

to grief in any other region of the inquisition over which these merciless gentlemen preside.

In truth, it is because I do know my Shakspeare, and have made a life-long study not only of his plays but of their literary and theatrical history as well, that I made the protest I did against the reappearance at the St. James's Theatre of a tradition which I had hoped was long since dead and buried. I am not quite so completely "with verdure clad" as to require instruction about such very stale matters of theatrical history as your correspondents are so kind as to bring to my notice. As to Hazlitt's opinion about Miss Boyle's singing of the Cuckoo Song, and the circumstance that he takes no exception to its introduction into the play, does Mr. Moy Thomas seriously suppose that any thorough Shakspearian student will attach the slightest value to it? I know all that Hazlitt has written on Shakspeare and the stage and its professors intimately. Much of it is excellent, but a good deal of it is extremely superficial. At all events, I should hope that Shakspearian criticism has now reached a much higher level than was considered to be satisfactory in the days when Hazlitt wrote. Were he alive now, and inoculated with the higher views which prevail among the most reverential of the students of our great dramatist, would he lend his sanction to so gross an interference with Shakspeare's text, however charmingly the song might be sung?

Mr. Moy Thomas does not understand my objection to Rosalind singing—viz., that this would at once have discovered her sex to Orlando. I never suggested that he would have found this out—as Mr. Thomas assumes I did—from knowing her singing voice. How could he know that when he had only heard her speak a few sentences in the wrestling scene? My objection was founded on the peculiar quality of a woman's singing voice, which no one could possibly mistake for a boy's voice—the *timbre* is so entirely different. Any one familiar with the sweetest voices of singing boys knows that this is so. A woman may mask her speaking voice; the singing voice is not so tractable.

I forbear from saying more, although much more might well be said in answer to advocates for the restoration of an effete stage tradition, which even they do not venture to uphold as justifiable in itself.—I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

February 4.

A READER OF SHAKSPEARE.

AN AULD LICHT SCANDAL.

THERE was a stirring time in our Auld Licht community when Easie Haggart, the grey-headed garrulous "lassie" at the manse, saved the minister. In a fit of temporary mental derangement, the misguided man had one Sabbath morning called at the post-office, despite the entreaties of his scandalized spouse, and was on the point of reading the letter there received, when Easie, who had slipped on her bonnet and followed him, snatched the secular thing from his hands. There was the story that ran like fire through the village and crushed an innocent elder, who was never the same man after, to the effect that Sam'l Todd had gone by canal to Edinburgh and countenanced the play-actors. There was the pitiful predicament of diffident Will'm McTaggart and Betsy Lunan, his snod little wife, who married too young, and could not summon up moral courage to announce the birth of their bairn. But I sing the great christening scandal—the unique case of Eppie Whamond, who was born late on Saturday night and baptized in the kirk on the following forenoon.

To the casual observer the Auld Licht always looked as if he were returning from burying a near relative. Yet when I met him hobbling down the street, preternaturally grave and occupied, experience taught me that he was preparing for a christening. Christenings took it out of the Auld Licht males, who showed symptoms of nervousness on these occasions and on no others. How the minister would have borne himself in the event of a member of his congregation asking that the baptism should take place at home it is not easy to say; but I shudder to think of the public prayers for the parents that would certainly have followed. The child was carried to the kirk through rain or snow or sleet or wind, the father took his seat alone in the front pew, under the minister's eye, and the service was prolonged far on into the afternoon. But though the references in the sermon to that unhappy object of interest in the front pew were many and pointed, his time had not really come until the minister signed to him to advance as far as the second step of the pulpit stairs. The nervous father clenched the railing in a daze, and cowered before the ministerial heckling. From warning the minister passed to exhortation, from exhortation to admonition, from admonition to searching questioning, from questioning to prayer and wailing. When the father looked up, there was the radiant boy in the pulpit looking as if he would like to jump down his throat. If he hung his head the minister would ask, with a groan, whether he was unprepared; and the whole congregation would sigh out the response that Mr. Dishart had hit it. When he replied audibly to the minister's uncomfortable questions, a pained look at his slippancy travelled from the pulpit all round the pews; and when he only bowed his head in answer, the minister paused sternly, and the congregation wondered what the man meant. Little wonder that Davie Haggart took to drinking when his turn came for occupying that front pew.

If wee Eppie Whamond's birth had been deferred until the beginning of the week, or humility had shown more prominently among her mother's virtues, our kirk would have been saved a painful scandal, and Sandy Whamond might have retained his eldership. Yet it was a foolish but wifely pride in her husband's official position that turned Bell Dundas's head—a wild ambition to beat all moral record.

Among the Auld Licht wives she was esteemed a poor body whose infant did not see the inside of the kirk within a fortnight of its birth. When the children grew up they crowded over those of their fellows whose christening had been deferred until a comparatively late date, and the mothers who had needlessly missed a Sabbath ever afterwards hung their heads. That was a good and creditable birth which took place early in the week, thus allowing time for suitable baptismal preparations; while to be born on a Friday or a Saturday was to humiliate your parents,

besides being an extremely ominous beginning for yourself. Without seeking to whitewash Bell Dundas's behaviour, I may note, as an act of ordinary fairness, that being the leading elder's wife she was sorely tempted. Eppie made her appearance at 9.45 on Saturday night.

