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THE
SIGN OF THE CROSS

A CANDID CRITICISM

OF

MR. WILSON BARRETT'S PLAY

BY

G. W. FOOTE

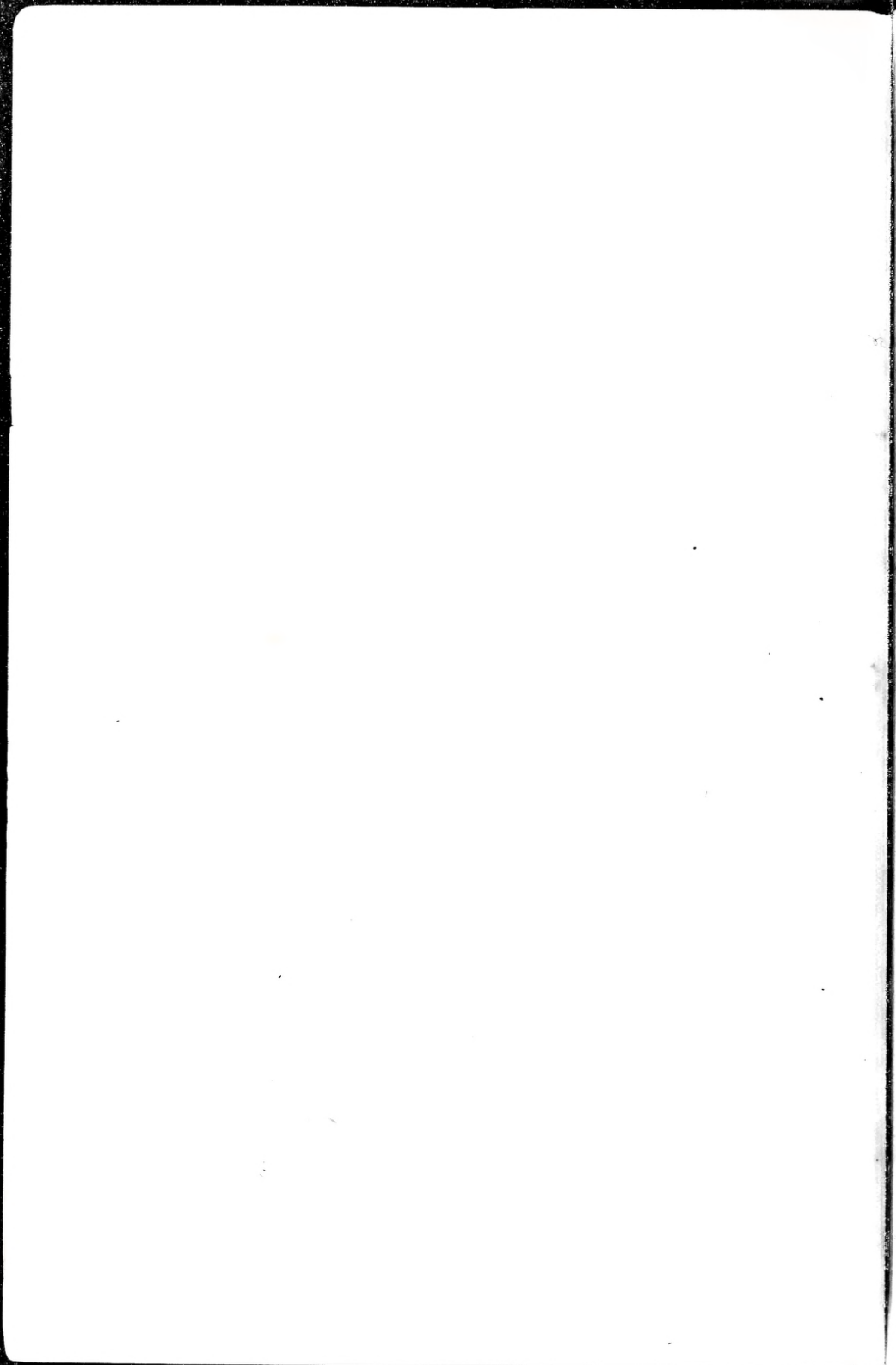


LONDON :

R. FORDER, 28 STONECUTTER STREET, E.C.

1896

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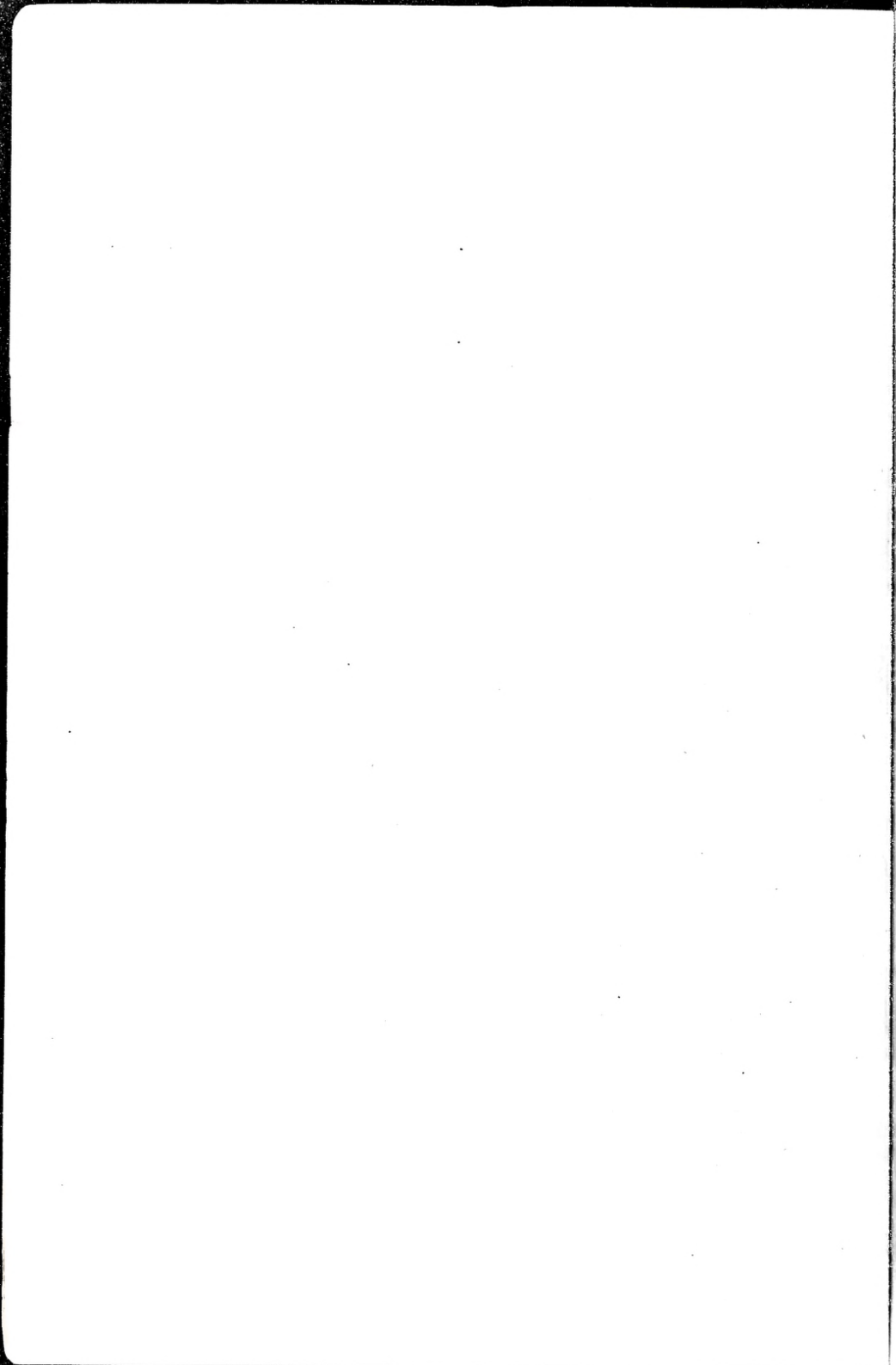
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THE SIGN OF THE CROSS.

LONDON has lately been placarded with a singular theatrical advertisement; a red cross stands out vividly from a black background, and the accompanying letter-press informs the public that a play called *The Sign of the Cross* is being performed at the Lyric Theatre. The picture is of extreme simplicity, and is very striking. It may be merely an advertising device, intended to catch the eye of the swiftest passenger, or it may be emblematic of the author's purpose. In the latter case, it is felicitous or otherwise, according to the spectator's point of view. The red may signify the blood of Christ which saves us from the everlasting darkness of hell; but it may also signify the cruelty of a superstition which is based upon the darkness of ignorance.

