nothing essentially evil in dramatic representations. 2. That the taste for them has existed for a very long period.

Why should I deny them? Assent goes without saying. But neither will you deny: 1. That there is nothing essentially evil in human nakedness. 2. That the taste for it, and for many other things that need not be named, is a good deal older than the taste for dramatic entertainments. Yet you do not need to be told that if we have nude nature we must get back into Eden or go down into savagery.

So I believe if we have the theater we must have a regenerated and sanctified human nature, or we must have more or less of unchasteness and filth on the boards. The ideal stage is out of the question, as men and women are now constituted. Theatrical reform, radical and permanent, is impossible without a deeper reform that shall pervade society, the home and the heart, and go to the very roots of human character.

You think otherwise. You have a shorter cut. In your judgment, discriminating Christian patronage of the theater as it is, will make the theater what it ought to be. In my judgment, this theory

of reform flies in the face of figures, facts and morals. It seems to me not only quixotic and visionary, i. e., indefensible at the bar of common sense, but unsafe and compromising, i. e., indefensible at the bar of Christian ethics.

Let me restate these points, and show how they are set round "with confirmation strong as proof from holy writ:"

First, the figures. Your theory of reform goes to pieces on a simple sum in addition. Count up the really moral and religious people who can be persuaded to attend theatrical performances, yet who will not tolerate by their presence at the theater anything indelicate or profane, and what proportion will they bear to the whole community? The veriest tyro in statistics would be swift with an approximate answer, and it would be away down below one-tenth. This little bundle of statistics nods its head defiantly at your theory.

The theaters are crowded, and they pay. Notwithstanding the vulgarity and obscenity, they pay. If these crowds wanted "everything objectionable" swept from the stage, don't you think they would soon find a way of getting it to the ears of the managers? Men stamp out of church sometimes, mad at some truth they hear. Did you ever know of a moral theater-goer walking out of the theater in indignant protest against a double entendre or a scoff at religion? No. They sit it through. They do not burn with righteous indignation much. They are not bursting with the spirit of reform. They are not there for reform. They are there for amusement, and they are willing to take it with a little so-called "spice" rather than make a fuss about it. They are not "low and vicious," but dilettanti. And such is not the stuff reformers are made of.

Secondly, the facts. Your theory of reform can no more stand the facts than it can the application of a little arithmetic.

The facts are, (1) that the theater in this city and country never had the support and encouragement of moral and religious people it now enjoys; (2) that the theater here was never so bad. Clearly, if Christian patronage is going to reform the theater, the reform ought to begin. But the grade is downward. The theater is growing worse and worse.

Quick to see how your theory is hopelessly sure to lose its head in "butting against these two stubborn things," you meet the first fact with an "if" and the second fact with a denial.

As to the first fact you say, "If the moral and religious portions of the community *as a whole, with ministers and people* (italics yours), would give their support to the theater," etc. In other words, you admit the increased Christian patronage, but it isn't enough and discriminating enough to start the reform. You must needs have the entire body of Christians, "as a whole, ministers and people," crowding the theaters on clean nights, to get the theaters washed of uncleanness on other nights. By the time you have gotten the whole church on that crusade there will be plenty of the reformation host themselves needing reformation, for Christian theater-going has never yet been known to contribute to spirituality, as it has never yet been known to contribute to theatrical reform.

But you again instance the present condition of

THE STAGE IN GERMANY.

You assert that your theory of reform "has been carried out there to the fullest extent, and the result has been that the theater there is unexceptionable." You cite a writer in the *Atlantic*, and an intelligent Christian lady of this city in confirmation. I do not question at all the sincerity of either. But testimony on such a matter depends for its value on point of view and extent of observation. A German gentleman of this city tells me he has heard "Camille"

at the Court Theater in Berlin. And "Camille" is one of the worst plays on the stage—as this gentleman styles it, "the glorification of a harlot." He says "Adrienne Lecouvreur," which Mojeska and Rachel, as well as Bernhardt, have rendered, "could be played on any stage in Germany." And "Adrienne Lecouvreur" is a drama "sustained almost throughout by two adulterous liaisons." Something is still the matter with the German stage. The theater there, I think you will now admit, is not quite "unexceptionable."

As to the second fact, that the theater in this city and country was never so bad, you deny it.

You say, "Every man at all familiar with the subject knows that there has been a steady improvement in its (the theater's) condition during the last thirty or forty years." And you also say that I have indulged in an "extravagance of language in respect to the evils of the theater," largely due to my "entire want of any personal knowledge of the subject."

