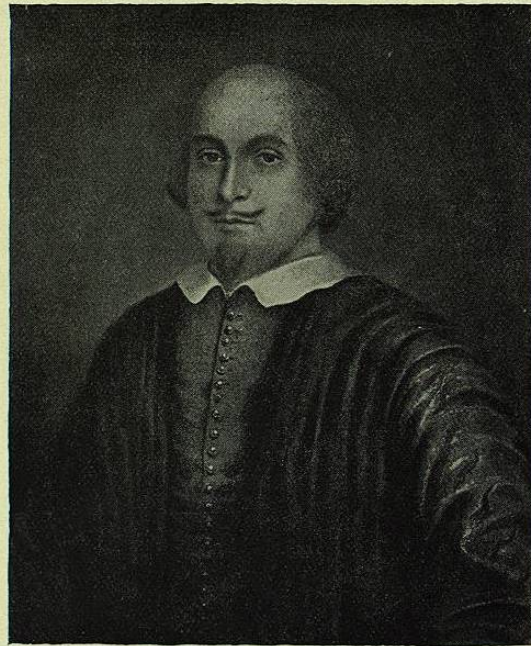


CHAPTER III.

SHAKESPEARE.

NOTHING but our habitual narrowness and conventionalism prevents us from realizing that the words of great souls are intended by God for our delight indeed, but far more for our moral illumination, and for our spiritual guidance.

One of the marvels of life is that God has dowered every child of man with such priceless boons, and that the vast majority of us, His children, — for whose joy and instruction He meant these blessings, — remain not only to a great extent *indifferent* to them, but stupidly *unconscious* of them. Take, by way of illustration, the beauty and glory of the outer world. May we not often say with Emerson: —



SHAKESPEARE.
(The Stratford Portrait.)

"In this refulgent summer it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm of Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays."

And again: —

How does nature deify us with a few cheap elements! Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous."

It ought to be a part of our most ordinary belief that

 "Every bird that sings,
And every flower that stars the elastic sod,
And every breath the radiant summer brings
To the pure spirit, is a word of God."

Yet how few are there who habitually use to the uttermost these gracious gifts! We are ever grumbling about our poverty. How many of us realize the immeasurable abundance of true riches which God has

poured upon us? To how many of us has the "glad light green of the spring leaves," the sweet season of bud and bloom, the snowdrops and violets and daffodils, the opening rosebud and the song of the blackbird, the pomp and prodigality of heaven, the crimson pageantries of sunset, the sea's "unnumbered laughter," the moon gliding in her brightness amid night's innumerable stars — to how many of us have these been a source of pure and passionate happiness, a cause of rapturous thanksgiving to Him who gave them?

How many of us have been weaned by them from love of money and selfishness and petty malice? Yet to whom were these glories given if not to us? "God hath made everything beautiful in its time," said the Wise King three thousand years ago; "also he hath set the world in their hearts, so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end." "The firma-

ment in its clearness, the beauty of heaven, the glory of the stars, the rainbow exceedingly beautiful in the brightness thereof," — all these things praise the Lord. But man is dumb. Fire and hail, snow and vapor, wind and storm, fulfil his word; but man — "colder than the ice, more aimless than the vapor, more inconstant than the wind" — lives in fretful ingratitude and disobedient pride.

Is it not just the same with our ignorant neglect of that gift of GENIUS which God has kindled for us in the hearts of the world's greatest writers? They are ours, but multitudes do not care to study them, or even so much as to read them. They shine, but how rarely do we try to "climb by these sunbeams to the Father of Lights"!

"Ever their statures rise before us,
Our loftier brothers, but one in blood;
At bed and table they lord it o'er us
With looks of beauty and words of good;"

and we turn from them to the mire and druff of personalities and idle talk, or waste our leisure in groping amid the verminiferous dust of malignant gossip. "Give me a great truth, that I may live on it!" exclaimed the German poet Herder.

These Heaven-enkindled souls offer us great truths in abundance; but of how small avail is it to those on whom has fallen the serpent's curse: "Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life." From these high thoughts we turn to ignoble ends and ignoble amusements, and live and move and have our being in the infinite littleness of chance desires. Alas!

"Unless above himself he can
Erect himself, how mean a thing is man!"

In this and the following chapters I wish to say a few words about an immeasurable subject. I will try to indicate some fraction as to what we may learn of life,

as God has made it, from one of the most gifted souls which He ever created, William Shakespeare. I have already tried to exorcise from timid minds the silly notion that in so doing I shall be taking any reader away from those great eternal lessons which we associate with our too narrow and technical conception of "religion."

Many persons still seem to be as foolish as the Khalif Omar, who is said to have ordered the invaluable library of Alexandria to be burned because the books must either be in agreement with the Koran or in contradiction to it, and in the first case they were needless, and in the second reprehensible! If the sovereign truths of the Gospel seem for a moment to be absent from what we say of literature, — as they are, for instance, from large sections of the Bible itself, — yet in all true and lofty teaching they are still as essentially present as the bottom of the ocean is present, though we see it not as we glide over

its placid surface or toss upon its stormy waves.

