

The Open Court

18
A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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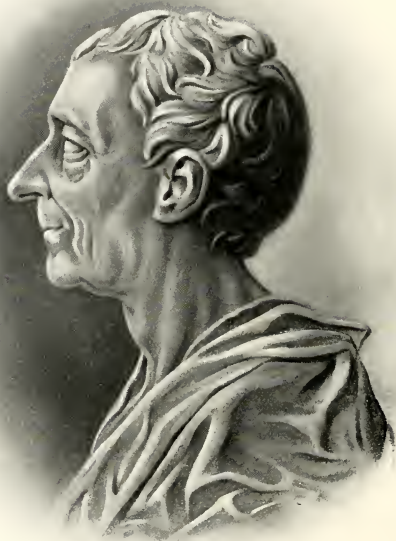
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MONTESQUIEU.

(1689-1755.)

Frontispiece to the January, '90, Open Court.

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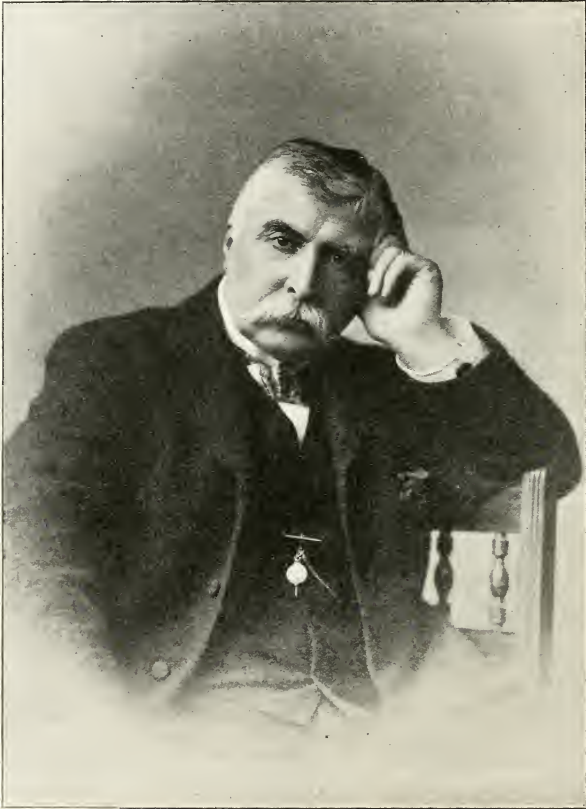
AN ILLUSTRATED LIFE OF JESUS, BY J. JAMES TISSOT.

BY CLIFTON HARBY LEVY.

AT least two great Frenchmen have gone to Palestine for the purpose of presenting the world with the life of Jesus. The result of Ernest Renan's pilgrimage was a romance charming in style, incisive in method, but yet so radical a departure from orthodox conceptions that it is considered by many anything but a true life of Jesus. Twelve years ago another Frenchman went on a pilgrimage to Palestine for a similar purpose, but he was an artist and at the same time a devout believer in the Scripture. The result of M. James Tissot's work is a remarkable illustrated life of Jesus which follows closely the lines of Holy Writ and tradition.

In 1885 James Tissot was a well-known figure in the art circles of Paris and London. He had painted any number of charming studies in the life of men and women of society. He was a thoroughly French artist in the mode of attack, a realist—yet not bound down to a theory so closely as to be a mere photographer. Every one of these early paintings is instinct with life, is full of sentiment, is an epitome of some phase of human thought or action. It was during this year that he was completing a series of paintings dealing with "The Woman of Paris." One picture in the series was to be that of a choir singer. So as to get the correct background and environment as well as the spirit of this composition, the artist visited the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris. While attending service in this church the deeply emotional character of the artist was stirred by the solemn mass, and, at the climax of the service, it seemed to him as if he saw a great picture which was not upon the walls of the church. In it were ruins of a modern

castle into which two peasants, man and woman, had strayed. Oppressed by the failure of all their efforts, they threw down the small bundle of their belongings and sat amid the ruins bowed in



JAMES TISSOT.