In the hurry and skurry that ensued, Sandy escaped sadly to the square. His infant would be baptised eight days old, the longest-deferred christening of the year. Sandy was shivering under the clock when I met him accidentally, and took him home. But by that time the harm had been done. Several of the congregation had been roused from their beds to hear his lamentations, of whom the men sympathized with him, while the wives triumphed austere over Bell Dundas. As I wrung poor Sandy's hand, I hardly noticed that a bright light showed distinctly between the shutters of his kitchen-window; but the elder himself turned pale and breathed quickly. It was then fourteen minutes past twelve.

But my heart sank within me on the following forenoon, when Sandy Whamond walked, with the calmness of despair, into the front pew under a glare of eyes from the body of the kirk and the "laft." An amazed buzz went round the church, followed by a pursing up of lips and hurried whisperings. Evidently Sandy had been driven to it against his own judgment. The scene is still clear before me: the minister suspecting no guile, and omitting the admonitory stage out of compliment to the elder's standing; Sandy's ghastly face; the proud godmother (aged twelve) with the squalling baby in her arms; the horror of the congregation to a man and woman. A slate fell from Sandy's house even as he held up the babe to the minister to receive a "droukin'" of water, and Eppie cried so vigorously that her shamed godmother had to rush with her to the vestry. Now things are not as they should be when an Auld Licht infant does not quietly sit out her first service.

Bell tried for a time to carry her head high; but Sandy ceased to whistle at his loom, and the scandal was a rolling stone that gathered moss at every door. Briefly it amounted to this: that a bairn born within two hours of midnight on Saturday could not have been ready for christening at the kirk next day without the breaking of the Sabbath! Had the secret of the nocturnal light been mine alone all might have been well; but Betsy Munn's evidence was irrefutable. Great had been Bell's cunning, but Betsy had outwitted her. Passing the house on the eventful night, Betsy had observed Marget Dundas, Bell's sister, open the door and creep cautiously to the window, the chinks in the outside shutters of which she cunningly closed up with "tow." As in a flash of lightning the disgusted Betsy saw what Bell was up to, and, removing the tow, planted herself behind the dilapidated dyke opposite, and awaited events. Questioned at a special meeting of the office-bearers in the vestry, she admitted that the lamp was extinguished soon after twelve o'clock, though the fire burned brightly all night. There had been unnecessary feasting during the night, and six eggs were consumed before breakfast-time. Asked how she knew this, she admitted having counted the egg-shells that Marget had thrown out at the door in the morning. This, with the testimony of the persons from whom Sandy had sought condolence on the Saturday night, was the case for the prosecution. For the defence, Bell maintained that all preparations stopped when the clock struck twelve, and even hinted that the bairn had been born on Saturday afternoon. But Sandy knew that he and his had had a fall. In the forenoon of the following Sabbath the minister preached from the text, "Be sure your sin will find you out;" and in the afternoon from "Pride goeth before a fall." He was grand. In the evening Sandy tendered his resignation of office, which was at once accepted. Wobs were behind-hand for a week owing to the length of the prayers offered up for Bell; and Lang Tammas ruled in Sandy's stead.

THE THEATRE.

THE reception of Mr. J. P. Hurst's new comedy, "Loose Tiles," at the Vaudeville last week was such as to ensure its repetition at the earliest available opportunity. Mr. Thorne has accordingly arranged for it a series of Wednesday and Saturday matinées, one of which was given yesterday. The piece is of the farcical kind just now in high favour with a large class of playgoers, who go to the theatre chiefly to laugh and are conveniently ready to fulfil their intention. Like "Confusion," "Nita's First," and "Twins," Mr. Hurst's new play finds not only its main motive but its whole subject in a misunderstanding, which is kept up with more or less ingenuity of resource until the requisite number of comic scenes has been put together. It relies for its effect not on witty turns of dialogue—though it certainly has one or two very telling lines—nor upon humorous characterization. Its author's stock-in-trade is laughable incident; and this he manipulates with considerable tact. He is anxious to have it known that "Loose Tiles" is "entirely original, and not derived from any extraneous source, either home or foreign." No doubt he quite believes in the truth of his statement; and yet it is clear enough that, though wholly guiltless of direct and conscious imitation, he owes part of his inspiration to various plays in which the real or supposed madness of some of the *dramatis personæ* is employed as a means for raising a laugh. The device sounds as though it would result in humour of doubtful taste, since insanity is too painful a subject to joke about. But Mr. Hurst has happily kept his work quite void of offence in this respect; for the audience knows from the first that the supposed lunatics are not lunatics at all, but are merely boarders in an establishment which used to be a lunatic asylum. Moreover, their treatment, even by those who think them insane, leads to nothing worse than the humouring of their "delusions"—a process which of course accounts for the steady maintenance of the series of mutual misunderstandings. This part of the play is contrived and carried out with much ingenuity. The initial blunder committed by the visitors to the boarding-house is made comical not only by its immediate consequences—the treatment of sane folk as though they were mad—but by its secondary result in preventing the visitors from