Well, let us see. Must I personally go down into

"THE BLACK HOLE" OF CHICAGO,

before I can know it to be the vile cesspool the *Inter Ocean* has painted it?

Let us see again. You go to the theater on clean nights. You say moral and religious people "must carefully inquire into the character of the plays which are offered, and when there is even a doubt in respect to them, must decline to attend." I take it for granted you obey your own law; and you go to the theater only when you know beforehand that the play to be produced is unobjectionable and attended by no improprieties. And now your testimony is, "I have attended several of the theaters of our city with the ladies of my family on many occasions, and have never, at any time, seen any of the 'shameful exhibitions of women,' or heard

any of 'the appeals to lust,' which you [I] say are so frequent and so vile." Perfectly wonderful. You make sure, by careful inquiry beforehand, that the play is to be clean, and then you go, and find no filth. Perfectly wonderful!

Let us see again. You support your denial of the growing badness of the theater by one single fact—only this and nothing more. You say when you were a young man "every theater had its bar where liquors were sold, and its 'upper tier,' the open and notorious resort for disreputable women. No respectable theater has either of these to-day." This is true. As a young man I was often at the theater, and I remember these things were so. But it is also true that now "the bar" is just outside the theater instead of being inside, and "disreputable women," instead of being in the "upper tier," are often crowded upon the stage. And I ask you if it were not better—incomparably better—to have disreputable women aloft in the gallery, decently clothed at least, and measurably out of sight, than in the full blaze of foot-lights, and in the full gaze of a promiscuous audience, stripped to shocking approaches to nakedness and appealing to lust?

When I was a boy, you could have attended the theater every night of the whole round year, and year after year, and you would have seen nothing like that.

When I was a boy, this insolent and flagrant

THEATRICAL VIOLATION OF THE SABBATH

was almost undreamed of. Now it is so common that Christian patrons of the theater will drop in at the play on Saturday nights with no qualms of conscience and as the merest matter of course, although they know that on the next night the same theater and the same manager and the same company with the same play will be making a mock of God's holy day.

But what is my "personal knowledge" on this subject, and what is yours, dear sir, compared with that of some others whom you seem to have forgotten, and whom I would again introduce to you, those dreadful, inescapable witnesses, the dramatic critics? I go to the theater on no nights. You go on clean nights. They go on all nights. They see the good and the bad. If anybody knows about the evils of the theater, and whether it is coming up out of the mire or going down deeper into the mire, they do. If they do not, who does?

And they are not likely to be so delicately fibered or such prejudiced prudes as to be easily shocked or led to raise a needless cry of alarm.

Let it be borne in mind, also, that their talk and mine is not about the worst class of theaters. You express your sympathy with me in my "detestation of low theaters and of their vile handbills." But I have said nothing about "low theaters" and "their vile handbills." My guns were shotted for the first-class establishments. They were purposely aimed at the four leading theaters in this city. Every word of that awful indictment applies to them, and theaters like them in other cities. If there is a deeper mire than these furnish, so much the worse for public virtue and decency; but it is not a matter in the present controversy, and must not be thrust in to divert attention from the play-houses that are laying such claim to respectability.

While on this point, however, let me quote from an American writer in a recent London *Contemporary Review*. Speaking of the New York theaters, he says: "A friend of mine who made a tour of them all was inclined to think that those patronized by the roughs in the Bowery were less immoral than those patronized by the residents on Fifth avenue." And he adds of the theater-going New Yorkers: "It is a matter of dispute whether they honestly enjoy good music as much as they enjoy immoral plays."

You see how this bears also on the question of trend—i. e., whether theaters are sinking deeper into the mire of filth or struggling out of it.

On this point your statement is: "Every man at all familiar with the subject knows that there has been a steady improvement in its (the theater's) condition during the last thirty or forty years." The sole support you bring to this sweeping statement I have already disposed of. And now let us hear the evidence on

THE OTHER SIDE.

The New York *Evening Post* says: "There has probably been a greater mass of meretricious rubbish (interpreted a little further down the column as 'appeal to baser instincts,' 'feverish slop,' 'nauseous twaddle,' etc.), set on the New York stage during the last ten years than during the whole of its previous existence!" Yet "every man at all familiar with the subject knows," etc. See above.

The Philadelphia *Press* says: "The stage has reached that point of degradation which Dr. Johnson deprecated and Byron deplored." And it speaks of "the mountebanks" of the play-houses, and "their disgraceful descent into the darkest ages of the drama." Yet "every man at all familiar with the subject knows," etc. See above.