Copyright by James Tissot, 1898.

despair. From force of habit or the very depths of suffering, they called upon God, and in answer to this prayer a being seemed to glide toward them through the ruins. In that being they see Jesus covered with the mantle upon whose border is represented the pic-

ture first of the "Fall of Man" then of "The Passion" denoted by the kiss of Judas. Jesus leans his head upon the shoulder of the man, extends his bleeding hands as if to say, I am the sacrifice. I am the solution, the only solution, of life and its problems. (P. 4.)

This picture so beset the artist that it brought on a fever, after his recovery from which he was compelled to paint what was for him an unprecedented composition, a sacred allegory.

Thereafter James Tissot was forced to abandon the earlier spirit with which his work had been animated, although he had already turned the half century of his life. It was impossible for him to paint or etch, as he had before, pictures of women with Gainsborough hats or men and women reclining upon the deck of a steamer; his spirit was changed, there was a metamorphosis of the entire being.

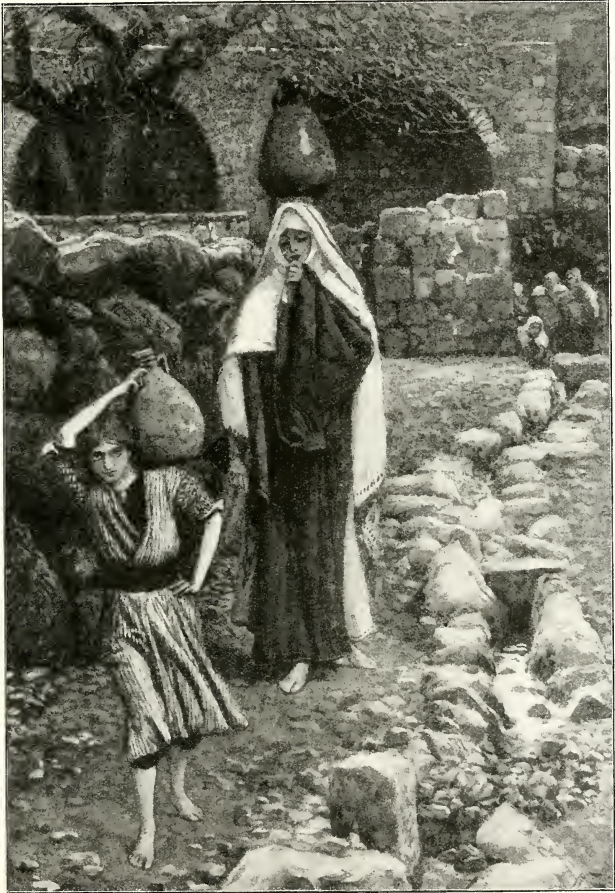
It is true that up to this time M. Tissot had been a Catholic more by courtesy than by conviction, that he had been interested deeply in the problems of spiritualism, hypnotism, and thought-transference, but some such moment as this one in the church was required to affect the whole spirit of the artist's work.

After completing his painting of "The Inward Voices" or "The Ruins," as it might be called, he determined to paint the real Jesus if it were possible. To do this he recognised the absolute necessity of a pilgrimage to Palestine. He was dissatisfied with the ordinary presentation even of the figure of Christ, for it seemed to him that in hardly any instance had even the greatest artists been able to free themselves from slavery to their environment and native country. It has been remarked over and over again that every land has a Jesus of that land; that the French painters paint French Jesuses, the Italian painters, Italian, the Dutch school, Dutch. M. Tissot wished to paint Jesus the Jew of the first century, not of the nineteenth or any other period. He went to Palestine intent upon this design of painting a picture of the real Jesus and perhaps his apostles. After his preliminary studies when he was about to return to Europe with the sketches gathered during his travels of a few months, he felt dissatisfied at the incompleteness of his work and decided to return and make perhaps fifty more. But when these were complete neither the conscience of the artist nor of the believer was satisfied, and it was only after ten years of labor and the completion of three hundred and sixty-five paintings and one hundred and fifty pen and ink drawings that M. Tissot was content to exhibit and publish his



THE RUINS.

work as a real reconstruction of the life and surroundings of Him whom Christendom worships.



