

DEFENDING THE THEATER.

Manager Maguire's Reply to a Rotten Pastor. To the Editor of the Standard: Clown—What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wild fowls? Malvello—That the soul of our Grandam might nably inhabit a bird. Clown—What thinkest thou of his opinion? Malvello—I think nobly of the soul, and no way and noway approve of his opinion.

While I think nobly of the church, and noway approve of the opinion of the "City Pastor," who last Sunday evening perpetrated slanders against the theater at large, actors in general, and the intelligent citizens of this community, (for it is the intelligent men and women of all grades of society who are regular theater goers). These slanders can not be allowed to pass without at least a few remarks from one whose life has been chiefly spent in the atmosphere of the play house. The reverend gentleman, if reported correctly, states that "the stage vitiates life and character, and that regular theater goers are low and immoral in tone."

For the gentleman's better information I can assure him that every legitimate theater is a fountain of good, a gateway to knowledge, "a perennial spring of intellectual delights." It is the shrine sacred to all the sages and poets, who enriched with "nectared sweets," not only the language of this land, but the languages of all other lands. It has fostered every art which adorns civilization, music, painting, poetry, sculpture, architecture, oratory—all that tends to make this life beautiful have been subservient to the dramatic art. It has in its province kept pace step by step, with the highest forms of civilization and existed before Christianity was born. It is the highest type of intellectual enjoyment, it extends over all the provinces of history, imagination and fancy, expanded so as to embrace comedy, tragedy and fanciful literature. It represents all degrees of human condition and all the caprices of human invention, to express all the perceptible details of actual truth and all the philosophic grandeur of general reflection. Even the church availed itself of the stage to make more impressive upon a semi-barbarous people before the printing press had accomplished its mission, by introducing dramatic performances of the sacred mysteries, so that their impress on a primitive people would be so much the greater by seeing in action those sublime teachings that words so poorly conveyed to obtuse minds.

To this day the stage has so progressed that in teaching humanity it is scarcely second to the pulpit, and immeasurably in its mission of doing good, beyond any pulpit or platform filled by intolerance, prejudice, bigotry and all uncharitable excess. Charles Lamb says of the theater: "I have seen a gifted actor diffuse a glow of sentiment which has made the pulse of a crowded theater beat like that of one man, when he has come in aid of the pulpit, doing good to the moral heart of the people." With reference to the statement that managers of theaters hire people to sit in various parts of the audience and applaud vigorously the objectionable parts, I have no hesitation in pronouncing this a dire fabrication and I challenge the gentleman to give his authority, or rather where did he see it; not surely in any respectable theater. After all, the gentleman himself, like other striking examples trotted out on occasions for exhibition, and like Topsy, delighted in saying, "Golly, how wicked I've been." Perhaps he was giving his experience in the days of his wildness when he frequented so-called theaters like Doney Geaghan's of the Bowery, the Cremorne of San Francisco, or such kindred establishments elsewhere. But even in those institutions I doubt if he saw what he claims in his statement. The reverend gentleman, presumably to impress his hearers with his erudition, gives the authority of Plato, Tacitus, Rousseau, Payne and Patrick Buckley (where does Buckley come in with this company?). What has contemporary drama in Plato's time to do with the present day? What constituted the code of morals in Greece 500 years B. C.? Intellectually, however, Greece was in the zenith of its fame, it was the epoch of letters as distinctive as is the age of Elizabeth in English literature, both of which derived their inspiration from the fostering protection of the stage of those days. In Greece, Euripides, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Eschylus, all vied in the sublimity and grandeur of their compositions. Their most devoted admirers were Socrates and Plato. The latter early in life was himself a poet and dramatist, whose poetic and sentimental training laid the foundation for the rich superstructure of his philosophy. Where does the historian Tacitus condemn the theater, except you allude to the ceremonial orgies, such as in pagan Rome with the feasts of Bacchus, Pan and other disreputable divinities of paganism, whose characters won't bear too close scrutiny—Tacitus himself being considered by some of his contemporaries a literary prig. During the time of Tacitus, however, there flourished a theater in Rome, where was an actor named Roscius, to whose tuition posterity owes the sublime orations of Cicero, and which to-day are read in our schools as models of eloquence. And now the satirizing, sentimental, irrelevant literary black-guard, Jean Jacques Rousseau, is called into court to bear testimony. I will accept Rousseau if any evidence can be placed upon the statement of the biggest scamp that was ever nursed upon the lap of dissipation, whose own confessions are in a literal translation unfit for the pursuit of any modest man or virtuous woman, who, however, it must be granted, lived in an age when France was rotten to the core socially with an extravagant and profligate court, corruption seething in church and state. Who can blame the theater then, which is after all "the very age and body of time," it was tainted with a plague by which the whole land was infested and which was only purified by the dreadful consequences of the French revolution. It must be remembered that Rousseau also flattered hypocrisy, and cant as none other since his time, and since he has been brought forward in this matter against plays and players, wherever he has expressed a sentiment against them, he has devoted whole chapters execrating the backs of the hypocrites who then disgraced the church in assuming "the livery of heaven in which to serve the devil."