The Chicago *Times* says: "Twenty-five years ago, such an exhibition as is now-a-days nightly made in this class of amusements (modern comic opera) in the most matter-of-fact way, would have gone nigh to landing the whole party in the police station." The *Times* critic, like all the others, is speaking of the first-class establishments. Turn to the file of the *Times* November 13, 1881, if you want the article. Yet "every man at all familiar with the subject knows," etc. See above.

Here is Mr. Henry F. Boynton entering this discussion. I do not know who he is, but he is evidently a friend and patron of the theater, who takes issue with me as you do about the

POSSIBILITY OF THEATRICAL REFORM.

He says in a letter to the *Tribune*, February 9: "The mess of rot and rubbish that is constantly being offered up for the delectation of Chicago theater-goers is simply appalling;" and "the pabulum offered to-day at most of our theaters—nay, more, at all of them, from London to Hong Kong, right around the world—is little better than trash." And he interprets the trash as that which "disgusts the discerning and contaminates the innocent spectator." Yet "every man at all familiar with the subject knows," etc. See above.

You may seek to break the force of this damaging evidence by calling it the extravagance of dramatic critics who are after a sensation. But the testimony is grounded on the distinct exhibition of the vileness and viciousness of individual plays. And to whom are we to go for knowledge of the theater if not to its most familiar friends and guardians?

But here are the actors themselves, from behind the scenes. What is their testimony? One in the *Tribune* February 11, who signs himself L. F. Southern, says: "In these times, entertainments in theaters are so indiscriminate, even in our most reputable play-houses, that I have known some of our best performers who have found it necessary to first attend and see a performance before they would allow their wives and daughters to go. Why was this necessary? Why, because they knew there was very little of cleanness in those places; and who better than they should know?"

Who better than they, indeed! Yet "every man at all familiar with the subject knows," etc. See above.

One more witness and I am done. When my indictment of the theater first appeared, a prominent and talented star actor was in the city, concededly among the most respectable, and of a national reputation. After he had read that array of charges and proofs he said (and I have the words from one who heard them fall from his lips): "Would to God I dared say all I know and feel about this matter.

BUT JOHNSON IS RIGHT;

only he has not told half the truth!" Yet "every man at all familiar with the subject knows," etc.

You probably agree with me, by this time, that I can afford to let this point go to the jury of public opinion.

The truth doubtless is that the actor quoted above, and whose name, if I should give it, would carry instant and great weight, is literally right, that I have "not told half the truth."

The evils of the theater are not all in the glare of the foot-lights, and very much that gets into the face of the audience does not get into print. While I have been on this theater investigation, often sickened, shocked, and made indignant at the unconcealed assaults on morality and decency, I can assure you doors have been opened to me whose revelations have been infamous, and of which I have not yet said a word.

Take this new French importation, "Odette," recently landed at New York and brought out at Daly's Theater, and which will, doubtless, soon be on its way to Chicago, and is it to be supposed that men and women can participate in rendering what the New York *Tribune* calls "that beatitude of glorious feminine wickedness" without the smirch of the foul thing striking a good deal deeper than their clothes?

And this brings me to the third point I proposed to restate and emphasize.

Thirdly.

THE MORALS.

The figures and the facts make your theory of reform quixotic and visionary, as I think I have abundantly shown. It fares no better, in my judgment, at the bar of Christian ethics. The theory seems to me unsafe and compromising.

It lets down the bars. However well meant, it lends countenance to the vile and the vicious. On the plea of a right to gratify dramatic instinct, it puts the moral and the religious to the support of an institution that is the open and notorious purveyor of trash, indecency and filth.

Look at it. It does seem to me this ought to be clear to any man born with a conscience. The moral and religious class select the intermittent clean nights. What do they patronize? The theater. Whom do they support? The management. That theater, thus patronized, stands revealed on its own open stage as prevaillingly a moral abomination. That management, thus supported, is branded with the dishonor of publicly and repeatedly debauching society and corrupting morals by its programme of vapid, sensuous and vicious plays.

What is your solitary reply to this? Why, that I gravely contend "that it is impossible there should be good things at the theater at any time because there are bad sometimes." I beg your pardon. What I do contend is that the good cannot wash out the bad, or take that brand of shame and dishonor from the management; and going to that theater supports the management.

You ask: "If Sarah Bernhardt panders to licentiousness by acting unclean French dramas, do Lawrence Barrett and Henry Irving thereby become immoral and unchaste? No. But if Sarah Bernhardt panders to licentiousness, Christians have no right to patronize the man who places her on the boards to do it! That should expose him to the scorn of purity and to social ostracism; not to

Christian countenance and patronage when he chooses to whitewash his theater boards.