The Sign of the Cross is written by Mr. Wilson Barrett, the well-known author, actor, and stage manager. However others may take him, Mr. Barrett takes himself seriously. He has a mission in the world, or, rather, a twofold mission—namely, to purify the stage, and to hold up the loftiest ethical and religious ideals. By means of interviews and letters in public journals, Mr. Barrett has sought to impress upon the world the highly important fact that in writing and staging his newest play he had quite other ideas than

making money or providing a suitable part for his own histrionic abilities. It is also, I presume, with his permission that a very intimate, though anonymous, friend of his gives a history of the play in the March number of *The Idler*.* According to the writer of this article, it was two years ago that the dramatic idea of *The Sign of the Cross* began to take shape in Mr. Barrett's mind. The "germs" of it were "then working at the back of his brain"—a part which is not too intimately associated with intellectual activity. "There lay in Mr. Barrett's mind," we are told, "a resolve to simplify the situation"—the *unfortunate* situation of a stage running rapidly to vitiation—"by a fervent dramatic appeal to whatever was Christlike in woman or man." "My heroine," said Mr. Barrett, "is emblematic of Christianity: my hero stands for the worn-out Paganism of decadent Rome."† And since the play has been produced, and has achieved a remark-

* As this article is unsigned, and the *only* unsigned one in this number of the magazine, the responsibility for it rests with the editor, Mr. Jerome K. Jerome.

† This "decadent Rome" business has been immensely overdone; first, by *doctrinaire* Republicans, who are so enamored of mere names and forms that they ascribe Republican virtues to the greedy aristocrats who assassinated Julius Cæsar; and, secondly, by Christian apologists, who strive to show that Christianity arose just in the nick of time to save the world from irretrievable moral ruin. As a matter of fact, Rome produced, *after* the period of Mr. Barrett's play, a succession of the greatest, wisest, and most magnanimous rulers the world has ever seen; and it is the deliberate judgment of Gibbon, which he has placed on record in his matchless and immortal work, that "If a man were called upon to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus"—that is, from the end of the first century to nearly the end of the second century.

able success—having, indeed, to use the language of the inspired eulogist, “conquered the pulpit, the press, and the peoples of two great continents”—to wit, the eastern United States, and the southern half of the little island of Great Britain—Mr. Barrett celebrates its religious character more lustily than ever. Ministers of religion, in every great town, have given it handsome and even rapturous testimonials. On the first night of its production in London the “audience included some score of the leaders of the Church.” Mr. Barrett has received piles of congratulatory epistles, and laying his hand upon them he “smiles contentedly,” exclaiming that “Baffled agnostics cannot hurt.”

It is obvious, therefore, that Mr. Barrett is not simply a playwright and an actor, with the legitimate ambition of catering to a wide public taste. He sets up as a moral reformer and a spiritual teacher; he poses as a champion of religion; he challenges attention as an apostle of Christianity. And it is because of these pretensions that I feel justified in subjecting his play to a most drastic criticism.

There is a special reason why I should publish this criticism. It appears to be held that I have committed blasphemy against Mr. Wilson Barrett, and I am naturally anxious to state the facts of the case, so that I may not lightly be found guilty of such an infamous sin.

Long before *The Sign of the Cross* was produced in London I had seen its praises in provincial newspapers. Ministers of religion gave it their approval; I believe it was even blessed by bishops. Such unusual tributes

to a stage-play excited my interest. It would never occur to me to cross the road, even with a free ticket, to witness one of Mr. Barrett's melodramas for its own sake. Even if I were miraculously tempted to do so, I have other work in the world than criticising such productions. But when I saw Mr. Barrett's new play advertised as a fresh piece of Christian Evidence, I resolved to test its merit and ascertain its worth. Accordingly I witnessed it at the Lyric Theatre. I went alone, to avoid all distraction. I sat, pencil in hand, and made such notes as were possible in the dim religious light which was deemed appropriate. For several days afterwards I turned the play over in my mind. I refreshed my memory—which hardly needs *much* refreshment—with regard to early Christianity and its trials and tribulations. I went over again, with ample authorities before me, the old story of the Neronian persecution. Finally, I lectured on *The Sign of the Cross* at St. James's Hall. What I said of it I said openly, not surreptitiously, nor even anonymously; and an opportunity for discussion was allowed after my lecture, if any of Mr. Barrett's friends or admirers cared to defend his play against my criticism. I have my failings, of course, like other men; but I never scamped a bit of work, I never lectured on any subject without trying to master it, and I never advanced an opinion without being prepared to defend it in open debate.

Mr. Barrett's friends did not reply to me on that occasion, but the one who writes in the *Idler*, after pages of dithyrambic laudation, suddenly turns upon two critics who have dared to cross the popular current.

Of whole-hearted attacks by able men ; attacks stopping short at nothing in the way of adroit mud-throwing and fiery abuse, there were but two—the rancorous onslaughts of Messrs. William Archer and G. W. Foote. The latter delivered his in the familiar and offensive accents of blasphemous “Freethought” from the hired rostrum of St. James’s Hall. The former hurled his contempt and contumely from a brief but comprehensive column in the *World*. Mr. Foote’s invective will not bear reproduction in the pages of the *Idler*, but Mr. Archer’s attitude as the outraged critic is worthy of note.

Mr. William Archer does not need my defence. He is well able to take care of himself. As far as this paragraph concerns me, however, I call it an outrage. The writer hints what he dares not assert, that I indulged in scurrilous or indecent language. This, I presume, is “criticism,” in opposition to my “abuse.” He is careful not to give his readers the least idea of what I actually said. Had he done so, he might have been put to the trouble of a reply. It was so much easier to bid his readers cry “Pah!” and call for “an ounce of civet.”

“Mud-throwing,” “fiery abuse,” “rancorous,” “offensive,” “blasphemous”—all mean that Mr. Barrett’s champion is hard-pressed, and, instead of arguing with me, he calls me names.

I have really not enough interest in Mr. Barrett to be “rancorous.” My lecture was perhaps rather sarcastic and satirical. When this anonymous writer cries “blasphemous,” I recognise a familiar trick of incompetent prejudice. “Blasphemy!” was flung at Jesus Christ, afterwards at Paul, and afterwards at all the early Christians ; and when *their* religion triumphed, the Christians flung it at *their* adversaries. And they

fling it still. It is a cry of bigotry and hatred ; it is an abnegation of reason, and an appeal to passion ; it is the first step on the road which leads to dungeons, torture chambers, and the fires of persecution. The word "blasphemy" should be banished from the vocabulary of civilisation.

But enough of Mr. Barrett's champion ! Let me proceed to give the reader the substance of my lecture at St. James's Hall, in just the sort of language I used on that occasion. He will then be able to judge for himself, and upon the facts, between me and Mr. Wilson Barrett.

Mr. Wilson Barrett's new play has certainly been a striking success from a popular and managerial point of view. By appealing to the sentimental and religious public, instead of to the more limited public with some dramatic taste and experience, he has drawn crowds to hear his fine if somewhat monotonous voice, and to witness his statuesque posings in the scanty costume of ancient Rome. When I saw the performance at the Lyric Theatre I was struck by the novel character of the audience, which might almost be called a congregation. It seemed to be the emptyings of the churches and chapels of London. Most of the people appeared to be unused to such surroundings. They walked as though they were advancing to pews, and took their seats with an air of reverential expectation. Clericals, too, were present in remarkable abundance. There were parsons to right of me, parsons to left of me, parsons in front of me—though I cannot add that

they volleyed and thundered. All the men and women, and all the third sex (as Sidney Smith called them) of clergymen, wore their best Sunday faces; and when the lights were turned very low in the auditorium, and pious opinions were ejaculated on the stage, it was remarkably like a religious exercise. "Ahs" and "hear, hears" were distinctly audible, and I should not have been surprised at an "amen" or a "hallelujah."

This impression of mine is strongly corroborated by Mr. Barrett's champion in the *Idler*. The imagination of this writer does, indeed, run away with his arithmetic; he says that *The Sign of the Cross* charms and moves "a multitude in number as the sands of the sea shore," which is a noble enough image in the Bible, though grotesque as applied to the spectators, within twelve months, of a particular drama; and he declares that Mr. Barrett has brought within the sphere of the dramatist's influence "millions of aliens hitherto antagonistic to the stage and all its works." This sort of rhetoric does not create respect for the writer's accuracy; nevertheless, his opinion may be taken on one point—namely, that Mr. Barrett's audiences consist very largely of non-playgoers—which is precisely my own conclusion.

