

Messenger and Visitor

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THEATRES—THEIR DANGERS

Everyone has heard that the terrible disaster which occurred a few weeks ago in connection with the Iroquois theatre of Chicago has led to a very searching investigation in regard to the conditions which caused or contributed to the disaster, and there is apparently a strong purpose on the part of the people of Chicago to hold to strict account those who are responsible for a state of things which made the theatre a veritable death-trap when once a fire had started on the stage. The investigation however is going much further than this. Attention has been strongly called to the conditions prevailing in other theatres and places of public assembly, with the result that all the theatres of the city and a large number also of its public halls and clubs have been closed until those responsible for their management are in a position to show that the laws enacted in the interests of those who frequent places of public assembly have been complied with. All this is as it should be. When all practicable provisions for safety have been taken there will necessarily remain a considerable element of danger if fire breaks out in a crowded building and it must be regarded as criminal negligence if provision is not made, so far as practicable against the occurrence and the spread of fire in places of public assembly, and if the ways of exit are not sufficient, and available whenever the building is occupied.

It will be well indeed if the terrible event which fell with such gloom and horror upon the people of Chicago shall induce in that and other cities a better provision for the safety of the crowds which daily and nightly frequent theatres and other places of public resort. But is this the only or the most important lesson to be learned in this connection? Will not this awful disaster cause people—at least Christian people—to reflect more seriously upon the moral character and influence of the theatre? We are all ready enough to feel the things which kill the body and to make provisions for our physical safety, but we are far too apt to forget that there are human interests constantly exposed to peril which are of infinitely greater value than these bodies which, with all that we can do to preserve them, will soon fade away. It is terrible indeed to think of hundreds of persons being sent suddenly into eternity through a disaster like that of Chicago, but the danger of being burned or crushed to death in such a disaster is a small part of the danger with which society is menaced because of the theatre. And while so much thought is being given to the physical safety of those who attend the theatre, it would surely be well if more consideration were given to the greater moral perils to which many of those are subject who frequent such places of amusement.

We have no wish to pass any sweeping and indiscriminating judgment upon the stress and theatre-going. There is of course a great difference between the theatre at its best and the theatre at its worst. There are plays which, in their moral influence as well as in their intellectual and aesthetic character, are immeasurably superior to others. It may be doubted however whether the theatre at its best in these days is morally helpful, and it is quite certain that in its prevailing manifestations it is far from that, while at its worst it is unspeakable. There are, no doubt, actors who are persons of high moral character and high ideals and who would if they could cleanse the stage from its impurities and frivolities and make it wholesome and helpful. But the theatre-going public has in general little admiration for their ideals, and shows little appreciation of their art. Sir Henry Irving, who is the foremost living representative of this class of actors has recently, in an interview with a representative of a Montreal paper, expressed his profound dissatisfaction with the prevailing character of dramatic art as seen on the modern stage. "There are more and more theatres, but the theatre does not improve," he said, rather sadly. "There is too much high kicking. There is too much frivolity. There is too much of a disposition to think that the public

must be amused at all costs. The idea is this. Here is a poor, wearied public, which has been busy with the cares of life all day. It is worn out. It has been bored and worried all day. How many cares press upon it! How many tragedies must it have experienced all the days of a life which means, for the most part, work! Well, then, can't you make this public laugh? Can't you give it something exciting? Something which will make it forget? Never offer it anything which will provoke it to think. Has it not been thinking all day till its head is aching? No; rest, frivolity, laughter! Why in our fathers' day people went to the theatre to see Hamlet or Lear or Othello. They took the theatre seriously. They went there for education and illumination. They followed the great presentations, which were so complex, and the unfolding of which offered such commentaries upon life. That is past and gone. See the great theatres being turned into music halls."

Sir Henry Irving's opinion is that, in spite of some good and wholesome work in dramatization by such writers as J. M. Barrie, the modern stage has degenerated. The modern stage for the most part, like the yellow journalism of these days, aims to give the public not what is wholesome but what will be paid for and devoured most readily, regardless of its moral quality. The attitude of Christians to the theatre should be determined, not by what it might be, but by what it is, and in view of its actual prevailing character and the moral perils which it involves, it is not easy to see how Christian men and women can conscientiously lend it their patronage.

A SABBATH IN CAPERNAUM.

In our Bible lesson for the current week we have Mark's brief but graphic account of a Sabbath day's ministry in the life of our Lord. It was a day filled with beneficent labor on behalf of humanity. It shows us Jesus as one who "went about doing good" and as putting in practice his own saying, "that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath day." Mark does not indicate the substance of the Master's teaching on this occasion. It is characteristic of this evangelist to report events rather than discourses, and the frequent occurrence of the word "straightway" indicates the rapid movement of his narrative from one event to another. But if Mark does not report our Lord's discourse in the synagogue at Capernaum, he tells us how it impressed the people. Evidently it was not a listless congregation. Probably the congregations whom Jesus addressed never heard him with that decorous indifference which so frequently confronts the modern preacher. Sometimes the people heard him gladly, sometimes they were aroused to fierce opposition, but they could not choose but listen to one who spoke as Jesus did. Mark tells us that these people in the Capernaum synagogue were astonished at his teaching. And the cause of their astonishment was not only the substance of his teaching but the manner of it. He spoke, not as the scribes with their constant references to the deliverances of the rabbis, but as one whose own understanding of truth, his absolute conformity to the will of God and his knowledge of human nature and its needs, enabled him to interpret the divine word to the people with such authority and power as they had not known before. The voice of Jesus is still the voice of authority in the spiritual realm. It is he alone who knows the Father. It is he alone who so interprets God as to satisfy the needs of humanity. "Never man spake like this man."

