the evil thoughts are followed by murders, adulteries, and every form of crime. To what writer has it ever been given to add more awful emphasis to the rule —

> "Guard well thy thoughts, for thoughts are heard in heaven"?

I have selected but three separate scenes to show the mighty intellectual force which Shakespeare wields that he may inculcate the duty of watchfulness and the supreme blessedness of moral integrity. I might have selected multitudes of other scenes no less powerful; but these will suffice to illustrate how much every earnest reader may gain from the wisdom of one who can only be ranked with Dante and with Milton, among the greatest of the Teachers of Mankind.

I now turn to the lessons taught in Shakespeare's plays as a whole. The meaning of life comes to us mostly in great revealing flashes and intense emo-

tions. Imagine the poorest and commonest of our rude sailor boys, trained from infancy in a home of rough hardship, coarse in manner, it may be ignorant in mind, rude in speech, with nothing grand about him except his humanity. He steps ashore after long toils on the stormy seas, and lo! as he enters his native village, "heart-shaking news meets him in long accumulated arrears," and, rushing up to the little churchyard, the poor lad flings himself in a passion of sobs and tears upon his mother's grave. Is he not, as it were, transfigured by that sorrow? Is not his whole being illuminated at that moment into something of tragic and poetic grandeur, which shows that "poor humanity" is greater than we know, as it struggles in vain with apparently ruthless destiny? Much of all our lives, and all of some men's lives, is, —

> "A life of nothings, nothing worth,
> From that first nothing ere our birth,
> To that last nothing under earth."

If this were all, we are hardly better than the animals, and might ask with Shakespeare, —

> "What is man
> If his chief use and market of his time,
> Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more."

We must be roused out of this corrupting delusion of earthiness, which Bunyan represents by his man with the muck-rake; or else, —

> "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The road to dusty death."

Now Shakespeare will help us, as no other secular writer can, to realize the awful reality and solemnity of our existence. There are no shams in his presentment of life as it is — no sickly fetish-worship; no miserable conventions; no namby-pamby make-believes. He does not think that life can be explained by a

few rose-pink sentimentalities. He "holds, as it were, a mirror up to nature." He portrays manhood, alike in its grandeur and in its littleness, as now it "bursts of great heart," and now "slips in sensual mire."

If we read Shakespeare only as a dramatist who wrote plays to be represented for our amusement on the boards of a theatre, we know nothing of him. "He saw life steadily, and saw it whole." As we pass through his plays in chronological order, from the airy, fantastic laughter of "Love's Labour's Lost," to the serene and mellow wisdom of the "Tempest," we can trace how — amid experiences of life often intensely bitter, and through temptations that came with awful force to his vivid temperament — Shakespeare had not only grown year after year in mental stature, but had also learned moral soberness and spiritual wisdom. As Goethe said, "His plays are much more than poems. The

reader seems to have before him the books of fate, against which is beating the tempest of eager life, so as to drive the leaves backwards and forwards with violence." And his plays became more deep in awful meaning as his life went on. Sir Walter Raleigh, in some memorable pages of the Preface to his "History of the World," traces the vindication of the moral order, the glory of faithfulness, and the certain Nemesis of evil-doing in the lives of our English kings; but how much more powerfully is this set forth in Shakespeare's historic plays! He illustrates for us with incomparable art and power the sure workings of the law of retribution, not by way of arbitrarily administered reward or punishment, but in the way of the natural consequences and outcome of human deeds.

Shakespeare's historic plays do not rise to the incomparable grandeur of some of his later tragedies of passion. Yet no

writer has ever surpassed the lessons of moral wisdom at which we may arrive by studying the normal results of good or of evil doing, as he delineates them in the fortunes of King John the hypocritical dastard, and Richard II. the fantastic dreamer, and Richard III. the open villain, and Henry VI. the feeble and unmanly saint, and Henry V. the prosaic but resolute and practical well-doer. This young hero-king evidently attained to Shakespeare's highest ideal of manly and victorious integrity of life as a ruler and as a man.