General Booth should be delighted with *The Sign of the Cross*. It is a Salvation Army tragedy. Setting aside pecuniary motives, it is designed in the interest of that species of Christianity which is generally styled "primitive," and, in my judgment, the play is as primitive as the religion it advocates. It is melodrama from beginning to end. There is plenty of incident, but no real plot; much movement, but no real progress.

Men and women are brought on the stage and taken off; they talk and act, and talk and act again; but as they are at the rise of the curtain they remain at its fall; there is absolutely no development of character, which is the one thing that gives a serious interest to dramatic composition.

Proselytising and didactic plays are always a blunder. There are profound lessons in Shakespeare's tragedies, but they do not lie upon the surface, and are not picked up and flung at you. Preachers may be as direct as they please; that is their method, and we know its actual effect, after all these ages, upon the morals of mankind. But the poet's method is indirect. He excites our sympathy, which is the vital essence of all morality, and our imagination, which gives it intensity and comprehensiveness. He produces a definite effect on those who are fit to understand him; but were he to declare that he intended to produce that effect, and expected to witness its immediate results, he would ensure his own failure. An organic whole, like one of Shakespeare's tragedies, suggests as life suggests; the lesson is borne in upon us unobtrusively yet irresistibly, like a lesson of our personal experience. In a certain sense Shakespeare has a purpose, but it is secondary and subordinate; the poetic impulse is primary and supreme. But if ethical intention is the source of inspiration, the poet sinks into a preacher, and falls from heaven into a pulpit. He arouses our critical faculty, and our very obstinacy is enlisted against him, if we have any positive character. If we have no positive character, but belong to the sentimentalists, the drama with a purpose is still a blunder,

though it move us ever so strongly; for, as Flaubert said, a writer of equal power comes along, invents characters, situations, and effects to prove the opposite thesis—and where are you then?

Mr. Barrett informs the world, in a letter to the *Newcastle Chronicle*, that he has “sought” in his new play to “make vice hideous.” It is really very good of him to be so solicitous about her appearance, but his anxiety is somewhat unnecessary. Was it not Pope who said that vice to be hated needs but to be seen? Mr. Barrett tickets her carefully, and paints her like a scarecrow; in doing which he overreaches himself, for it is not brazen, riotous vice that is dangerously seductive. Temptation comes to average human nature in a more plausible fashion. It may be good preaching to “make vice hideous,” but it is bad drama. The business of the playwright, as the great Master said, is to “hold the mirror up to nature.” Do that, if you can; give us a faithful image of good and evil; and you need not fear as to which will be loved or hated. But if you cannot do this, it is idle to plead your excellent intentions.

Far more pertinent, though still more essentially absurd, is Mr. Barrett’s statement, in the same letter, that “it was necessary to introduce the darker side of the life of the time, in order to show the value of Christianity.” This he has done with a vengeance. His playbill gives two lists of characters—“Pagans” and “Christians.” All the Pagans are wicked people—tyrants, sycophants, intriguers, assassins, drunkards, thieves, and prostitutes. All the Christians are good people—pure, benevolent, and merciful. Look on this

picture and on this! Oh yes, but both are painted by a partisan. We all know the lion was nowhere in the picture of his fight with the man, but a lion who saw it remarked that it might have been different if lions could paint.

Mr. Barrett's method is too "simple" to deceive any man or woman of the least practised intelligence. His dramatic confidence-trick could only be played upon the greenest innocence. His philosophy is simply the sheep-and-goats nonsense over again—as though the world, in its religious, political, or social disputations, was ever sharply divided into two categories of absolute virtue and absolute wickedness. Not thus are the elements of human nature ever mixed and distributed.

The fact is that Mr. Barrett has just availed himself of the ancient trick of the Christian apologist. He does not merely introduce the "darker side of the life of the time"—he excludes all its brighter side. It is nothing to him that Seneca, the Pagan philosopher, and Lucan, the Pagan poet, were sent to death by the same Nero who is said to have murdered Christians. That may be history, but it is not partisanship. Mr. Barrett makes the life of Paganism as black as midnight, and the life of the little handful of Christians the one gleam of light piercing the darkness. His simplicity is really childish. And only to think that this should be accepted as fair and accurate by thousands of apparently rational people—though they *do* attend churches—a hundred years after the death of the great author of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*! It is enough to make Gibbon turn and groan in his grave.

“Religions,” says Schopenhauer, “are like glow-worms; they require darkness to shine in.” Mr. Barrett may not have read this epigram, but he felt its truth instinctively; so he painted a black sky, and called it “Paganism,” and then he painted in one star, which could not help being brilliant, and called it “Christianity.”

Had the author of *The Sign of the Cross* been a real dramatist, instead of a melodramatist, he would have taken the same human nature on both sides, neither miraculous in its heroism nor subterhuman in its weakness; he would have taken men and women of this composition, and exhibited them as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, lovers, friends, and citizens; and then have shown how these universal and eternal relationships were affected by a difference of religious conviction. Mr. Barrett has not done this; he has not even attempted it; no doubt he felt it beyond the scope of his powers. Yet he might at least have displayed conviction on both sides, and he has not even done that. But, without sincerity, while there may be comedy, there cannot be tragedy; and thus Mr. Barrett's play is on the one side farce, and on the other side melodrama.

Now, I have no objection to melodrama, at the proper time and in the proper place; it ministers to a certain childish or semi-savage and uneducated element of average human nature, demanding much gratification both in literature and on the stage. It was this element which Coleridge had in mind when he spoke of the soul being “stupefied into mere sensations, by a

worthless sympathy with our own ordinary sufferings, or an empty curiosity for the surprising, undignified by the language or the situations which awe and delight the imagination"—and of the spectators having "their sluggish sympathies" excited by "a pathos not a whit more respectable than the maudlin tears of drunkenness." Klopstock rated highly the power of exciting tears, but Coleridge replied that "nothing was more easy than to deluge an audience—it was done every day by the meanest writers." This is true enough, but melodrama holds its own still, appealing widely to "the groundlings," and in lax moods even to "the judicious." And for my part, when I do take a dose of melodrama, I confess I prefer the real, unadulterated article.

Many years ago, in the early seventies, I visited an East-end theatre which was famous for its melodrama. The audience took the play as sterling tragedy; they cheered the hero and howled at the villain; while I cried with laughter, and shed more tears than I ever dropped at a serious performance. The villain of the piece had as many lives as a cat, or *would* have had as many had there been time for nine acts. At the end of one act he fell down a precipice several hundred feet deep; but he turned up again smiling and bent on further mischief. At the end of another act he stood all alone on a block of ice in a northern sea; the ice sank, and he went down with it; but he turned up again as though nothing had happened. At the end of another act he was shot by a platoon of soldiers. That *should* have settled him, but he turned up again. Finally, in the last act, he was (as Carlyle would say)

accurately hung. As the life was squeezed out of him, a breathless messenger rushed in with a reprieve. This was the hero's last great opportunity. Standing in the centre of the stage, with his right hand uplifted to heaven, he exclaimed: "Too late! too late! the ends of justice can no longer be defeated?"

That is how I like my melodrama, and if Mr. Wilson Barrett played in such a piece, I would go to see him with pleasure. *His* melodramas are not as good as the one I saw at the "Brit." Take *Claudian*, for instance. That was considered a highly moral play, and was even said to have won words of praise from Mr. Ruskin. But it was merely a spectacular melodrama, and only a most orthodox Christian could discover its morality. *Claudian* was a gentleman who could not die, being under a curse of longevity, which could only be broken by a pure and disinterested love. Age followed age without this precious boon being discoverable by our hero, who roamed the eastern world as a posturing and (to some of us) a rather nauseous mixture of Manfred and the Wandering Jew. *Claudian* was constantly standing amidst the wreckage of mankind. He survived earthquakes that ruined whole cities. We saw him standing alone on tumbling masonry that would not kill him. And all this slaughter was apparently designed to complete his spiritual development, so that, at last, when the curse of longevity was broken, he might be perfectly ripe for paradise. What the multitudes who perished were ripe for—what became of their immortal souls after tragic separation from their mortal bodies—neither the dramatist nor the majority of the spectators condescended to consider. It was

enough for them to inhabit the earth with the noble Claudian, and quite a privilege to constitute the groaning pyramid of which he was the sublime apex. Such, indeed, was the morality of *Claudian*, and surely it must be contemptible to all healthy men and women unperverted by the doctrine of vicarious sacrifice.