JESUS AND HIS MOTHER.

Copyright by James Tissot, 1898.

These paintings and drawings have now been brought to the United States and are being exhibited under the auspices of the



A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS.

Copyright by James Tissot, 1898.

American Art Association in New York, Chicago, Boston, Pittsburg, Washington, Philadelphia, and other cities.

The pictures have also been reproduced in several volumes, being grouped in chronological order under various heads. The



JESUS ADMONISHING THE APOSTLES

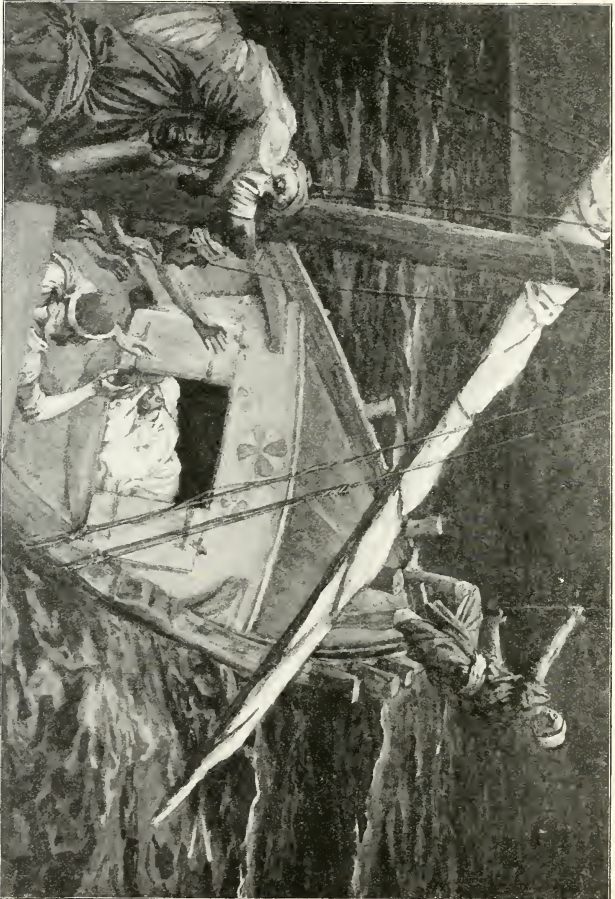
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first division deals with the "Childhood of Jesus" in most sympathetic fashion. Here the artist has been forced to utilise the types which he had gathered from his studies of the inhabitants of Palestine, and especially of Jewish children, that he might give the

world as realistic and truthful pictures as were possible, of Jesus, the boy at Nazareth. That composition entitled "Jesus and His

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JESUS ASLEEP DURING THE STORM.



Mother" is perhaps one of the best illustrations of the artist's method of furnishing the actual Oriental background and costume,

as well as a poetic presentation of the figures and their expressions. (P. 5.)

In the next grouping, dealing with the "Ministry of Jesus," we have the most complete study of those three years of ministry that had yet been given to the world by the hands of a master artist. He begins with the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist, (p. 6) and outlines each incident in the career of Christ that has been chronicled either by legends or Scripture. In the picture, for instance, of "Jesus Ministered to by Angels" we have a strange, mystic conception far different from the usually accepted interpretation of the statement. Here it is not a ministry by food and drink, but a ministry of the touch, a transference of spirit, so to speak. This picture is not reproduced.