This lesson brings us face to face with the question of demonic possession. Mark tells us that there was in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, who cried out in dread and aversion at the presence of Jesus, recognizing him as the Holy One of God. Then at the command of Jesus, the unclean spirit came out of the man, to the amazement of all the people present. There is a natural tendency in modern times to reject the belief, common among the Jews of that day and still persisting in the East, that human beings are sometimes possessed—their wills controlled—by evil spirits. We cannot of course dwell upon this question here. It is evident however that the evangelists shared the belief of their times in respect to the reality of demonic possession. It is evident also that if Jesus did not himself share this belief he acted toward those said to be possessed as if he believed them to be under the control of evil spirits. It is probable that many cases were at that time, and are still, in the East classed as demonic, which a modern physician would diagnose as cases of insanity or some form of dementia, but that will hardly justify us in denying the possibility or the reality of demonic possession. Some of the most eminent Biblical scholars are disposed to speak with reserve upon the subject. Canon Sanday of Oxford, discussing the subject briefly in connection with the article "Jesus Christ" in Hastings Bible Dictionary, says of what was called demonic possession: "The scientific description of it has doubtless greatly changed, but it is still a question which is probably by no means so clear, whether, allowing for its temporary and local character, the language then used did not contain an important element of truth. The physical and moral spheres are perhaps more intimately connected than we suppose. And the unbridled wickedness rife in those days may have had physical effects which were not unfrequently described as the

work of 'demons.' The subject is one which it is probable has not yet been fully explored."

In the concluding verses of the lesson Jesus is seen as the healer of disease. There is a demonstration here of how keenly he sympathized with human suffering and how ready he was to relieve it. We may ask questions which it is not easy to answer concerning the persistence of sickness and suffering in the world and even among those who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. But the divine sympathy for humanity manifested in the life and ministry of Jesus helps to sweeten every bitter cup for the believer. Must we not believe that every good that has appeared in human form has a corresponding and a larger good in the heavens. Parental love—all real earthly love—is but a faint reflection of the infinite love of God. It is possible that there should be even in the breast of Jesus any love more kind and sympathetic toward suffering humanity than that which dwells in the heart of the Father. Jesus came to show men the Father and to bring them to him.

Editorial Notes.

A Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the drinking habits of the German people has reported that the people of the Empire consume alcoholic liquids to the value of \$75,000,000 yearly. The portion of income spent by the Germans on drink is said to amount to one eighth of all they earn. The commission found that the German people's drink bill is four times as high as the State's total income from duties and food and drink taxes, eleven times as high as the entire budget of the post and telegraph, twenty-one times as high as the cost of old-age insurance, thirty times as high as the amount of fire insurance in the Empire, one thousand times as high as the cost of caring for the poor, and considerably more than is spent by the Government to sustain its immense army and navy.

According to the statement of Rev. Dr. Leonard in the Missionary Review of the World, for January, the twenty-nine Foreign Mission Societies of the United States have contributed in the aggregate during the year 1903 the sum of \$1,564,976, which is less by \$75,000 than the contribution of fifteen great English Societies. The contributions of the American churches for foreign missions during the year have increased by about \$250,000 over those of the previous year. The gain in the English contributions last year was \$400,000. It is gratifying to see the contributions of the Christian world for the evangelization of the heathen increasing year by year and attaining so considerable proportions, but when we measure this sum against the British and American drink bill or tobacco bill, it sinks into comparative insignificance.

It is learned from *The Watchman* of last week that Dr. Geo. E. Horr has resigned the editorship of that paper, having accepted the appointment to the chair of Modern Church History at Newton and that Dr. E. F. Merriam becomes editor in chief of the *Watchman*, with Rev. Joseph S. Swaim as associate editor. Drs. Horr and Merriam say very pleasant and complimentary things of each other and of Mr. Swaim, all of which are doubtless fully justified by the high character and ability of those concerned. We regret very much the withdrawal of Dr. Horr from the editorial chair, but the place to which he has been called is one which his talents and acquisitions qualify him to fill with great advantage to the Institution and to all the important interests with which it is connected, and the editorship of the *Watchman* is committed to competent hands.

Our friend, Mr. Parsons of Halifax, touches an important matter and in our opinion makes valuable suggestions in writing of the importance and possibility of placing the MESSENGER AND VISITOR in many homes where it is not now found. It is perhaps natural that we should magnify the office of the denominational paper, but we honestly believe that our people generally are not giving sufficient consideration to the influence of the paper in connection with the advancement of the interests for which we, as Christians and as Baptists, stand. Baptists who read their denominational paper will be found in intelligent and sympathetic touch with our principles and our work. They will support our enterprises because they will know something of their aims and their history. Where the paper is not read there will be found comparatively little knowledge of the denomination and its work and accordingly little disposition to contribute to its benevolent interests. It would be a matter of interest to know what proportion of the support of the various branches of our denominational work comes from the large number of Baptist homes in which the MESSENGER AND VISITOR is not taken. We believe that the facts in this connection, if they could be secured and tabulated, would constitute a most important demonstration of the value of the paper's influence in promoting the work of the denomination.

It of course sometimes happens that a larger number of contributions reach this office in a week than we can find space for in a single issue. In that case something has to be held over until the next week, and correspondent are disappointed because their communications do not appear when they expected. We assure our correspondents, however, that we endeavor to do the best we can for them, and especially to find room for those articles which would lose interest by being held over. We would remind our friends that as the MESSENGER AND VISITOR GOES TO PRESS early