The hero of a melodrama must never do anything wicked, but he must be thought capable of doing it, and it rather heightens the interest if he lies under a certain suspicion; for the virtue of the multitude is like that of some of the fine ladies in old comedies, who flared up at a positive attack on their virtue, but despised the man who never excited their apprehensions. All this is provided for in *The Sign of the Cross*, as it was provided for in *Claudian*. In both pieces Mr. Barrett plays the part of a good man gone wrong—not too wrong, but just wrong enough. You know he will come out right in the end, but meanwhile there is an appearance of uncertainty, which raises a half-pleasant alarm. Mr. Barrett's part in the new play is that of Marcus Superbus, Prefect of Rome. This high and mighty gentleman is also Manfredian. He is in very bad company, and there are hints of his questionable past. But his inherent nobility breaks through every hindrance and shines through every disguise, and eventually he dies in the fullest odor of sanctity.

Now let the reader observe the simplicity of Mr. Barrett's methods as a playwright. I have said that all his Pagans are wicked and all his Christians virtuous. As a general statement it was true, but I have now to furnish the requisite qualification. Marcus Superbus

is in the list of Pagans, but he is a good man gone wrong, who is bound to come right, and in the end he joins the list of Christians. Thus the exception only emphasises the rule. There was but one good man among the Pagans at the beginning, and he was obliged to leave them at the finish ; which shows, not only that all the Christians were good, but that every good man was sure to become a Christian.

Marcus Superbus is Prefect of Rome under the Emperor Nero. This wicked ruler persecutes the Christians, and one of these unfortunates is a beautiful girl named Mercia. Sweetness and purity were not enough—beauty was also indispensable ; for Marcus had to fall in love with her, and what was the use of a plain face under a Salvation bonnet ? The part of Mercia is played charmingly by Miss Maud Jeffries. It is not an active, but a passive character. Mercia cannot strike into the course of events and modify it, but she can suffer the worst it may bring. And as I saw her devotion to “her people,” and beheld her renunciation of earthly joys, and watched her growing resignation to martyrdom, I thought of how the Church has always exploited woman, and how it has pressed her natural maternity into the service of its sinister supernaturalism.

Marcus desires this Christian girl. Her innocence is a condiment to his jaded palate. He tries solicitation, he attempts violence ; both fail, and at last he is touched by the passion of love. He would have Mercia as his wife. She is in the dungeon of the amphitheatre ; her companions have gone out to the lions, and she is to follow them. A judicious interval is

allowed by the officials for stage purposes. Marcus enters and begs her to save her life, and let him be her husband. She also confesses that she loves him—for he has twice rescued her from deadly peril. But how is her life to be saved now? Marcus tells her; let her renounce Christ. She refuses, and prefers death; whereupon Marcus becomes a Christian himself, claims Mercia as his bride for all eternity, and goes forth hand in hand with her to the hungry lions in the arena.

All for Love; or, the World Well Lost was the title of John Dryden's finest tragedy. Mr. Barrett's play might be called *All for Love; or, the Gods Well Lost*. From an emotional, amatory point of view, the conversion of Marcus is intelligible; from a spiritual point of view it is simply ridiculous. Can a man become a Christian in three minutes? Is Christianity to be learnt from a woman's eyes? Has it no doctrines, no history; nothing which makes any sort of appeal to the understanding?

I have been told that Marcus was becoming a Christian all through the play; to which I reply that he was falling in love all through the play. He was *not* a Christian when, in the altercation with Berenis, who taxes him with unfaithfulness to her, and with being trapped by a Christian girl, he exclaims: "*What this Christianity is I know not, but this I know, that if it makes many such women as Mercia, then all Rome, nay, the whole world, would be the better for it.*"* He

* Mr. Barrett forgets having made his hero profess ignorance of Christianity; in a later part of the play Marcus and Nero talk about Christ and Christianity as

was *not* a Christian when he pleaded with Nero to spare Mercia; for he begs the life of "but one girl," heedless of the fate of all the other martyrs. He was *not* a Christian when he besought Mercia to renounce Christ. But he *was* a Christian three minutes afterwards, and the suddenness of the change is beyond all rational explanation.

After all, however, Marcus was cheated at the finish, apparently through Mr. Barrett's imperfect acquaintance with the teachings of Jesus Christ. Mercia could not be his bride for all eternity. There is no justification in the New Testament for supposing that a man who misses a wife here will gain her hereafter. This is the world in which we must marry, if we marry at all. Jesus Christ distinctly taught that there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage in the kingdom of heaven, where all are as the angels of God—that is, of the neuter gender.*

Having followed the hero and heroine of this play to the point of their doom, I now turn back to consider a special incident which is connected with its very title. The third scene of the third act is laid in Marcus's palace, where a number of Christians are imprisoned, and among them Mercia. Marcus comes out from a noisy crew of male and female revellers, and talks to

though both were perfectly familiar. Pilate's name is mentioned as the official who ordered Christ's execution, and the emperor is reminded that Christ said his kingdom was not of this world. The inconsistency is glaring; and what would any competent historian think of such a conversation about Christ and Christianity between an emperor and his metropolitan prefect in A. D. 64?

* Mark xii. 25; Luke xx. 34-36.

himself about the beautiful Christian girl, contrasting her with the lewd women he has left (of course the women were *all* lewd in Rome—except the Christians), and finally orders her to be brought into his presence. After some rather fantastic conversation, they are suddenly surrounded by the revellers who have burst out to find the absent Marcus. The women proceed to rate Mercia like fishfags. One of them actually invites her to work a miracle—as though that were a Christian speciality! Mr. Barrett is probably ignorant of the fact that the Pagans had as many miracles as the Christians. Neither side denied the actuality of the other's miracles; the point in dispute was this—Which were wrought by divine, and which by demonic agency? However, the wanton crew are driven away by Marcus, who then (curiously enough) solicits Mercia to impurity, and, on being repulsed, actually attempts outrage. The stage is darkened for this struggle, at the crisis of which comes a flash of lightning; and Mercia, having found a crucifix about her, holds it up in the limelight; whereat Marcus shrinks aghast and crouches in terror. It was a "fetching" piece of stage business, but it will not bear criticism. There is really not the slightest evidence that the cross was used as an emblem by the Christians at all as early as the reign of Nero.*

* The negative evidence on this point is quite overwhelming—and, of course, a negative cannot be proved by positive evidence. "I question," says Dean Burgon, "whether a cross occurs on any Christian monument of the first four centuries." Mrs. Jameson finds no traces of the use of the cross "in the simple transverse form familiar to us" at any period preceding or closely succeeding the time of Chrysostom, who flourished in the second half of the fourth century. Dr. Farrar, in his latest work on *The Life of Christ as Repre-*

Even had it been so, what sort of an impression would it have made on a Pagan? If it meant anything at all to him, it would be significant of the powers of generation—a most awkward thing to appeal to at such a crisis! I can understand a cross being held up by a Christian maiden to a Christian wooer who should attack her virtue; it might remind him of principles calculated to restrain his passions. But to hold up a cross to a “heathen” ravisher seems to me grotesque. Had nothing stood between Mercia and outrage but a crucifix, her honor would not have been worth a moment’s purchase. Have the Turks and Kurds spared Armenian girls on account of the crosses they wear on their breasts? The fact is that this sign of the cross—Marcus cowering, and Mercia holding aloft a crucifix—is simply a bit of stage clap-trap, quite in harmony with the sentimentality of the whole melodrama.

The sign of the cross is introduced again in the last act. The boy Stephanus—a part admirably played by Miss Haidee Wright—shrinks from following his Christian companions from the dungeon of the amphitheatre to the bloody arena. He has been lashed and racked already, in a most brutal scene, which makes no appeal whatever to the intellect and imagination,

sented in Art (p. 19), admits that the symbol of the cross was not generally adopted, even if it appeared at all, until “after the Peace of the Church at the beginning of the fourth century.” Elsewhere (p. 24) he says—“The cross was only introduced among the Christian symbols tentatively and timidly. It may be doubted whether it once occurs till after the vision of Constantine in 312 and his accession to the Empire of the East and West in 324.” The curious reader will find much interesting information on the whole subject in a very able little book recently published—*The Non-Christian Cross*, by John Denham Parsons.

but is a direct appeal to mere sensation ; its interest, in short, if it *has* an interest, being not psychological, but purely physical. Stephanus is still suffering from the effects of that torture, and the consciousness of having betrayed his friends while under it, and Mercia tries in vain to arouse his fortitude ; but at last he sees a vision of Christ beside him, and of the Cross before him, and he follows it cheerfully to his doom. This, again, is very pretty, though it is susceptible of improvement. It is easy to bring invisible characters and objects upon the stage. Something more definite should be produced at the end of the nineteenth century. Surely the resources of science are equal to throwing a phantom Christ beside the boy Stephanus, and a phantom cross before him. I make this suggestion in good faith. Even melodrama should be as good as possible ; it is as well to "go the whole hog" in everything.