You ask again: "Does it follow because in one church an atheistical free-thinker like Miln denies the existence of God from its pulpit, that therefore we shall be contaminated by hearing other ministers pray to God and proclaim His praises from the same pulpit?" Contaminated? No. And I have never said or thought you were personally "contaminated" in hearing a perfectly chaste and elevating play.

But, suppose the officers of a church, the management, continuously engage Ingersolls, and Milns, and Brigham Youngs, and men of like plumage for their pulpit supply, and at rare intervals furnish a week of Gabriel, would Christians count it promotive of doctrinal reform in that church and consistent with loyalty to their Lord to pay pew-rent there on the Gabriel Sabbath?

Once more—take your book illustration. You speak of the "yellow-covered literature"—the "licentious and obscene publications"—admittedly corrupting and defiling. And you ask: "Shall I therefore refuse to read Scott and Dickens?" Oh, no! But if a certain book has pages on pages of lewd and vicious pictures and stories, and here and there a little of sweetness and purity, like "Hazel Kirke," will decent people be justified in buying that book that they may enjoy "Hazel Kirke," even though they never look at the other pages? Or, if a bookseller stocks his shelves with "obscene publications" and expose them for sale, and sell them, pouring that stream of filth from his doors week in and week out, Sabbaths included, will Christians throng his doors with their patronage when he announces a week of Scott and Dickens?

Here is "Michael Strogoff," purchased, I understand, by the management at Haverly's, and running for weeks there. What is the secret of the success of "Michael Strogoff?" "Legs," says the *Inter Ocean* critic, on the very day your letter appears.

"Spangles and tights are the charm. Low-cut bodicés reveal the interest. Twoscore women and girls [think of it!] who look very pretty across the footlights, clad in an amazing economy of materials, winding gracefully in and out the figures of a dance, or coyly lifting neatly-booted feet above the straight line of sight, are attractive creatures to the average sense."

I appeal to you, and to every citizen like you—I appeal to that court in the royal realm of the conscience, whether every instinct of pure manhood and womanhood does not demand that the theater that will produce, the management that will provide, a play like that shall have no recognition whatever by decent society?

But the "Michael Strogoff" plays are not the worst. "Camille," "Adrienne Lecouvreur," "Odette" and the like, are insidious, fascinating, pathetic, and, therefore, the more satanic attempts to tear down every sacred shield about our homes and hearts. They are meant "to glorify a fascinating sinner, and make the world weep over her ruin." As the New York *Tribune's* dramatic critic says: "This beautiful animal bears no resemblance whatever to those tiresome females who rear their children in virtue and honor. No foolish fidelity to the prosy state of matrimony here—no straight-laced nonsense."

Again I appeal to the moral and Christian sense of this city whether it is not the duty of every moral and Christian man and woman never to darken the doors of a play-house, once guilty of putting such an outrage to decency as that upon its boards!

If you could find a theater that never pandered to licentiousness, the whole case would be changed, but I think you cannot find it the whole world round. At all events, I wish you joy of the search.

I am asked if I expect to abolish the theater. As if an evil that cannot be abolished must not be denounced, discountenanced and opposed! I no more expect to abolish the theater than the *Inter*

Ocean expects to abolish prostitution by its vigorous and commendable effort to break up the confederated, public and offensive iniquity of "The Black Hole."

HERE IS MY PROGRAMME,

if anybody cares for it:

1. The theatrical management held up to public scorn and social ostracism that deliberately arranges by purchase or hire, for the shameful exhibition of "women and girls," or the representation of plays whose heroines are courtesans gilding a shameless career with sensuous fascination.

2. A season of State prison made sure to the man or men guilty of the exhibition of licentious plays, just as it is provided now for the sale of licentious literature.

3. An aroused and sensitive public sentiment that would make patronage of an immoral play-house disreputable.

4. A conscience that would make every wearer of Christ's name willing to lose his right hand, rather than that hand should open the door to the theater, and so give to its moral abominations, even by appearance, the sanction of a Christian profession.

5. Meanwhile, an earnest, persistent, loving, aggressive preaching, by speech and life of that sweet and mighty Gospel, the touch of whose very garments has so often made pollution blossom into purity, to which we owe all we have of purity to-day in our hearts and homes, and the prevalence of which at last shall glorify all baseness and banish all filth.

One word more and I am done. You speak of the "indelicacy in expression and in suggestion" of some portions of my previous letter. If you will turn to the New Testament you will find the One Pure Heart and the hearts that were nearest like to that, mincing no words as they denounced impurity, licentiousness and lust.

Very respectfully yours,

HERRICK JOHNSON.