In the plays of Shakespeare, however, those eternal verities of God's revelation are scarcely ever out of sight. Shakespeare's mind was *saturated* with the Bible. "He was habitually conversant with Scripture," writes one commentator. "He had deeply imbibed the Scriptures," says another. His works have been called "A secular Bible;" but they are something more than secular. The good Archbishop Sharp, a friend of saints in the reign of Queen Anne, once a Dean of Canterbury, used to say: "The Bible and Shakespeare have made me Archbishop of York."

"Next to the Bible," said Dr. Hugh MeNeile, Dean of Ripon, "I have derived more benefit from Shakespeare than any human author; for he so thoroughly knew the human heart." Dean Milman classes him among the great Christian poets, as not merely writing on religious subjects, but as

instinct with the religious life of Christianity. "He favored virtue from his very soul," said Keble, "and led the way to sounder views even upon sacred things, and to juster sentiments concerning God Himself."

A learned and saintly English bishop has written a book entitled "Shakespeare and the Bible." In it he shows that as the Bible was one of the few books to which Shakespeare had constant access, so in hundreds of passages he illustrates with unparalleled power its deepest lessons. Many truths lie in the Bible, buried under mountain-loads of perverted religionism. It needs the grandeur and truthfulness of an intellect which Heaven bestowed, to bring back not a few of the deepest truths of Scripture in their brightness and original intensity. If we never emancipate ourselves from the current misuse of the Bible, we may, like the villanous Richard III., trick out our base ends "with odd old ends stolen forth of Holy Writ," or incur

the censure which Antonio passed on Shylock: —

“The Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose;
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.”

In separating the upheaped chaff of fetish-worship and Pharisaism from the wheat of true religion, Shakespeare will help us in many ways; and we can purchase his plays for a penny apiece.

There are three benefits especially which souls who prefer fact to falsity may gain from the study of Shakespeare. One is the thrilling expression of the wisest and holiest lessons in many an isolated passage; the second is the intense significance of separate scenes; the third is the deeper and more solemn insight into the meaning of life set forth in entire plays. On subjects so large I can, of course, touch but cursorily by way of specimen.

My object is only to illustrate, not to exhaust; to offer, by way of specimen, one or two grains of gold, and to point to the mine where we may dig for them ourselves. The truths which Shakespeare illuminates with the glory of his genius have a universal bearing, and cannot be used for sectarian ends.

First, then, let us notice — quite casually — Shakespeare's immortal presentation of isolated moral and spiritual truths. Books have recently been published to prove that Shakespeare was a Roman Catholic. The attempt is futile. On the contrary, it was the Protestant type of character, and the Protestant policy in state and nation, which received impulse and vigor from the mind of the greatest of English poets. “Energy, devotion to the real, self-government, tolerance, a disbelief in machinery and materialism for the improvement of human character, an entire indifference to outward functions in comparison with the invisible

life;" and, it may be added, an absolute fidelity to human facts, and a freedom too sacred to bow itself to self-interested manipulations of truth, or the dominancy of any usurping priestcraft, — are his essential characteristics.

Here are a few of the isolated truths which Shakespeare has clothed in immortal words. Are any of us slandered or misunderstood? May we not take this comfort: —

"If powers divine
Behold our human actions, as they do,
I doubt not then but innocence shall make
False accusation blush."

Do any of us flatter ourselves that vice can escape punishment? Let us learn, once for all, that —

"The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us."

Would we know the reason why God punishes the guilty? It is because "the gen-

tle arrows in the mighty hand of God" are intended to *heal* the wounds which they inflict; and when adversity is accepted with wise submission as the natural consequence of our ill deserts, then even adversity —

"Like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in its head."

In more than one passage Shakespeare brings home to us the truth that —

"To wilful men
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters."

Again, are we in need of comfort if sometimes we find our thoughts tormented by evil suggestions? In the "Pilgrim's Progress" Christian, as he walked through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, was sore troubled because an evil spirit was whispering into his ear the blasphemies which he feared might be his own. Might he not have learned from Shakespeare the consola-

tion that involuntary suggestions, which we repudiate with horror, involve no personal guilt, since —

“’Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,
Another thing to fall.”

Do we desire to have impressed upon our hearts the truth that self-control, self-mastery, self-possession, the acquiring of ourselves, is the secret of all noble life? Then let us ponder the rule, —

“To thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

Would we shun the curse of inconsistency? Was the truth ever more beautifully expressed than in the lines, —

“How sour sweet music is
When time is broke and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men’s lives.”