While the boy Stephanus was being lashed in front of the curtain, and racked behind it—while his shrieks rang through the theatre—I am quite sure the Christian spectators were saying to themselves—"Ah ! that is Paganism !" Few of them are conversant with the records of the past. History begins for them at the time when they first read the newspapers. They do not know, therefore, that it is not so very long since their Christian forefathers left off perpetrating the very same atrocities that were inflicted on the boy Stephanus—not to mention others of a still deeper damnability. Stephanus was not lashed and racked as a Christian, but as a refractory witness ; and this

method of treating witnesses and accused persons was afterwards universal in Christendom. Joseph de Maistre, indeed, in his apology for the Spanish Inquisition—the most terrible tribunal that ever existed on earth—argues that in inflicting torture it was only conforming to the usage of all modern nations.* No one who values his sanity, unless he is particularly strong-minded, should dive too deeply into the horrors of torture inflicted by Christians, and principally ecclesiastics, on persons accused of witchcraft or suspected of favoring them. It cannot be denied that Christianity added new and most ingenious horrors to the torture-system of antiquity, especially in its treatment of heretics. This infamous system only declined as science and freethought slowly permeated the mind of Europe. From the days of Montaigne to those of Voltaire the voices of great and good men were raised against it. But it did not die in a hurry. Calas was broken alive as late as 1761. Frederic the Great, the freethinking monarch, issued a Cabinet order abolishing torture in 1740, though its use was still reserved in Prussia for treason, rebellion, and some other crimes. It was swept away in Saxony, Switzerland, and Austria between 1770 and 1783. Catherine the Great restricted its use in Russia, where it was finally abolished in 1801. It lingered in some parts of Germany until it was abolished by Napoleon, after whose fall it was actually restored. George IV. consented to its abolition in Hanover in 1819, but it existed in Baden until 1831.

* *Lettres à un Gentilhomme Russe sur l'Inquisition Espagnole*, p. 50.

It was in 1777 that Voltaire begged Louis XVI. to abolish torture in France; in 1780 it was very greatly restricted by a royal edict; but as late as 1788, at Rouen, Marie Tison was crushed with thumbscrews, and was allowed to hang in the stappado for an hour after the executioner had reported that both her shoulders were out of joint. As a matter of fact, torture was finally swept out of French jurisprudence by the tempest of the Revolution. It was not legally abolished in Spain until 1812. Being inimical to the spirit of the common law, it was very little used in England before the days of Tudor and Stuart absolutism. Racking warrants were executed under Elizabeth, and were sanctioned by Coke and Bacon under James I., but were almost swept away by the Great Rebellion. The *press*, however, was still reserved for prisoners refusing to plead guilty or not guilty; weights being placed upon their chests until they were crushed to death. Giles Cory was pressed to death in this way in America in 1692, and it was not until 1722 that this relic of barbarism was abolished by Act of Parliament.*

It is perfectly true that modern Europe inherited the torture system from Greece and Rome, but Christianity aggravated instead of mitigating the iniquity. "It is curious to observe," says Mr. Lea, "that Christian communities, where the truths of the Gospel were received with unquestioning veneration, systematised the administration of torture with a cold-blooded ferocity unknown to the legislation of the heathen nations whence they derived it. The careful restrictions and

* Henry C. Lea, *Superstition and Force*, pp. 510-523.

safeguards, with which the Roman jurisprudence sought to protect the interests of the accused, contrast strangely with the reckless disregard of every principle of justice which sullies the criminal procedure of Europe from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century."

Christianity has never *in practice* been an enemy to cruelty. During the Dark Ages, when Christianity was entirely supreme, two things disappeared together—Freethought and Humanity. Modern humanitarianism is a very recent growth. It came in with the revival of scepticism. A hundred years ago Christian society was inexpressibly callous. The jurisprudence of England itself was simply shocking. Men and women were hung for trifling offences, and mutilations were frightfully common. Historians are too apt to hide the real facts with abstract declamation; I propose, therefore, to give my readers a sample of the tender jurisprudence of England two hundred and thirty-six years ago.

I have in my library a rare volume published in 1660. It is a full report of the indictment, arraignment, trial, and judgment (according to law) of "nine and twenty Regicides, the murderers of his late Sacred Majesty," Charles the First. The volume was published "for the information of posterity." The Church and State party evidently thought the condemned Regicides were treated with proper justice, according to the best principles of morality and religion. Historians tell us that these unfortunate men, who had tried and condemned to death "the man Charles Stuart" in 1649, were cruelly executed. But they do not tell us *how*; they do not give us *the facts*. Now the volume I refer

to gives (with full approval) the details of the execution of Major-General Harrison, and states that the others were "disposed of in like manner." Harrison was hanged on the spot where Charles the First was beheaded; while only "half-dead" he was "cut down by the common executioner, his privy members cut off before his eyes, his bowels burned, his head severed from his body, and his body divided into quarters, which were returned back to Newgate upon the same hurdle that carried it." The head was set on a pole on the top of the south-east end of Westminster Hall, and the quarters of the body were exposed on four of the city gates.

This brutal act was done deliberately and judicially; not in a moment of excitement, but in cold blood. Its perpetrators were not ashamed of it; they were proud of it; and they put it carefully on record for "posterity." And they were Christians, and it was only a little over two hundred years ago.

History is indeed the greatest stumbling-block of Christian apologists, and Mr. Barrett is no more fortunate than the general run of his brethren. This will be still more clearly seen, I think, in a careful examination of the part of his play which comes into direct contact with Roman and Ecclesiastical history.

In his letter before cited, to the *Newcastle Chronicle*, Mr. Barrett mentions a jumble of ancient and modern names as authorities for his picture of Nero. It is certain, however, that all the modern historians have mainly relied upon Tacitus and Suetonius. What these relate of Nero is enough to stagger credulity. It is difficult to conceive that Rome, for so many years,

tolerated such an unnatural monster. This much, at least, must be admitted, that the Nero of Tacitus and Suetonius, but especially of Tacitus, is a study in degeneration, reaching at length to absolute insanity. Such a pathological case is profoundly interesting to the students of morbid psychology; but its historical interest is very slender, for it can scarcely be argued that the character or actions of Nero had any serious influence on the development of the Roman empire; while as for the burning of Rome, in which it is hardly credible that he was implicated, it is certain that the catastrophe was as much a blessing in disguise as the Great Fire of London, since a finer Rome, as later a finer London, sprang from the ashes of its predecessor. It should also be remembered that the career of Nero was not terminated, and never could have been terminated, by Christian efforts. The teaching of Paul, in the very height of Nero's despotism, was one of passive obedience. Nero's power was ordained of God, and to resist him was to incur damnation. Such was the teaching of Paul in his epistle to the Romans.* But such was not the old spirit of Roman liberty, which fired the hearts of Pagan senators to declare Nero a traitor to the State and worthy of death; and the suicide of the monster only anticipated the executioners sent to carry out the national sentence.

Mr. Barrett does not give the least idea of the *vices* of Nero. He represents him, indeed, as quite a model husband, fondly devoted to Poppea; and dwells almost exclusively on his cruelty and hatred of the Christians.

* Romans xiii. 1-4

The subtle characteristics of neurotic vanity seem to be chiefly contributed by Mr. McLeay, who acts the part of Nero, and whose performance is certainly powerful, although it is marred by overacting.

Nero's vices, as depicted by orthodox historians, would have made a shocking entertainment. Mr. Barrett shrinks from presenting them; they are not even insinuated. The drunkards and wantons are all assembled around Marcus Superbus. And they are marvellously tame. A red-faced, paunchy devotee of Bacchus amuses the audience with his hackneyed jocosity, while a few ladies expose naked arms and indulge in frivolous conversation about marriage—which immensely tickled the listeners, and brought out a curious leer on some sedate faces. On the whole, the vice in Mr. Barrett's play—the vice that was to show the darker side of Pagan life—is about as dreadful as that in Tennyson's *Vision of Sin*, which was so fiercely satirised by James Thomson. In short, it is mere commonplace immorality, such as abounds in every city of Christendom.

