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The Play "Corianton"

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Abstract: A youth oriented defense of the Book of Mormon and a justification for the drama referred to in the title.

THE PLAY "CORIANTON."

BY S. A. KENNER.

The prehistoric civilization of the American continents is a subject of profound interest, and no little research. Now and then a fragment, detached and disconnected, but still disclosing some little scrap of information, rewards the diligence of the archaeologist, but is by no means satisfactory to him or to others. It gives no suggestion of its authorship, its meaning or its purpose; no key to its mystical tracings is provided; its words, if words they be, are in an unknown language, one that died long, long ago; and if any links designed to connect it with modern tongues were left for the use of those to follow, the links themselves have been effaced. This being the case, all discoveries would seem to mean but the addition of mystery to mystery, to enlarge, as it were, the field of speculation, instead of narrowing it to the limits of present day comprehension. However, the knowledge that those people lived, had forms of government, and were reasonably if not extensively enlightened, receives additional strength with each additional development; and the scientific world, baffled in its efforts to penetrate the cloud of mystery enveloping the subject, has plodded along with what it could pick up, nourishing its flagging hopes with the hope that sooner or later "something would turn up" by or through which more satisfactory conclusions could be had. In this attitude of enforced listlessness, it will be observed, while solutions or even clues were and are eagerly sought, nothing but science need apply; all agencies but those which appeal to and are understood by the physical senses have been, and in some reduced measure are yet, strictly excluded.

While the learned men were guessing and expounding, keeping their wagon hitched to the materialistic star, and eschewing inspiration as well as superhuman agencies of whatever character, there arose, at the beginning of the second quarter of the last century, a youth "to fortune and to fame unknown," who, though not ignorant, was by no means educated. His name was Joseph Smith, and he resided in New York, near the town of Palmyra. He proclaimed a new dispensation of Providence to the people of the world, and, aided by agencies which even the skeptical may understand were not mortal, he found buried on a hillside some golden plates inscribed with hieroglyphics which were to him wholly incomprehensible. But he became invested with a new and comprehensive faculty of divination, so much so that the complete translation of the legends on the plates was only a matter of manual exertion, and with its publication the missing link between the extinct races and the living ones of our continents was found. The boy's work was at first received with contemptuous incredulity, then with cautious questioning, and, finally, with general disbelief; while he himself was first laughed at, then scorned, then mobbed, then plundered, then driven, and finally murdered. But his work remained, and its influence spread. Little by little, the barriers of incredulity were battered down with reason, justice and investigation entering to remain. As one unfolding after another, demonstrating the correctness of the book's predictions, came to pass, it became plainer and plainer, to those who were willing to hear and determine impartially, that its historical features must also be founded upon fact, the more so in that at no point and in no place has it conflicted with, but rather corroborated and explained, the developments of archaeology. And here do we find the foundation, the inspiration, the essence of the play "Corianton."

To some it may seem a peculiar if not incongruous thing that the Book of Mormon should be made the source from which the materials for a dramatic production came. Yet why? History is and has been a most fruitful field for the dramatist, and many of the plays which have fiction for the warp of the fabric employ historical events for the woof. That it is a novel manner in which to bring forth characters and incidents long since passed

into the mists of obscurity, and whose discovery was finally made possible and permitted for religious rather than secular purposes, is of course; yet should it be remembered that there are different ways of accomplishing great purposes; that whenever it is necessary that information relating to man's past and present status on the earth be made general, and placed within the reach of all, the processes of distribution may involve means of which we previously were not aware, and cannot all at once comprehend. "God moves in a mysterious way." The Sphinx still raises its ungainly head above the shifting sands of the ages which have buried it to the shoulders, and pokes its battered nose into the twentieth century with as much "frozen effrontery" as when the Egyptians gave it the last blow of the chisel, and then stood away to marvel at and admire the labor of their hands. It also bears a message from the ages of the hidden past, but what it is no man knoweth, and itself gives forth no sign or sound; neither did the stately ruins, the imposing piles, the carved walls, the massive columns nor the mummified remains of the Aztecs, or whatever else the ancient Americans may be called, send along any message to succeeding ages that could be understood, until the man, the times, and the means, arrived. And then the message was published that all might understand it; and, from a segment thereof, was taken the principal incidents which form the basic principle of the play "Corianton." Those who are disposed to cavil at this, or to maintain incredulity regarding the divine authenticity of the book itself, should consider the case in all its bearings. They would then see a free and rational people suffering all manner of violent treatment, and, finally, expulsion from their homes because of their firm and unyielding faith in the tenets laid down in, and history unfolded by, the book; furthermore, sustained by the same faith and the hope of what it will bring as a reward, the bridging of the vast desert expanse which yawned between the Missouri, and the bringing together of the selvages of Eastern and Western civilization fifty years earlier than it would have been accomplished but for the pioneering work of those people, in the very midst of the otherwise unsettled, dreary waste. Such faith, accompanied by such works, tell us more plainly than words can do it that more than a belief—a knowledge—of the sanctity and truthful-

ness of the message, from a people who long antedated the advent of the Redeemer, inspired, upheld and directed the settlers of Utah, bringing first rude dwellings, then comfortable and finally elegant ones, constituting cities, towns and villages, in nearly all of which there is a temple of the drama, and in two of which has been produced the play which portrays some portions of the sacred writings constituting the corner stone of their religion.

That the book is not followed strictly; that some things in the sections used have been omitted, and other things which it does not contain are inserted; that the plot as a whole may be somewhat of a departure from the series of events to which the play relates; that characters in the book do not figure in the drama, and *vice versa*—all these are of course. Exactness to history in making up dramatic representations is quite out of the question; it is not even thought of. Much as we owe to and respect recorded events of great moment, in the affairs of peoples, and, notwithstanding our proneness to select some of them now and then to weave a story, a poem or a play, we cannot "tell it all," because we also owe something to conventionality, and must keep in view the accepted methods which control in such cases—using only such features as are of general interest, and enlarging or diminishing so much as may be necessary without losing or even obscuring the central idea. So it is with "Corianton." In the play we have with reasonable fidelity the chief circumstances to which it relates, as narrated in the Book of Mormon—the righteous father Alma, the wayward and the upright son, the former's yielding to temptation through vicious associations, the terrible punishment of the scoffer and blasphemer, the wicked rule of the Zoramite, the justice and uprightness of the secular judge, the cunning, scheming and vile conspiracies of the enemies of the godly—these are all limned with as much accuracy as is possible in a dramatic representation. But those who regard it as in any sense a proselyting medium are astray in their reckoning; but it may be the means of arousing curiosity, this leading to interest in, and consequent investigation of, the subject to which it relates, and thus be the means of accomplishing other good than merely affording an evening's entertainment. Certainly we can all indulge in the hope that it will be so.