Into five especially of the plays that belong to the closing epochs of his life, Shakespeare has poured his most Titanic conceptions of the evil of the world, and what it means. Those plays are "Hamlet," "Timon of Athens," "Othello," "Macbeth," and "King Lear." Of the lessons of Hamlet, and of the fine curses of Timon, "with his noble heart, which strongly loathing greatly broke," I will not now

speak. At the other three plays we will, by way of illustration, cast a passing glance.

I. In "OTHELLO" Shakespeare has given us his most finished picture of a full-blown and irredeemable scoundrel, the only absolute and quite unmitigated incarnation of moral evil whom he has portrayed. Iago is a sensual egotist, who, because he disbelieves wholly in goodness, and chooses to foster in his own mind a suspicion equally vile and groundless, entraps one after another of the innocent to their ruin, and becomes a very demon of iniquity, doing the devil's authentic work. He has not enough belief even to create remorse in him. Malignity and animalism suffice this human Mephistopheles. Lodovico calls him "a viper and a hellish villain," and he is the only monster entirely without one gleam of a redeeming feature whom Shakespeare has delineated. Othello, disillusioned at last from the envenomed

spell, looks at the man who has destroyed him, and says: —

> "I look down towards his feet — but that's a fable.
> If that thou be'st a devil I cannot kill thee."

And again: —

> "Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
> Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?"

Iago is a specimen of those "men slugs and human serpentry" of whom Keats speaks. He feeds on dust, and by the potent alchemy of his own baseness transmutes it into venom. Of course, as befalls all such "human serpentry" in the long run, his own head is crushed. But while all our sympathy and love are for the victims, whose innocence he has plunged into sin, into rashness, and into uttermost ruin, we can hardly feel one spark of pity for this clever, successful, atrocious reprobate when he is tortured and executed amid our uttermost loathing. For Desde-

mona, for Cassio, for rash, honest Othello, "crushed and beaten to their ruin by this demon's anger stern," we have nothing but heartfelt compassion ; and thus the inherent majesty of goodness asserts itself as the one supreme thing to be sought after, even amid the deadly triumph of wickedness. A writer who thus intensely, and by the direct grandeur of his art, convinces us that, as Milton says,

> "If Virtue feeble were,
> Heaven itself would stoop to her,"

furnishes us with the strongest possible arguments for our inherent belief in God and immortality, and thus teaches us the most solemn and eternal lessons.

II. Again, Shakespeare's "MACBETH" is the tragedy of "Sin its own avenger." It sets before us in lurid illumination the horrors of a guilty conscience scourging the offender with whips and scorpions, and making the murderer his own executioner.

Remorse afflicts the man who is tampering with his first experience of crime, and "when the pleasure has been tasted and is gone, and nothing is left of the crime but the ruin it has wrought, then, too, the Furies take their seats upon the midnight pillow !" And Shakespeare teaches us this law of the moral world with a force that thrills our deepest hearts. But "Macbeth" is also a study of *temptation.* All sin begins in the consent of the evil that is within us to the suggestion that comes from without us. "The tempting opportunity always meets the susceptible disposition." Macbeth's passion to be king, even at the cost of bloody treachery, is stimulated by the juggling prophecy of the three witches. He entertains the evil thought, till it has become the evil wish and the evil purpose. He is further stimulated to the actual abhorrent crime by the stern determination of his wife, till the two, in spite of the fierce recalcitration

of their own alarmed consciences, murder their king and guest, the gracious Duncan.

Feeling the awful ghastliness of the crime into which he had thus been led, Macbeth cries: —

> "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? Nay, this my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incardine,
> Making the green one red."

On the other hand, Lady Macbeth, in contemplation of her husband's shrinking conscience, cries, "A little water clears of this deed!" But she, too, lives to find, in the agonies of dreaming sleep, that not even all the perfumes of Arabia will sweeten her little hand from the sickening taint of blood which she imagines herself to have washed away at once with a few drops of water.