Dreadful as is the picture of Nero's vices in the pages of Tacitus, it is not so singular as Mr. Barrett seems to imagine, nor need we ransack the records of antiquity for parallels. Modern history will supply us with all we require. Royal courts, even in England, have not been remarkable for purity. What Dryden had witnessed and heard reported of the seething lust of high society in the time of Charles II. amply justified his stigmatising "this lubrique and adulterous age." The satirists of the time branded practices which were not inferior in infamy to anything denounced even in

the sixth satire of Juvenal. Bad as England was, however, it was eclipsed by France. Nothing could well be filthier than the picture which Brantome drew—and drew quite lovingly—of the lives of the princes, princesses, and aristocrats of his period. Indeed, one fails to see, as Mr. Cotter Morison justly observes, how “the court of the later Valois differed, except for the worse, from the court of Caligula or Commodus.”* Some of the worst sinners were dignitaries of the Church, whose scandalous lives brought upon them no sort of discredit, so common was the most unbounded profligacy. Yet these lay and clerical debauchees were intensely religious. The fervor of their piety was as intense as their lust. They were ready to kill or be killed in the maintenance of Christianity. And if we turn from France to Italy, the prospect becomes still darker. Some of the Popes were guilty of the dirtiest vices and the vilest crimes; murder and incest being by no means the worst of their iniquities.

Christian apologists systematically represent the old Pagan world as infinitely immoral, and their own religion as the divine agency which rescued mankind from utter degradation. But this is not history; it is partisanship. Europe grew steadily worse as Christianity rose to undisputed supremacy, and the ages of faith were the ages of filth.

Mr. Barrett displays in all directions his profound ignorance of history. He seems to believe that the Roman Empire was governed like Turkey. He appears

* *Service of Man*, p. 132.

to know nothing of its courts of law and its criminal jurisprudence. He imagines that men were commonly put to death without trial. By virtue of a mere rescript from Nero, Christians are slaughtered in this play as unceremoniously as the Turks dispose of Armenians. At the end of the second act a band of Christians arrange a secret meeting for worship in the Grove by the Cestian Bridge. By way of concealing themselves more effectually (I presume) they indulge in congregational singing. Before they have time to disperse they are pounced upon by a party of soldiers, headed by no less a person than Tigellinus, chief counsellor to Nero. Swords flash, shrieks are heard, and presently all the Christians (except Mercia, who is theatrically rescued by Marcus) lie about in various attitudes of dissolution.

I shall have to discuss, presently, whether Nero ever murdered or molested any Christians; meanwhile I must observe that, if he did so, there is no record of how they were dealt with by the tribunals. But there is such a record with respect to the more authentic persecutions of the second and third centuries, and it lends no countenance to the summary methods of *The Sign of the Cross*. "A modern Inquisitor," says Gibbon,* with keen and polished sarcasm, "would hear with surprise that, whenever an information was given to a Roman magistrate of any person within his jurisdiction who had embraced the sect of the Christians, the charge was communicated to the party accused, and that a convenient time was allowed him to settle

* *Decline and Fall*, chap. xvi.

his domestic concerns, and to prepare an answer to the crime which was imputed to him." No such consideration was shown by the Inquisition, which butchered myriads of heretics. Over its prisons might have been inscribed the terrible sentence: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." It was a rule of the Holy Office never to inform a prisoner of the charges laid against him, nor even to disclose the identity of his accusers. He was *questioned*—that is, *tortured*—and accusations were based upon the wild and wandering words he uttered in his agony. It was the *modern* Inquisition, too, which devised the crowning cruelty of seizing a condemned heretic's possessions, after burning him to ashes, and leaving his widow and children to absolute beggary.

The temper of Roman magistrates in dealing with Christians is illustrated in the following passage from Gibbon:—

"The total disregard of truth and probability in the representation of these primitive martyrdoms was occasioned by a very natural mistake. The ecclesiastical writers of the fourth and fifth centuries ascribed to the magistrates of Rome the same degree of implacable and unrelenting zeal which filled their own breasts against the heretics or the idolaters of their own times. It is not improbable that some of those persons who were raised to the dignities of the empire might have imbibed the prejudices of the populace, and that the cruel disposition of others might occasionally be stimulated by motives of avarice or of personal resentment. But it is certain, and we may appeal to the grateful confessions of the first Christians, that the greatest part of the magistrates who exercised in the provinces the authority of the emperor or of the senate, and to whose hands alone the jurisdiction of life and death was entrusted, behaved like men of polished manners and liberal

educations, who respected the rules of justice, and who were conversant with the precepts of philosophy. They frequently declined the odious task of persecution, dismissed the charge with contempt, or suggested to the accused Christian some legal evasion by which he might elude the severity of the laws. Whenever they were invested with a discretionary power, they used it less for the oppression than for the relief and benefit of the afflicted Church. They were far from condemning all the Christians who were accused before their tribunal, and very far from punishing with death all those who were convicted of an obstinate adherence to the new superstition. Contenting themselves, for the most part, with the milder chastisement of imprisonment, exile, or slavery in the mines, they left the unhappy victims of their justice some reason to hope that a prosperous event, the accession, the marriage, or the triumph of an emperor, might speedily restore them by a general pardon to their former state."

Anonymous charges could not be received ; the Christians were confronted in open court by their accusers. Even if these succeeded in their prosecution, they had to face the ignominy which has always attended the character of an informer ; and, if they failed, they " incurred the severe and perhaps capital penalty, which, according to a law published by the Emperor Hadrian, was inflicted on those who falsely attributed to their fellow-citizens the crime of Christianity."

The zeal of many fanatical Christians for martyrdom, in the hope of obtaining a heavenly crown, was sometimes very embarrassing to the tribunals. They rushed to the courts, without waiting for accusers, and called upon the magistrates to inflict the sentence of the law. "Unhappy men!" exclaimed the proconsul Antoninus to the Christians of Asia, "unhappy men! if you are thus weary of your lives, is it so difficult for you to find ropes and precipices?"

It is as well to note, also, that the harmless simplicity, which is so generally ascribed to the early Christians, and which is held to render their persecution so gratuitous, is inconsistent with the temper displayed by Christians ever since they obtained power. Sheep are not so easily transformed into wolves. The fact is that the early Christians were not satisfied with the toleration granted by the Roman law to every form of opinion. "Liberty of thought," says Renan, "was absolute. From Nero to Constantine, not a thinker, not a scholar, was molested in his inquiries." The epicurean philosophers were as hostile as the Christians to the Pagan superstitions, yet they were never persecuted. Why was this? The answer is simple. Although the Christians were few in number, and their position, as Renan aptly observes, was like that of a Protestant missionary in a most Catholic town in Spain, preaching against saints and the Virgin, they acted with the greatest imprudence. Their attitude was one of obstinate disdain, or of open provocation.

"Before a temple or an idol, they blew with their mouths as though to repel an impurity, or they crossed themselves. It was not rare to see a Christian pause before a statue of Jupiter or Apollo, interrogate it, strike it with a stick, and exclaim to the bystanders, 'See now, your God cannot avenge himself!' The temptation was then strong to arrest the sacrilegious Christian, to crucify him, and to say to him, 'Well now, does *your* God avenge himself?'"*

Christians who acted in this way had only themselves to thank if they fell victims to the fury of the populace. And the Christians of to-day should recollect that they

* Renan, *Marc-Aurèle*, p. 61.

uphold Blasphemy Laws, which were designed to protect *their* religion, not only from insult, but even from public criticism; that, under those laws, men have been burnt and hung in England; and that, under the same laws, Freethinkers are still liable to imprisonment.

Mr. Barrett caps his travesty of Roman jurisprudence in a fashion which is positively ridiculous. The rescript from Nero, already referred to, is brought to Marcus Superbus, the Prefect of Rome, stating that the Christians conspire against the emperor's throne and life, and ordering their extermination. Kill them all, says Nero—men, women, and children. Mr. Marcus Barrett, or Mr. Barrett Marcus, drops his voice, tremulous with horror and pity, at the word "children"—and the audience (or congregation) shudder in turn, as though it really happened. But it never did happen. No ruler of a civilised state ever issued such an order. What is related in the New Testament of Herod is simply a Christian falsehood. Certainly no Roman emperor ever wrote out an order for the indiscriminate massacre of men, women, and children. Such an order *was* written once, and Mr. Barrett forgot where he had read it. It is to be found in the book of Deuteronomy, and is the direct command of Jehovah. In the case of certain cities, the Jews were to kill all the males and married women, and keep alive the virgins for themselves; in the case of other cities, they were to slay all, men, women, and children, and leave alive nothing that breathed.

Roman jurisprudence was not perfect, but it was

more humane than the jurisprudence of Christendom until within a very recent period. At any rate, it should not be saddled with the responsibility of Jewish atrocities; and that this transference of guilt should be made in a Christian play, before an audience of Bibliolaters, is a surprising illustration of ignorance or hypocrisy.

The more we examine Mr. Barrett's history the more extraordinary it appears. I have already noticed that he makes Nero and Marcus talk about Christ and Christianity as though both were perfectly familiar. Now this is simply absurd, as I will proceed to demonstrate.