In the Oriental grouping, where Jesus is admonishing the apostles, we have the background of waving palms and that dignified figure of the leader addressing his disciples as he understood the character of each and every one. The faces of the apostles themselves are character studies of no small value; the coloring of the original adds infinitely to the effect which must be imagined when seen in a black-and-white reproduction. (P. 7.)

The picture of "Jesus Asleep During the Storm" serves as a striking instance of the artist's combination of truth and sentiment. The boat, which is tossed high by the waves, is just such a boat as Jesus must have used on this perilous journey. The figure of Jesus himself sleeping so calmly while the crew rushes about mad with terror is doubtless intended by the artist to typify the wonderful serenity which is one of the leading characteristics of the Jesus of the New Testament. (P. 8.)

But, M. Tissot has not forgotten any of the minor characters in the great Christian tragedy. Not a parable fails of illustration to make it both clear and comprehensible. His pictures of the minor personages are as striking as those of the leading characters, for he recognises the fact that nothing is of slight importance to Christendom which bears upon those three years of activity. His drawings of Mary Magdalene, before and after her conversion, are eloquent commentaries upon the significance of Jesus's attitude towards her and her class, as well as of her personal change of life. (P. 10.)

The later groupings of the paintings under the headings "Holy Week," "The Passion," and "The Resurrection," include many compositions illustrative both of careful archæological study and deep devotion. The artist found it necessary to restore Jerusalem



MARY MAGDALENE AFTER HER CONVERSION.

Copyright by James Tissot, 1898.

itself in the light of modern discoveries in order to paint Jesus and the closing scenes of his career there. The Temple of Jerusalem itself is no small triumph in reconstructive archæology. Calvary



ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI.

Copyright by James Tissot, 1898.

has also been restored, giving to Christendom the truer conception of that place as a little mound, not more than twenty-two feet high, upon which the final scene of the tragedy was enacted. The artist

omits nothing of all the events appertaining to that final week. The arrest, the various trials before conviction, and the supreme sufferings afterwards are all pictured in detail. In fact, some critics have objected to the too great detail with which this theme has been treated. They object to the pictures dealing with "The Driving of the First Nail," "The Driving of the Nails Into the Feet," "The Elevation of the Cross," etc. But the artist replies: "If men are to understand all of the sufferings which that most horrible of Roman customs, crucifixion, brought upon Jesus, they must see each and every act."

Possibly the finest of all this series is that painting of the last moments when the martyr quotes from the Psalms the memorable phrase, "Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani!" (P. 11.)

In dealing with the Resurrection the artist employs most simple devices picturing the several appearances of Jesus to those who had believed in Him.

In the book in which the pictures are reproduced each composition is accompanied by an extract from the Gospel furnishing the basis of that picture. These extracts are taken from the Vulgate and the authorised version, appearing on the left and right hand sides of the pages, respectively. In addition to the Biblical basis of the compositions the artist has found it necessary to write a large number of notes explaining the reasons for which he paints each picture as he does, at the same time giving very full accounts of the customs of the Jews at the time of Jesus, by which it is made possible to understand otherwise inexplicable incidents.

The work of M. Tissot will interest not merely the believers in Christianity, who are desirous of knowing all they can about the founder of the faith, but inasmuch as the artist has not relied merely upon intuition, but has studied the ground carefully and has listened to the instructions even of the rabbis in Jerusalem upon important points, it interests also the Jews and other students of history who desire to understand this important epoch more fully.

There can be no doubt of the value of these ten years of labor spent upon a period of which the world knows so very little. The objection raised by some who have seen the paintings, that Jesus seems so human, will not be considered anything but praise by those who regard him as one of the world's greatest men. The fact that this artist who was seeking the truth was compelled to paint Jesus first as a child, then as a man, in order that he might present him first as a martyr and then as a God, is no small trib-

ute to the conscientiousness with which, Christian believer though he be, M. Tissot has done his work.

When these pictures were exhibited in Paris in 1894, and in London two years following, they created a great sensation, and it is probable that their effect in the United States will be no less remarkable.