Thus Macbeth exhibits "that frightful page in the book of human destinies of which the head-line is 'Desires Accomplished.'" That page cannot but be a "frightful" one, in spite of any apparent immediate fruition, when the desires are wicked, and when they have been accomplished by deeds of guilt. But in that curse of a criminal desire, criminally fulfilled, we read not only the lesson: —

> "I swear 'tis better to be lowly born,
> And range with humble livers in content,
> Than to be perked up in a glistering grief
> And wear a golden sorrow; —

but, much more, we have the delineation of crime through all its stages — temptation, glamour, the maturing of the evil wish, the spasm of the guilty act, and the agony of disillusionment, which instantly follows.

> "Had I but died an hour before this chance,
> I had lived a blessed time!"

But the immediate disillusionment, however agonizing, is as nothing; for on the

heels of it come the hauntings of ghostly shame, the permanence of horror, the turning to venomous ashes of the fruit guiltily plucked; last of all, retributive catastrophe, coming down like a thunderclap, puts an end to unutterable despair. Macbeth stands before us a haggard, miserable criminal, sick of life, and mockingly betrayed by the powers of evil, in which he has trusted. Unlike Iago, he still believes in the goodness, the forfeiture of which haunts him, and makes him feel that "fruit is seed," that he is only reaping the harvest of what he himself has sown.

He felt that the heart of the wicked is a troubled sea. Iago, like a fiend, is content to stand out vividly, as long as may be, in the glare of the hell which he has deliberately chosen, and which for a time suffices him; but Macbeth *feels* hell to be hell, and it is in agony that he would have cried with the fallen Archangel of Milton: —

> "Which way I fly is hell, myself am hell;
> And, in the lowest deep, a lower deep
> Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
> To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven."

III. Lastly, let us glance for one moment at the stupendous play of "King Lear" — that tragedy of tragedies, that tragedy of storm and tempest which sets before us the earthquake and eclipse, the catastrophe and conflagration, of every element of human happiness. A lovelier picture of womanly faith and tenderness than Cordelia, the daughter of King Lear, even Shakespeare never drew. And her pure daughterly love the old foolish king, in his rash autocracy and ungovernable egotism, has flung away. And there lies Cordelia, strangled on the bosom of her sire, and the poor, mad, hunted, deserted, discrowned king tears his thin white locks and sobs over the murdered corpse in vain. It is only after hurricanes of calamity that he awakes to find, too late, the priceless treas-

ure of a true daughter's tenderness, which in his folly he has spurned from him for counterfeits so deadly as the foul and lustful selfishness of a Goneril and a Regan. Dr. Johnson was so disappointed with this termination of the play that he would not read it a second time, and approved of the audacity with which a poor poetaster like Nahum Tate altered it for the stage to a happy ending.

Yet the conceptions of Shakespeare were far sublimer and more true to life. He does not stop to console us with the hopes of the life behind the dark curtains of death. In this stupendous picture of human ruin, in which —

> "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,
> They kill us for their sport,"

Shakespeare has deliberately excluded the possibility of any allusion to the heaven beyond the grave which shall, for the innocent, redeem the frightful ruin of this

life by the unimaginable bliss of a life to come. For the England of King Lear is supposed to be an England of Pagans who have never heard of Christianity. But had it been otherwise, Shakespeare would only have weakened the intense force of the lesson which he designed to teach, which was that, even if there were *no* life to come, yet — if we were nothing but creatures of a day — "evil is abnormal, and a curse which brings down destruction upon itself." Shakespeare shows us innocence and nobleness entangled in the very stakenet of hell, but he never wavers for one instant in his estimate of right and wrong. He has no little platitudes to offer us; he does not pretend to account for the mystery of things as though he were "God's spy."