Orthodox sources of information are all suspicious. Mr. Lecky, in a famous passage, deplures the fables and falsehoods which have ever disgraced the literature of the Church, and quotes with melancholy approval the dictum of Herder that "Christian veracity" deserves to rank with "Punic faith."* The fervid and reckless Tertullian, writing within two centuries of the death of Christ, not only tells the Roman authorities that they had preserved in their archives a circumstantial relation of the astounding eclipse which is said to have occurred at the Crucifixion, but impudently adds that Tiberius proposed to enrol Christ among the gods, but was unable to obtain the sanction of the Senate.† When such stuff as this passed amongst the Christians as history, after the lapse of only a few generations, we may well refuse to believe anything advanced by their apologists, unless it is supported by independent evidence.

* *European Morals*, vol. ii., p. 212.

† *Apology*, ch. v., ch. xxi.

A century after the death of Nero a great and good man occupied the throne of the Roman empire. His *Thoughts* is one of the most precious books in the world's literature; and Mr. George Long, his classical translator, says that "it is quite certain that Antoninus did not derive any of his Ethical principles from a religion of which he knew nothing."* Renan is only a little less emphatic. "It is most likely," he says, "that no redaction of the evangelical texts had passed under his eyes; perhaps the name of Jesus was unknown to him."†

Now, if Marcus Aurelius may never have heard the name of Jesus, and if it is certain that he knew nothing of Christianity, it is incumbent upon Mr. Barrett to explain the knowledge of both Jesus and Christianity which he attributes to Nero in the middle of the previous century.

It is extremely doubtful whether Christianity had penetrated to Rome before Paul went there as a prisoner, and this was in the reign of Nero. Aubé is evidently misled on this point by a passage in Suetonius, who relates that Claudius "expelled from Rome the Jews, who, at the instigation of one Chrestus, were always making disturbances." This refers to A.D. 49, and Aubé regards it as "the first mention, obscure but incontestable, of the advent of Christianity in Rome."‡ But the name of Chrestus was then in common use, and the passage cannot possibly refer to Christ, who was never in Rome himself, and whose followers, if *they*

* P. 22.

† *Marc-Aurèle*, p. 55.

‡ Aubé, *Histoire des Persécutions de l'Eglise jusqu'à la fin des Antonins*, p. 82.

existed there so soon after the crucifixion, could not have been numerous enough to engage in a dangerous conflict with the Jews. Lardner admitted that learned men were not agreed that this Suetonius passage related to Christ, and Ludwig Geiger says—"How this passage could have been applied to Christ, I cannot conceive."*

It is stated in the Acts of the Apostles (xxviii. 15), which is of very questionable historical value, that the "brethren" came out to meet Paul as he approached Rome. But these "brethren" disappear as soon as they have given a kindly touch to the narrative; for it was "the chief of the Jews" that Paul called together when he had been three days in the city, and to whom he preached "concerning Jesus." Apparently they had been unable to learn anything "concerning this sect" from the mysterious Christian "brethren" who came out to meet Paul as far as "The Three Taverns."

Paul's treatment in Rome is a curious commentary on Mr. Barrett's text. A declaration is put into the mouth of Poppea, "that Nero gives liberty of worship to all his subjects but the Christians." Now, according to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul had appealed unto Cæsar against the malicious bigotry of his own countrymen, the Jews. It was because he had embraced Christianity, and had become its principal champion, that they accused him as a pestilent fellow and a stirrer-up of tumults. Yet on reaching Rome, the city of Nero, and the alleged scene of a terrible and infamous persecution of the Christians, he found himself in a haven of safety. He was "suffered to dwell by himself

* Gill, *Notices of the Jews in the Classic Writers of Antiquity*, p. 164.

with a soldier that kept him," and "dwelt two whole years in his own hired house," preaching Christianity every day under the very nose of his janitor, without the slightest molestation.

It is not a fact that Nero interfered with the liberty of worship of any of his subjects; it is not true that he ever issued an order against the Christians on account of their faith; it is false that he ever charged them (as Mr. Barrett represents) with conspiring against his throne and life.

Rome had been more than half destroyed by a frightful conflagration, and it was rumored that Nero was the incendiary of his own capital. Absurd as the rumor was, it is said that Nero was alarmed, and that he looked about for a victim to offer as a sacrifice to the angry multitude. What followed is related in the famous passage in Tacitus:—

"With this view he inflicted the most exquisite tortures on those men who, under the vulgar appellation of Christians, were already branded with deserved infamy. They derived their name and origin from Christ, who, in the reign of Tiberius, had suffered death by the sentence of the procurator, Pontius Pilate. For a while this dire superstition was checked, but it again burst forth: and not only spread itself over Judæa, the first seat of this mischievous sect, but was even introduced into Rome, the common asylum which receives and protects whatever is impure, whatever is atrocious. The confessions of those who were seized discovered a great multitude of their accomplices, and they were all convicted, not so much for the crime of setting fire to the city as for their hatred of human kind. They died in torments, and their torments were embittered by insult and derision. Some were nailed on crosses; others sewn up in the skins of wild beasts, and exposed to the fury of dogs; others again, smeared over with combustible materials, were used as torches to illuminate

the darkness of the night. The gardens of Nero were destined for the melancholy spectacle, which was accompanied with a horse-race, and honored with the presence of the emperor, who mingled with the populace in the dress and attitude of a charioteer. The guilt of the Christians deserved, indeed, the most exemplary punishment, but the public abhorrence was changed into commiseration, from the opinion that those unhappy wretches were sacrificed, not so much to the public welfare as to the cruelty of a jealous tyrant.*

This passage occurs in the *Annals* (xv. 44) of Tacitus. Gibbon regards it as genuine; but let us look at the facts.

The *Annals* of Tacitus was first printed at Venice between 1468 and 1470. There is not a trace of the existence of this work prior to the fifteenth century. Mr. W. R. Ross has written a learned book to prove that it was forged by Bracciolini.† He shows, by a wide appeal to Christian and Pagan authors, that the *History* of Tacitus was well known, but that there is not a single reference to the *Annals* during thirteen hundred years. He says that this long, unbroken silence is inexplicable, except on the ground that the work was not in existence; and he then gives a variety of reasons, personal, historical, and philological, for concluding that the writer was not Tacitus, but Bracciolini.

I do not desire to take a side in this controversy; I do not know that I am entitled to. But, in the circumstances, I do question the authenticity of the

* This is Gibbon's translation. There are many others, but his combines elegance and accuracy, as might be expected from such a scholar and such a writer.

† *Tacitus and Bracciolini*.

particular passage which relates the persecution of the Christians by Nero. It contains a reference to Jesus Christ, which would have been invaluable to the apologists of Christianity; but not one of them, from Tertullian downwards, until fourteen hundred years after the death of Christ, ever lighted upon it, or caught a glimpse of it, or even heard of its existence. And knowing what we do of the forgery practised in all ages on behalf of the Christian faith, I say that this particular passage—whatever may be the case with respect to the entire *Annals*—lies under very grave suspicion.

It is not generally known how very recent is the Christian appeal to Tacitus. Mr. Ross says that the *Annals*, though printed in the fifteenth century, was “not generally known till the sixteenth and seventeenth.” A singular corroboration of this statement may be found in John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*—as it is commonly (though incorrectly) called. This work was first published in 1563, and I find that Foxe knows nothing whatever of this (since) famous passage in Tacitus. He does relate that Nero slaughtered the Christians, but his authorities are Eusebius, Hegeppus, Sulpicius Severus, and Orosius. He refers in a footnote to Suetonius, and the reference to Tacitus is supplied, within brackets, by the modern editor.

This suspicious passage in Tacitus was probably based upon a very similar passage in Sulpicius Severus, a Christian writer who flourished about A.D. 400. I give the latter in full, so that the reader may, if possible, judge for himself:—

“In the meantime, when the number of the Christians was greatly increased, there happened a fire at Rome while Nero was at Antium. Nevertheless, the general opinion of all men cast the blame of the fire upon the emperor. And it was supposed that his aim therein was that he might have the glory of raising the city again in greater splendor. Nor could he by any means suppress the common rumor that the fire was owing to his orders. He therefore endeavored to cast the reproach of it upon the Christians. And exquisite tortures were inflicted upon innocent men ; and, moreover, new kinds of death were invented. Some were tied up in the skins of wild beasts, that they might be worried to death by dogs. Many were crucified. Others were burnt to death ; and they were set up as lights in the night-time. This was the beginning of the persecution of the Christians.”*

Lardner supposes that Sulpicius Severus had read Tacitus, but it is first necessary to prove that the *Annals*, or the special passage in it, existed *to be* read. Lardner also supposes that Sulpicius Severus had “other authorities,” but who they were is left in obscurity. As a matter of fact, the farther back we go *beyond* this writer (A.D. 400) the less precise does the information become concerning the Neronic persecution of the Christians. The earliest Christian writers were ignorant of details with which later Christian writers were so familiar. And it is curious that, although the later Martyrologies are so circumstantial, not a single name was preserved by the Church of any Christian who perished in Nero’s massacre. Paul is said to have been beheaded at Rome at some time, and Peter is said to have been crucified (upside down) there ; but every student knows that these are mere traditions, which

* Lardner’s translation, *Works*, vol. vi., p. 630.

abound in supernatural incidents that deprive them of all historical value.

