

THE DIVINE DETECTIVE

Every person of sound education enjoys detective stories, and there are even several points on which they have a hearty superiority to most modern books. A detective story generally describes six living men discussing how it is that a man is dead. A modern philosophic story generally describes six dead men discussing how any man can possibly be alive. But those who have enjoyed the roman policier must have noted one thing, that when the murderer is caught he is hardly ever hanged. "That," says Sherlock Holmes, "is the advantage of being a private detective"; after he has caught he can set free. The Christian Church can best be defined as an enormous private detective, correcting that official detective—the State. This, indeed, is one of the injustices done to historic Christianity; injustices which arise from looking at complex exceptions and not at the large and simple fact. We are constantly being told that theologians used racks and thumbscrews, and so they did. Theologians used racks and thumbscrews just as they used thimbles and three-legged stools, because everybody else used them. Christianity no more created the mediaeval tortures than it did the Chinese tortures; it inherited them from any empire as heathen as the Chinese.

The Church did, in an evil hour, consent to imitate the commonwealth and employ cruelty. But if we open our eyes and take in the whole picture, if we look at the general shape and colour of the thing, the real difference between the Church and the State is huge and plain. The

State, in all lands and ages, has created a machinery of punishment, more bloody and brutal in some places than others, but bloody and brutal everywhere. The Church is the only institution that ever attempted to create a machinery of pardon. The Church is the only thing that ever attempted by system to pursue and discover crimes, not in order to avenge, but in order to forgive them. The stake and rack were merely the weaknesses of the religion; its snobberies, its surrenders to the world. Its speciality—or, if you like, its oddity—was this merciless mercy; the unrelenting sleuthhound who seeks to save and not slay.

I can best illustrate what I mean by referring to two popular plays on somewhat parallel topics, which have been successful here and in America. *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* is a humane and reverent experiment, dealing with the influence of one unknown but divine figure as he passes through a group of Squalid characters. I have no desire to make cheap fun of the extremely abrupt conversions of all these people; that is a point of art, not of morals; and, after all, many conversions have been abrupt. This saviour's method of making people good is to tell them how good they are already; and in the case of suicidal outcasts, whose moral backs are broken, and who are soaked with sincere self-contempt, I can imagine that this might be quite the right way. I should not deliver this message to authors or members of Parliament, because they would so heartily agree with it.

Still, it is not altogether here that I differ from the moral of Mr.

Jerome's play. I differ vitally from his story because it is not a detective story. There is in it none of this great Christian idea of tearing their evil out of men; it lacks the realism of the saints. Redemption should bring truth as well as peace; and truth is a fine thing, though the materialists did go mad about it. Things must be faced, even in order to be forgiven; the great objection to "letting sleeping dogs lie" is that they lie in more senses than one. But in Mr. Jerome's *Passing of the Third Floor Back* the redeemer is not a divine detective, pitiless in his resolve to know and pardon. Rather he is a sort of divine dupe, who does not pardon at all, because he does not see anything that is going on. It may, or may not, be true to say, "Tout comprendre est tout pardonner." But it is much more evidently true to say, "Rien comprendre est rien Pardonner," and the "Third Floor Back" does not seem to comprehend anything. He might, after all, be a quite selfish sentimentalist, who found it comforting to think well of his neighbours. There is nothing very heroic in loving after you have been deceived. The heroic business is to love after you have been undeceived.

When I saw this play it was natural to compare it with another play which I had not seen, but which I have read in its printed version. I mean Mr. Rann Kennedy's *Servant in the House*, the success of which sprawls over so many of the American newspapers. This also is concerned with a dim, yet evidently divine, figure changing the destinies of a whole group of persons. It is a better play structurally than the other; in fact, it is a very fine play indeed; but there is nothing aesthetic or fastidious about it. It is as much or more than the other

sensational, democratic, and (I use the word in a sound and good sense) Salvationist.

But the difference lies precisely in this—that the Christ of Mr. Kennedy's play insists on really knowing all the souls that he loves; he declines to conquer by a kind of supernatural stupidity. He pardons evil, but he will not ignore it. In other words, he is a Christian, and not a Christian Scientist. The distinction doubtless is partly explained by the problems severally selected. Mr. Jerome practically supposes Christ to be trying to save disreputable people; and that, of course, is naturally a simple business. Mr. Kennedy supposes Him to be trying to save the reputable people, which is a much larger affair. The chief characters in *The Servant in the House* are a popular and strenuous vicar, universally respected, and his fashionable and forcible wife.

It would have been no good to tell these people they had some good in them—for that was what they were telling themselves all day long. They had to be reminded that they had some bad in them—instinctive idolatries and silent treasons which they always tried to forget. It is in connection with these crimes of wealth and culture that we face the real problem of positive evil. The whole of Mr. Blatchford's controversy about sin was vitiated throughout by one's consciousness that whenever he wrote the word "sinner" he thought of a man in rags. But here, again, we can find truth merely by referring to vulgar literature—its unfailling fountain. Whoever read a detective story about poor people? The poor have crimes; but the poor have no secrets. And it is because the proud have secrets that they need to be detected before they are

forgiven.