Yet, taking the facts of the world simply and resolutely as they are, in all their unutterable, inexplicable pathos, he exalts and purifies us, because, in spite of all the pity

and the terror, he still shows us the immortality of goodness, and its certain victory, in the midst of apparently irretrievable defeats. Never was there a more tragic figure than that of King Lear. "What a figure!" exclaims Victor Hugo, "what a caryatid! He is the man bent down, and ever exchanging one burden for another yet more crushing. The more feeble the old man grows, the more the weight augments. He is overburdened by the load, first of empire, then of ingratitude, then of isolation, then of despair, then of hunger and thirst, then of madness, then of all nature. The clouds still roll over his head, the forests overwhelm him with their shade, the hurricane beats upon his white hair, the rain and the storm drench his mean garments, and he walks along bent and haggard, as if the two knees of the night were on his back." There are times when to all of us, as to King Lear, may come the temptation to think that —

> "Life is but a tale,
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing."

But we are prevented from succumbing to such despair, because — as Shakespeare by his art shows us, and as he had himself learnt of God — that even apart from eternal hopes, the right still differs from the wrong, not by mere "preferability," but by an immeasurable difference of divine superiority. Faith and goodness still burn through the midnight, and triumph over it. Even when good, true men seem most hopelessly overwhelmed, he bids us see that "over such sacrifices, the gods themselves throw incense." It is the lesson of the Psalmists, of the Book of Job, of the noblest chapters in the story of Daniel, of the Epistles, of the Apocalypse, of all martyrdoms, yes, of the very Cross of Christ Himself. The man who is content to live in the smug self-satisfaction of a prosperity acquiescent in earthliness, self-deceived by a sham reli-

gion; — the ignoble trimmer, who is determined at all costs not to suffer even for righteousness' sake — knows absolutely nothing of the meaning of life. He may complacently circumnavigate the vast and miry shallows of human life, but he will never obtain the faintest glimpse of any Island of the Blest. Shakespeare shows us that, even were there no eternity hereafter, it were still better to be Cordelia, strangled in prison, than to enjoy "those deadly egoisms" of Goneril and Regan in their purple, and wearing their adulterous crowns. We would rather lie dead beside sweet Desdemona, or self-stabbed with rash but honest Othello, than exult and triumph with the thrice-execrable Iago.

We would rather be the gracious Duncan, lying there murdered at midnight, his white hair dabbled with his gore, and

"His silver skin laced with his golden blood,"

than be his haggard and haunted murderer.

We would choose to be King Lear, "in his weakness, his unreason, his affliction, his poverty and madness," rather than Edmund, even at the summit of his success, with his thought, "active as a virulent acid, eating its rapid way through all the tissues of human sentiment."

That is one of the consummate lessons which Shakespeare had learnt from the book of God. Faithfulness and innocence are above all earthly reward. Whatever earth may heap upon man of agony, "whether his faithfulness palpitates with light, or seems to be quenched in darkness," virtue is always its own exceeding great reward. The righteous have set their hearts on other things than riches, or success, or the praise of men. To these they rarely attain. It is their much commoner lot to live "belied in a hubbub of lies," and die disappointed of every earthly hope. But they do attain, and that always — as the bad, amid their awful retribution, cannot attain

— to what is transcendently happier, and infinitely more precious; — even to the tranquil and never-to-be-shaken conviction that all is and all must be well. Yes! even in the lion's den; yes, even amidst the hottest fires of Smithfield; yes, amid the worst wrenches of the wrack of this tough world, they know the glory of spiritual happiness! The peace of God which passeth all understanding is only within the reach of those who, because they are faithful to the best they know, feel that the Eternal God is their refuge, and underneath them are the everlasting arms. And this is the truth which, in his own way, the great dramatist desires to bring home to our conscience.

Shakespeare, in his last will and testament, wrote, "I commend my soul into the hands of God my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing, through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour, to be made partaker of life everlasting." I believe that he would have subscribed from his heart to

those strong words of Robert Browning, the poet of our own day who was most akin to him in manly genius and sincerity, that —

> "The acknowledgment of God in Christ,
> Accepted by the reason, solves for thee
> All problems in the world and out of it,
> And has, so far, advanced thee to be wise."