Supposing, however, that the Tacitus passage be genuine, still it lends no countenance to Mr. Barrett's statement that Nero persecuted the Christians *as* Christians, or slew them for conspiring against his throne and life. Nero's action, as Lardner remarks, was "not owing to their having different principles in religion from the Romans, but proceeded from a desire he had to throw off from himself the odium of a vile action—namely, setting fire to the city."* "The religious tenets of the Galileans, or Christians," says Gibbon, "were never made a subject of punishment, or even of inquiry." Mosheim states that "Nero first enacted laws for the extermination of Christians,"† but later on he admits that "the Christians were condemned rather as incendiaries than on religious grounds"; and his English editor, Murdock, is obliged to point out that Nero did not enact *public laws* against them. It is impossible to refute the conclusion of Gibbon, that there were "no general laws or decrees of the senate in force against the Christians," when Pliny, in the beginning of the second century, wrote to the Emperor Trajan for instructions with respect to those who were accused at his tribunal of being worshippers of Christ. "Trajan's rescript," says Long, "is the first legislative act of the head of the Roman state with reference to Christianity, which is known to us." Pliny's translator, the elegant and learned Melmoth, remarks that his author's letter to Trajan "is esteemed

* Vol. i., p. 206.

† *Ecclesiastical History* (Murdock's edition), vol. i., p. 65.

as almost the only genuine monument of antiquity relating to the times immediately succeeding the Apostles"—which is rather severe on the other "monuments." Melmoth adds that the Christians came under the Roman law against unlicensed assemblies; and that, as they met just before the dawn, the very unusualness of the hour laid them open to the suspicion that they indulged in Bacchanalian practices. But it is not my purpose to write a disquisition on the reasons why the Christians of the second century were persecuted by a government renowned for its religious toleration. My object is to demonstrate the truth that the Christians were not molested by Nero on account of their religion, and in this I think I have fully succeeded.

Whether the Christians were really put to death in the atrocious manner described by Sulpicius Severus, and in the forged passage of Tacitus, no man can determine. Personally, I do not believe it. I am of opinion that the story, as it stands, is an orthodox invention, like the ten persecutions, and the martyrologies, and the dreadful fate of the persecutors. But in what, I ask, did Nero's butchery of Christians (if it happened) differ from Christian butchery of heretics and infidels? Nero is alleged to have covered some of his victims with combustibles, and used their burning bodies to illuminate his gardens. This strikes the imagination, which counts for so much in these matters. Yet it scarcely adds to the *cruelty* of the burning. I believe there is no way of roasting a man agreeably. His suffering is not affected by the use that may be made of the fire for other purposes. And when I read

of the death of Servetus, who was hunted to his doom by John Calvin; when I read that he was burnt with green wood to prolong his sufferings; when I read that he vainly begged his murderers to throw on dry wood, in order to end his agony; when I read all this, I perceive that these Christian butchers had nothing to learn of Nero in the arts of torture and assassination.

Two blacks do not make a white. I am aware of it. But I do not hold a brief for *any* persecutors. I merely say that one black has no right to denounce the other's nigritude.

I would also observe that the Christians who butchered systematically for a difference of opinion, from the time of Constantine down to the end of last century, had not even the poor excuse of the Pagans who persecuted the Christians at intervals during the much shorter period of about two hundred years. After the burning of Rome, for instance, how natural it was that people should say they had seen men going about with torches and setting fire to the city. And if it be true that Nero fastened the guilt, of which he was himself suspected, upon the Christians, how easy was it to excite the Pagan populace against a new sect, whose members were so fond of prophesying the speedy end of the world, and that too by a universal conflagration.* Sub-

* Sir Richard Davis Hanson, late Chief Justice of Australia, in his able work on *The Apostle Paul*, remarks (p. 449): "Although, then, there is no existing evidence to justify the accusation made against the Christians, of having originated or assisted to spread the conflagration, we are not, perhaps, entitled to regard it as altogether without foundation." Chief Justice Hanson points out that if Irish Christians in London could blow down the walls of

sequently, when the Christians constituted a kind of international secret society, when they openly displayed their hatred of the empire, and gloried in its misfortunes, and were never weary of foretelling its ruin—was there not *some* excuse for the action of the government against them? But the Christians were never in any danger from the heretics and infidels they massacred. They never even raised such a pretext. They killed and tortured for points of faith, and not on any ground (however mistaken) of self-preservation.

A correspondent of mine, Mr. J. W. Hillier, having witnessed *The Sign of the Cross*, and feeling that Mr. Barrett had approached the subject in a spirit of partisanship, wrote to him suggesting that he should follow it with another play, dealing with later times and the persecutions inflicted by Christians on those who differed from them. Mr. Barrett's reply is as full of sentiment as a speech by Joseph Surface. "No good," he says, "would accrue from such a play as you describe. It must engender bitterness. The cause of humanity could not be served by showing that many who professed Christianity neglected the first principles of its teaching. No mud thrown at St. Paul's Cathedral injures the Christian religion or helps the cause of truth. No false priest destroys the beauty of Christ's teaching."

a prison to liberate a member of their society, it is possible that Christianised slaves or Jews in Rome might set fire to a prison or a palace to facilitate the escape of a valued brother. Of the crime of setting fire to Rome it is "almost proved" that Nero could not have been guilty. Whether the Christians were guilty or not, the populace "obviously thought the accusation credible, and probably believed it to be true."

Whatever are the "first principles" of Christianity, according to Mr. Barrett, it is certain that *one* of its first principles, according to the teaching of its principal divines in all ages, is the doctrine of salvation by faith; and any man of sense can see that this doctrine leads—as, in fact, it has always led—to persecution. This doctrine, however, is probably not included among the "beauties" of Christ's teaching. Mr. Barrett would doubtless refer me to such texts as "Blessed are the merciful." Well, I admit that the "beauty" of this utterance cannot be destroyed by any false priest. But, on the other hand, could the crimes of Nero destroy the "beauty" of the teaching of Seneca or Epictetus? It seems to me that Mr. Barrett's methods are very illogical. To show how Christians were persecuted by Pagans is to help humanity, but to show how Christians have persecuted independent thinkers is to engender bitterness! Why does not Mr. Barrett honestly say that it pays better to flatter Christians than to tell them the truth?

Mr. Barrett must be well aware that the Cross has played other parts in the world than the protector of virtue and the stimulator of fortitude. It was the sign of the Cross (we are told) visible in the heavens that led Constantine to worship the God of the Christians, and to force their religion upon his Pagan subjects. Within three hundred years of the death of Jesus, the Christian preachers had only succeeded in converting about a twentieth part of the inhabitants of the empire; but within another hundred years the greater part of the rest were converted by the gentle arts of

bribery, proscription, and persecution. Those who spoke evil of Christ were condemned to lose half their estates, the writings of the opponents of Christianity were committed to the flames, and men were soon burnt alive for dissenting from the Church. It was the sign of the Cross, centuries afterwards, that led the brutal horde of Crusaders to pollute with cruelty and massacre the very land that had been trodden by the feet of their "Savior." It was the sign of the Cross that inspired the Spanish Christians to annihilate the Moorish civilisation, which they have never been able to equal. It was the sign of the Cross that blessed the bloody work of the Spaniards in America, where they destroyed millions of inoffensive natives by every conceivable species of cruelty. It was the sign of the Cross that was most frequently painted on the shirts of the poor wretches who were burnt for heresy by the Inquisition. Sometimes, by a crowning infamy, a red crucifix was presented to the victim to kiss. It was pressed against his lips, and it made them smoke, for it was *red-hot*.

These are not facts to be forgotten. Whoever seeks to hide them is an enemy to civilisation.

History has been called philosophy teaching by example. In the name of history, thus understood, I protest against Mr. Barrett's play, and the ridiculous (and, perhaps, venal) reception it has met with in the so-called organs of public opinion. My writing may be weak, but it is not anonymous; my voice may be feeble, but I raise it openly; and I invite the clericals who laud *The Sign of the Cross* to answer my criticism.