J. H. McVICKER TO DR. JOHNSON.

"You say, 'There is not a dramatic house that has stood the test of time without allowing filth on its boards; there is not one on earth, not one,' and after this sentence you sign yourself 'Respectfully, Herrick Johnson.' You should have signed, 'Slanderously, Herrick Johnson,' or 'Maliciously, Herrick Johnson.' If you will apply that assertion to McVicker's Theater, I will agree to convict you of libel or pay \$1,000 to any charity you may name."—*Extract from open letter of J. H. McVicker to Rev. Herrick Johnson, February 14, 1882.*

"But Dr. Johnson says he will not submit a great moral question like this to the verdict of a petit jury."

"Very well, then. I will let him select the jury. Or I will accept the suggestion of the *Inter Ocean*, and discuss the question with him before a jury whose verdict will have weight and be final. . . . I will argue the question with Dr. Johnson on the stage of Music Hall."—*Extract from reportorial interview with Mr. McVicker, published in the Inter Ocean, Tuesday, March 7, 1882.*

PROF. SWING'S ÆSTHETICS.

"He [Dr. Johnson] lacks that delicacy of expression which should be the eminent characteristic of one who writes against the sensuality of the theater. . . . He is inferior to almost all public writers and speakers in that quality of mind which cannot even think evil."

"It would be a pity if a purifier of dramatic literature should, in the pursuit of his end, display a familiarity with words more objectionable than those in the drama under his condemnation. It will have to be confessed that the sermons and letters of this clergyman against the drama are more of the earth earthly than is the average drama itself. This Johnsonian literature reminds one of that preacher in Canada who preached against dancing in such a peculiar manner that the dancing went on, but that the parson was himself discharged on account of the vulgarity of his discourse."—*Extract from the Alliance, signed "D. S."*

DR. JOHNSON'S ANSWER TO THE FOREGOING.

[*Chicago Inter Ocean, March 18.*]

TO THE EDITOR OF THE INTER OCEAN :

When a lawyer was once stating his point for the twelfth time, the judge interrupted him by saying, "You have made that point eleven times already." "True, your Honor," was the lawyer's reply ; "but there are twelve men on the jury." Fichte once wrote a philosophical tract entitled, "An effort to compel the reader to understand."

If the theater of this city is the moral abomination I have sought to represent it, the truth needs to be told and re-told, and with utmost plainness and intensity of speech. The case should be made so clear that the issue can by no possibility be mistaken. And a little apostolic "much outspokenness" is as needful now as it was in the days of Wycherley and Congreve. The thief won't come down from the apple-tree by shying tufts of grass at him.

Let me once more define the question. It is not whether some clean plays are on the boards. This is not denied. It is not whether some virtuous players may be found. This is not denied. It is not as to the drama, but the stage ; and not some ideal stage, but the stage of history and of to-day. It is not a personal question as affecting a particular manager or critic. Personal considerations should sink out of sight here. And to be eager for the glory of a personal victory becomes almost a crime in the presence of peril to a sacred cause, and in conflict with an evil threatening about every interest in the family and society worth conservation.

This is no question, therefore, for a petit jury, nor for the huzzahs of rival crowds at Music Hall ; but for the bar of intelligent public opinion. And there I bring it again, perfectly confident of the issue.

My arraignment of the theater has been for its frequent exhibitions of filth, its appeals to lust, its show of young women in grossly immodest and indecent approaches to nakedness, its assault upon all that the family circle holds most sacred, and its insolent profanation of the Sabbath.

In support of this terrible arraignment, I have cited the best dramatic critics of the leading papers of the three great cities—New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. Their testimony has been given word for word. Their characterization of individual plays has been overwhelmingly damaging and damning. Their witness to the general badness and downward trend of modern theatrical representation has been equally unqualified. And both actors and theater-goers have corroborated their testimony.

What is the answer to all this? Proof to the contrary? No. That would seem to be the thing to bring. But no one produces it. What do we get instead? Plenty of denunciation, a charge of "impurity of style," (!!) a challenge to a libel suit (!) and this statement: "If any one of these writers were called to the witness-stand and cross-examined it would destroy his (Johnson's) case." Positively this is all. These four, and nothing more.

As to the denunciation, let it pass. As to the "impurity of style" (!), well—ditto. As to the libel suit, ditto. As to the statement concerning the dramatic witnesses, it must be meant either that if cross-examined, they would testify to good plays as well as bad (which is not denied, and which does not affect the issue), or that, if cross-examined, they would be shown to lie. I hardly think the author of the quoted statement cares to take the position that the dramatic critics of the *New York Tribune*, the *New York Evening Post*, the *Philadelphia Press*, and the three leading dailies of Chicago, are liars, when they with entire unanimity and with no possible concert of action, write up the filth and immorality and

viciousness of the play-houses. If their words were defamatory and libelous, and not the sober, sad truth, the theater managers would have made it so hot for the critics they could not have kept their places a week.