Would we be warned against bargaining with God in favor of any sinful reserva-

tion? Hear the guilty, adulterous king exclaim: —

“May one be pardoned and retain the offence?
In the corrupted currents of the world,
Offence’s gilded hand may shove by justice.
And oft ’tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law. But ’tis not so above:
There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled,
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
To give in evidence.”

How powerfully does this passage teach us the immeasurable difference between mere remorse and genuine repentance! Sin must be forsaken before it can be forgiven; consequently the murderous usurper, unable to pray, rises from his knees with the wearied, despairing confession, —

“My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to Heaven go.”

Would we learn that the true secret of happiness is within, not without us? Hear the saintly Henry VI. exclaim, —

"My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
Not decked with diamonds and Indian stones,
Nor to be seen. My crown is call Content.
A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy."

It would take me many pages to pursue this part of the subject, for the writings of Shakespeare are more thickly strewn than those of any other poet who ever lived with such Orient pearls as these. But it is important to observe *two things* about the *florilegium* of exquisite isolated passages, full of concentrated wisdom and keen insight, which might so abundantly be collected from the works of our great dramatist.

1. In the first place these passages, which are on all lips, are never fine things uttered for the sake of saying fine things. There is never anything of the attitudinizing element in Shakespearean wisdom. He never goes out of his way to drag in some magnificent passage. His grandest utterances are never of the nature of purple

patches sewn on some threadbare robe, of which they only serve by contrast to reveal the poverty. They always occur naturally, and, so to speak, spontaneously. They arise from the subject itself, and are exactly congruous to the characters of those who give expression to them, and the emotions by which they are called forth. Hence the lustre and preciousness of these jewels is enhanced tenfold if we take them in their proper setting. They acquire fresh force and beauty from the surroundings, which give them a deeper meaning than they can have apart from the total lesson conveyed by the plays or scenes in which we find them. A reader who knew Shakespeare only from these isolated gems would know but little of his greatness, or of the lessons which he was raised up to teach from thenceforth to all time and to all the world.

2. And in the second place, these beautiful passages, these wise sayings, always

impress us with their own intense reality and sincerity. *They are never second-hand*; they never arise from an attempt to clothe in striking language either the commonplaces of universal experience or the floating reminiscences of acquired knowledge. They are the ripe fruit of personal attainment. They were won through sorrow and struggle. They speak from the heart to the heart. They have been tested by the events of actual life and very real suffering.

It is true that Shakespeare's dramatic utterances belong to the characters of those who speak them, and fall into their natural place; so that we can never quote a sentiment as *his* without reference to the personage into whose lips the words are put, or the circumstances by which they were elicited. Nevertheless, all the most serious and valuable of his immortal aphorisms have an independent worth. Shakespeare reveals himself even while he hides

himself. The mere dates of his plays show the age at which they were written, and the varying circumstances of his life. They fall into four periods, and an immeasurable difference in tone of mind separates his early comedies from his later works. "Love's Labour's Lost," and "The Comedy of Errors"—even "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and "The Two Gentlemen of Verona"—written in the first period of his life (1588-1590), when he was still in the gay buoyancy of his early manhood, are widely separated in their general characteristics from "The Merchant of Venice," "Henry V.," and "All's Well that Ends Well," which belong to the second period (1598-1602).

These again have in them none of the tempestuous passion and intense realization of life's insoluble mysteries that we find in "Hamlet," in "Measure for Measure," "Othello," "Macbeth," "Lear," and "Timon of Athens," which belong to the

third period of his career (1602-1608). It is not till "The Tempest," written about 1610 — in which Shakespeare bids farewell to his art and practically breaks his magic wand — that we find the calm and ripe serenity of advancing years in one who by that time had escaped from the stormy billows, and, even if it were "with difficult scant breath," was able to look back from the shore at their raging foam. Shakespeare was born in 1564, and he was not far off from fifty years of age when he wrote his last play. He died in 1616, perhaps on his fifty-third birthday.

No man can absolutely hide from the world the true character of his mind. A mask may be close-fitting, yet it has an awkward way of slipping off at unguarded moments. But wherever and however Shakespeare reveals himself in his plays, it may be regarded as certain that he displays his inner life, with all its troubles, most decisively in his "Son-

nets." They were probably written between 1592-1602, and they breathe forth such passion as could not have been simulated. However many be the problems with which their interpretation is surrounded, it is in these Sonnets that we hear the accents of the man himself; and they show us that Shakespeare had devoted a passionately enthusiastic and chivalrous devotion — such as was more common in ancient than in modern times, and in Southern than in Northern climates — to a beautiful youth, and also to a dark but enchanting woman; and that both affections had been treacherously betrayed. It is in the struggles through which the soul of Shakespeare passed during this period of storm and stress that we find the most decisive moment of his spiritual and mental career. It is to the feelings then evoked that we owe the atmosphere of lurid mystery and Titanic emotion which overhangs the chief plays