And now enters Payne—Payne, I did not read, being a Christian, I draw the line at Payne. I have heard, however, that he had opinions on Christianity which are widely at variance with the orthodox teachings of the churches. I do not accuse Payne of writing against the theater; in fact this is the first time I have heard him quoted in this connection. If the reverend gentleman will accept Payne as an authority on Biblical matters I will accept him in matters theatrical, but if Payne is rejected on Scriptural grounds as a false teacher, I claim the privilege of rejecting him also, as it is a logical conclusion.

"Falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus." The Buckley referred to—at least this particular Buckley—I'm unacquainted with. I knew a good many clever boys of the same name in the "old dirt," and if informed of the particular parish he adorned previous to his emigration I might be enabled to trace him. Now I would ask the reverend gentleman considering his evident dire experience and his familiarity with Payne, Rousseau, etc., why he dares, in the face of statistics and the records of the daily papers concerning his own calling, brand actors as immoral? True, there are black sheep in every flock, and the theatre may have in its fold a stray sheep of logwood hue, but why should the theater and the profession at large be painted ebony by a few actors or two stragglers. One might as well say the church at large is infested and the pulpits filled with wolves in sheep's clothing, because we read of some clerical fraud almost every day making an excursion to Canada with his friend's wife and the Sunday school funds as agreeable adjuncts to his trip. It would be the acme of absurdity to abuse the church, or blame the good, holy and pious men who are to be found in all places doing His work, following in His footsteps, whose lives are devoted to the welfare, spiritual and temporal of poor erring humanity, because you can find throughout the penitentiaries of the land ex-preachers of the gospel who have been found guilty of playing every stop in the gamut of crime. I don't know of any actors gracing those abodes, but if any there be it is not for robbing the widows and orphans. "So, on the score of morality, I don't think we ought to be vain on either side." There is, reverend sir, a very large mantle, a property of the dramatic fraternity, and whatever their little shortcomings or foibles, I believe its folds are ample enough to cover the entire guild and possibly a clipping off the tail might be spared which could in all graciousness be bestowed on you. This garment is called Charity. Pray you, sir, cultivate it, and instead of mispending your time over Tacitus, Plato, Payne and Patrick Buckley, devote more attention to studying, say, for instance, the "Sermon on the Mount."

Why does the reverend gentleman stigmatize "She Stoops to Conquer," "East Lynne," and "Money" as being immoral plays? Wherein does their immorality exist? Is it because they hold the mirror up to nature? Is it because it shows and teaches in East Lynne there is retribution sure to follow wrong-doing even in this life? Is it because in "Money" the mask of sham-friendships and the hollowness of certain states of society is torn in shreds and people held up for what they are, and not what they seem? Is it because the stage holds up what is vile or base in our nature, in its manifold hideousness so as to earn our disgust and elaborate in its most attractive forms all the virtues and all our better attributes so that by the contrast of that which is bad and that which is good the former is made more revolting, the latter more alluring to the mind of the spectator so leaves the theater in innumerable instances duly impressed with the lesson imparted to him, and, in a measure, a better man for its reception.

The theater has had its chief support, and has today, from all the brightest minds in every land. The greatest preachers in the land are foremost in their admiration of the drama, and it was my great pleasure recently to read an account of an eloquent defense of the stage by the Rev. Dr. Barrows, as an institution almost illimitable in its power to do good when properly directed. And now, in closing, I would draw the attention of the reverend gentleman to these lines from Shakespeare: "Therefore they thought it good you hear a play And frame your mind to mirth and merriment Which bars a thousand harms, and lengthens life."

JOHN MAGUIRE, Actor. Butte, May 13, 1890. Try one of those Prince Cuban cigars. Peckover has them.

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