But, whatever is meant by the above managerial statement, the witnesses are around, they are known and read of men. Why are they not cross-examined! Just now, it is the general impression, a badly damaged cause is in woeful need of some rebuttal.

THE FIVE POINTS.

The terrible indictment against the theater and the ample proof supporting it, are before the public. In the light of that indictment and that proof, I summed up the discussion with Mr. E. C. Larned by embodying substantially my view of the situation in a "programme" of action. It embraced five points.

To the first three points explicit editorial indorsement was given by the *Inter Ocean*, as follows:

The first three clauses of Dr. Johnson's programme will meet with general approval. He says:

1. The theatrical management held up to public scorn and social ostracism that deliberately arranges, by purchase or hire, for the shameful exhibition of "women and girls," or the representation of plays whose heroines are courtesans gilding a shameless career with sensuous fascination.

Respectable people can make no objection to that.

2. A season of State Prison made sure to the man or men guilty of the exhibition of licentious plays, just as it is provided now for the sale of licentious literature.

Correct again. But Dr. Johnson must not be the sole judge of what is licentious.

3. An aroused and sensitive public sentiment that would make patronage of an immoral play-house disreputable.

That is all right again, though, as before, Dr. Johnson must not be the judge.

Very well. The public shall be the judge. Tastes differ. Standards differ. It is supposable that even a petit jury might disagree on a question of moral filth! Whether men will regard a certain representation on the stage as an appeal to lust or not, a shameless exhibition of woman or not, a murderous assault on everything sacred in the family or not, will depend very much upon the mother who bore them, the nurture they have had, the company they have kept, and the soiling their spirits have gotten.

But I fearlessly appeal—notwithstanding the fact that the present fêted and dined and wined apostle of high æsthetics is a writer of lewd poetry, and, notwithstanding the fact that our one apostle of “sweetness and light” is more shocked by my “impurity of literary style” than by the impurity of the theater itself—I fearlessly appeal to the finer instincts and better moral judgments of the great body of intelligent and Christian men and women of Chicago. The case shall go to them. I submit the materials for judgment from the plays themselves. And that there may be perfect fairness, they shall be brought from the boards of the cleanest play-house in the city—McVicker's, who distinctly claims for the theater that it is, to use his own words, “an institution which, by its teachings, has always been one of the main supports of true Christian religion.”

In the very same paper in which Mr. McVicker's letter appears with the above claim, there is an account of a comedy. “The Two Klingsberg,” played in his theater the night before (Sunday night). The account represents the leading character of the comedy as “an old and conceited roue,” and says, “Mr. Hasse's life-like and brilliant rendition of the rich old roue more than compensates for the weakness and inconsistencies of the play.” Webster and Worcester

define *roue* "a person devoted to a life of sensuality ; a confirmed rake ; a debauchee."

The public must judge whether a "life-like rendition" of a "conceited roue" could be given on Sunday night so that the "brilliant work" would be "well enjoyed," without the presence of some moral filth.

OTHER PLAYS.

"The World" had two runs at McVicker's last year. The dramatic critic of the *Inter Ocean* says this play "can be gravely objected to from a moral point." But here is the plot, let the public judge. Two brothers. One goes to Australia—supposed to be dead. One disinherited—has mistress ; finally gets property and rejects his mistress. She, thus cast off, says in substance, "I picked you out of the gutter and you lived on the money I earned by vice. Now that you are a baronet, you cast me off. But I'll drag you in the mud again." Supposed dead brother returns. Suicide.

"Fresh" was given on the same stage. A dramatic critic says : "It is crammed full of the slang of the period, gathered from the street, the saloon, the race course—everything in fact." The public must judge whether that raking of the slums would produce filth, and especially when associated with ladies' costumes represented as "rather short-waisted at the top."

But there is another class of plays, the secret of whose success, according to the *Inter Ocean* critic, is "legs," "spangles and tights," and "low-cut bodices." "Olivette" is of this sort, as represented at McVicker's. It had two runs last year on that clean stage, which "has always been one of the main supports of true Christian religion." Between the two companies that gave it, the Soldene and the Acme, it is Hobson's choice as to decency. Mr. Henry F. Boynton said over his own signature in the *Tribune*, "It required two managers, one on each side of the stage, to keep that excessively lively

company (the Soldene) within bounds." By a clause in the contract "the curtain was to be rung down on the slightest hint or approach to vulgarity," i. e., they were to eschew their usual lewd practices, and put a check on their salacious actions. But the gross and outrageous vulgarity was the company itself. One need only look at the posters to see how the women were dressed, or rather not dressed. If their very exhibition was not an "appeal to lust," what was it? That this shockingly near approach to nakedness was wholly needless is evident from the fact that the Boston Ideal Company rendered "Olivette" at the Grand Opera House in a sailor costume that was at least full enough to show some little regard to decency.

If any one is disposed to question whether, after all, this almost nude exhibition of women and girls is demoralizing and vicious, or simply a matter of taste, let him in imagination conceive of any woman for whom he has the least respect thrusting herself thus into the eyes of an audience, and how immediate would be the shock, how total the revulsion of feeling, and how lost the woman would be regarded to every fineness and glory of womanhood.

Think of that watchful guardianship over those lascivious creatures, in those flesh tights, on that open stage, and all forsooth, to keep clean an institution which "has always been one of the main supports of true Christian religion."

STILL WORSE.

But plays of the "Olivette," "Michael Strogoff" and "Black Crook" sort, are not the worst. There is another class, subtle, insidious, pathetic, full of passion and tears, the leading character commonly embellished with animal beauty, with the maternal instinct, and with the glamor of a pathetic situation. The chief lesson is "the beatitude of glorious feminine wickedness." The career is one of betrayal of faith, infidelity to marriage, and license of lust,

generally closing with a spasm of remorse and an ounce of laud-anum, or some other form of the cowardly crime of self-murder.

Whether such plays have been produced at our cleanest theater, and whether they constitute a murderous assault on everything sacred in the family circle, the intelligent, moral and Christian public of this city can judge as well as I from the record. I have been through it, in part. It has been no welcome journey—sickening and shocking, rather. But it has been a revelation. Here are some “samples” of plots or “arguments.” Let me premise that they are no worse than others I do not name.

“Frou-Frou” was given last year at McVicker’s. Frou-Frou is the heroine. She is of great brilliancy and frivolity. Her hand is sought by a count, who confesses to the father, on coming to “talk marriage,” that he has a mistress in his own dwelling, but that he “left voluptuousness at home to follow virtue.” And so the play goes on; Frou-Frou marries a man she does not love, who gets content at last to have her “more Frou-Frou than ever.” And she at last abandons husband and child, running away with the aforesaid Count. Then came trouble, sickness, remorse, forgiveness, death. The play is full of compromising situations and allusions too indecent to be transcribed, and some of the suggestions are positively infamous.

“L’Etrangere” was given last year at McVicker’s. In this play a father boasts of having gotten “700 years of nobility in five minutes” by selling his daughter to an old Duke who he knew was still leading a fast life. Both the father and the Duke go on paying undisguised attention to “The Foreigner,” a woman who receives only men at her home, and who holds that “sentiments are values which must be represented by current funds.” Carnal criminalities are referred to as “a few little pastimes.” Marriage and home and love and virtue are trifled and played with as

so many footfalls. The whole play is a hot-bed of license and lust.

So is "The Sphinx" and "Hernani" and "Phædra," all of the Sara Bernhardt group. I had thought "Adrienne Lecouvreur" one of the worst. It is clean beside some of these others. And all were given last year at McVicker's.

We are not, however, done with the record when we are done with the Bernhardt. Here is "La Traviata," or "The Lost One." It is simply "Camille" in opera. A beautiful creature thrown by circumstances and the loss of her parents into a course of voluptuous living, falls in love at last, and suddenly becomes conscious of "the hollowness of the pleasures in which she has basked." She goes and lives in seclusion with her lover, but without marriage, secretly selling her property to maintain the establishment. He hears of this and is smitten with "dreadful anguish" at the "infamy." But the infamy is not his illicit passion. It is her payment of the bills. And his effort to "wash out this stain" leads to the further situations.

"Carmen" is of the same general character. "La Traviata" (the favorite) is simply the King's mistress. That tells the whole story.

"Two Nights in Rome" is represented as not impure in diction, but bad for morality on any stage. A courtesan marries a man who afterward discovers her true character; complications ensue, etc., etc.

"Legion of Honor" plays the same havoc with morality and marriage as all the rest. I have neither seen nor read this play, but one who has tells me it is just what its name would lead any one at all familiar with the stage to expect. There is a mistress, of course, and an illegitimate child, and marriage and return of lover, and insult and challenge and duel and murder, and, as the outcome of all this hideous melange, vindicated honor.

ENOUGH FOR ONCE.

I could go further, and say more, in this enumeration of plays upon which to ask the verdict of intelligent public opinion. But surely this is enough for judgment. All these plays were put upon the boards of the confessedly cleanest theater in this city during the past year. Think what the other play-houses must be! And yet—and yet, the theater is “an institution which by its teachings has always been one of the main supports of true Christian religion!”

Fathers and mothers, whose truer instincts can yet be trusted to keep jealous guard about your children, what do you think of a school like this for lessons in virtue? Husbands and wives, who still believe in the sanctities of wedlock, your judgment on these plays? Are they a murderous assault on everything the family holds sacred? If they are, then, beyond a question, patronage of an institution that will thus make sport and mock of marriage is inconsistent with a sacred regard for nuptials that have on them the seal of God.

Young men of this city, can you look into the face of purity, and then go unblushingly and without sense of self-degradation to such scenes as these plays furnish? Can you take purity with you, and expect it to be unsoiled by the uncleanness?

Good citizens, can we afford to patronize and sanction at all, even on clean nights, an institution that thus and so often allows and encourages the production of plays that are simply satanic attempts to tear down every sacred shield about our homes and hearts?

Doesn't it seem an awful puerility to be noisily criticising the “indelicacy of speech” in the attack on this foulness of filth, when speech should be burning with a righteous indignation against the foulness itself? Doesn't it seem a miserable and wicked “cant of culture” to be prating of “not thinking evil,” when that culture can see no impurity in the play-house comparable with the impurity that

same culture "thinks" *into* the literary style of the arraigner of the play-house?

The "beloved disciple," who did not hesitate, on occasion, to pronounce a man "a liar," "a murderer," and "of the devil;" the ardent apostle, who gave us that terrible arraignment of iniquity and lust in the first of his Epistle to the Romans; and the Christ in whose lips there was no guile, and whose every thought was without spot or blemish, yet who said, "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart," and whose terrific charge against a whole class in His day was that they were "whited sepulchers," "hypocrites," "blind guides," "serpents," "offspring of vipers," who should not "escape the damnation of hell"—these three, the apostle of love, the apostle of aggressiveness, and the Christ of both—should teach us that when we stand face to face with a buttressed iniquity we are justified in using something more than "soft words," "culture," and a "holy life" in the effort to batter it down.

HERRICK JOHNSON.

MR. MCVICKER'S LAST.

The following is Mr. McVicker's reply to the foregoing arraignment of McVicker's Theater. After the charge of tampering with witnesses and the threat of a libel suit, and the challenge to a public discussion, this is all! The letter is submitted to public judgment without comment, and Mr. McVicker is cheerfully allowed the last word; and the question he named for public discussion at Music Hall, "Does McVicker allow impure plays upon his stage?" gets ready answer.

H. J.

EDITOR CHICAGO HERALD—In your issue of the 19th, alluding to a letter from the Rev. Herrick Johnson, printed in the same paper, you say he intended it as a reply to my letter published in the *Herald*

of February 19. I am glad to learn from you what the reverend attorney intended, for I should not have discovered it by reading his epistle "to the editor." He has a way of being very loud but not very clear. "He doth protest too much."

Now, my dear sir, the public can and will stand considerable pressure before showing disgust, therefore, believing that the readers of the *Herald* embrace a large portion of the intelligent public, I would suggest that you have given them all they desire of Herrick Johnson, whose words are "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," and that you drop him before the disgust appears to the injury of the *Herald's* circulation. At least ask him to play upon another string. He has given sufficient evidence to convince a reflective mind that he does not understand the beautiful and simple teachings of Jesus Christ, therefore it is unreasonable to expect he should know anything about the lessons taught by the plays he raves at. The great difficulty under which he labors is the weight of his knowledge and sublime wisdom, forcing him to arrogate the right to judge all things, forgetting that St. Paul said to the Romans: "So, then, each of us shall give an account of himself to God. Let us not, therefore, judge one another any more, but judge ye this matter, that no man put a stumbling-block in his brother's way or an occasion of falling. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean of itself: save that to him who accounteth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." Then this same Paul, talking to the Corinthians, said: "But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." Paul was a better talker than Brother Johnson, who, I fear, in his search for sudden notoriety, will never be able to clean up the things which to him are unclean, and so to the witnesses he has called to the public, in pity and forgiveness, I leave him, to stumble in his own way, merely, in parting from him, assuring him that the stage will live and flourish after he is forgotten, and that it will continue to be an institution which, by its teachings, has always been one of the main supports of true Christian religion, such as the Master taught, unfettered by narrow creeds.

J. H. McVICKER,

Manager of Mc Vicker's Theater.

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