NOTE ON THE STORY OF ESSEX'S RING.

THERE is, in the State Paper Office, an Account written in French, by Dudley Carleton, "of the death of queen Elizabeth, as caused by melancholy on the death of the earl of Essex." * This paper, which bears the date of April 4th, 1603, to a certain extent confirms the court belief which the French ambassador refers to, but to which he reasonably gives little credit. The story of the ring which Essex sent to Elizabeth, as the token that he asked her mercy, but which token was never delivered, has been circumstantially told by Hume. We have not inserted a similar narrative in our text, believing, with a very competent judge of evidence, that "it is of too doubtful authenticity." † But as we are unwilling entirely to omit so romantic a story, we here give it, as related by Dr. Birch:—

"The following curious story was frequently told by lady Elizabeth Spelman, great-grand-daughter of Sir Robert Carey, brother of lady Nottingham, and afterwards earl of Monmouth, whose curious Memoirs of himself were published a few years ago by lord Corke:—When Catherine, countess of Nottingham, was dying (as she did, according to his lordship's own account, about a fortnight before queen Elizabeth), she sent to her majesty to desire that she might see her, in order to reveal something to her majesty, without the discovery of which she could not die in peace. Upon the queen's coming, lady Nottingham told her that while the earl of Essex lay under sentence of death, he was desirous of asking her majesty's mercy in the manner prescribed by herself during the height of his favour; the queen having given him a ring, which, being sent to her as a token of his distress, might entitle him to her protection. But the earl, jealous of those about him, and not caring to trust any of them with it, as he was looking out of his window one morning, saw a boy with whose appearance he was pleased; and, engaging him by money and promises, directed him to convey the ring, which he took from his finger and threw down, to lady Scroop, a sister of the countess of Nottingham, and a friend of his lordship, who attended upon the queen; and to beg of her, that she would present it to her majesty. The boy, by mistake, carried it to lady Nottingham, who showed it to her husband, the admiral, an enemy of lord Essex, in order to take his advice. The admiral forbade her to carry it, or return any answer to the message; but insisted upon her keeping the ring. The countess of Nottingham, having made this discovery, begged the queen's forgiveness; but her majesty answered, 'God may forgive, but I never can,' and left the room with great emotion. Her mind was so struck with the story, that she never went into bed, or took any sustenance from that instant; for Camden is of opinion that her chief reason for suffering the earl to be executed was his supposed obstinacy in not applying to her for mercy."

A sequel to this story was communicated by a trustworthy correspondent to the editor of "Old England." The substance of this communication is, that when Mary, queen of Scots, married Darnley, she sent Elizabeth a ring, being a plain gold circle, to fit the thumb having a rose diamond, in the form of a heart; that Elizabeth gave this ring to Essex; that it passed into the hands of king James; that it was given by him to sir Thomas Warner; and has remained in the possession of his descendants to the present time. It must be clear to every reader that the existence of such a ring does not in the slightest degree add to the authenticity of the original story. In the relation as given by Dr. Birch there is manifest exaggeration. The countess of Nottingham died, according to lord Corke, "about a fortnight before queen Elizabeth." It has been ascertained that she died on the 25th of February; Elizabeth died on the 24th of March. The death of the queen must have been even more remarkable than her life, if, upon this fatal disclosure, "she never took any sustenance from that instant." A drawing of the "Warner" ring was engraved in "Old England."

* "Calendar of State Papers of the reign of James I." edited by Mrs. Green, 1857.
† Jardine "Criminal Trials," vol. i. p. 370.

CHAPTER XII.

Literature and Art characteristic of the periods of their production.—First years of Elizabethan literature bore the impress of the two preceding reigns.—Sackville.—The early popular drama.—Marlowe and the contemporary dramatists.—Growing refinement.—Spenser.—Shakspere.—Lyrical poetry.—Its association with Music.—Rural images in the poets connected with the pleasurable aspects of country life.—Architecture.—The palatial mansion.—Gardens.—The gentleman's manor-house.—Classical education.

THE historian Hume, in his desire to exhibit the reign of Elizabeth as a period of uncontrolled despotism, says, "It is remarkable that in all the historical plays of Shakspere, where the manners and characters, and even the transactions, of the several reigns are so exactly copied, there is scarcely any mention of *civil Liberty!*" * Mr. Hallam, without adverting to this passage, has furnished an answer to it: "These dramatic chronicles borrowed surprising liveliness and probability from the national character and form of government. A prince, and a courtier, and a slave, are the stuff on which the historical dramatist would have to work in some countries; but every class of free men, in the just subordination without which neither human society nor the stage, which should be its mirror, can be more than a chaos of huddled units, lay open to the selection of Shakspere." † The "manners and characters," not only of Shakspere's historical plays, but of all his other dramas, are instinct with all the vitality that belongs to a state of social freedom, in which what we hold as tyranny was exceptional. The very fact which Hume alleges, but which must be taken with some limitation, that in Shakspere's historical plays "there is scarcely any mention of civil liberty," is really a proof of the existence of such liberty. In our own time a French writer has recorded, that after attending a debate in our House of Commons, he observed to an English statesman that he had heard no assertion of the general principles of constitutional freedom. The answer was, "We take all that for granted." We are not about to analyse the characters of Shakspere's dramas to show that "they

* "History," Appendix iii. vol. v. † "Literature of Europe," vol. ii. p. 395.

comprise every class of free men." We believe of Shakspere, as we believe of Chaucer, that neither of these great poets could have existed except under a condition of society which permitted a very large amount of civil liberty. But this is not the place to set forth any detailed reasons for this belief; and we should scarcely have alluded to the assertion of Hume, except to show that he properly looked beyond Courts and Parliaments to discover the spirit of an age. All Poetry, as all other Art, must in a great degree be the reflection of the time in which it is produced. The Elizabethan Poetry, and especially the Drama; the Elizabethan Music; the Elizabethan Architecture; bear the most decided impress of their own time. The rapid, and therefore imperfect, view which we shall take of the most prominent indications of intellectual progress will be principally to exhibit them as characteristics of their period.

The stormy reigns of Edward VI. and of Mary were not favourable to the cultivation of Literature. Wyatt and Surrey belonged to the time of Henry VIII., before the elements of religious contention had penetrated much below the surface of society. But when the nation came to be divided into two great opposing classes, earnest in their convictions, even to the point of making martyrs, or being martyrs the sonneteer and the lyrist would have little chance of being heard. There were a few such poets—Vaux, Edwards, Hunnis—but even their pleasant songs have a tincture of seriousness. The poet who at the very beginning of the reign of Elizabeth struck out a richer vein—Thomas Sackville—breathes the very spirit of the gloomy five years of persecution and almost hopeless bigotry through which England had passed into a healthier existence. There was then a long interval, during which poetry was imping her wings for her noblest flights. The drama was emerging from the childishness and buffoonery of her first period of separation from the shows of Catholicism. The same Thomas Sackville, early in the reign of Elizabeth, produced his tragedy of "Gorboduc," of which it may be sufficient to say, that Sidney describes it as "full of stately speeches and well-sounding phrases, climbing to the height of Seneca his style."* English Dramatic poetry was not born with the courtly Sackville. It was struggling into life when it first seized upon the popular mind as an instrument of education—"made the ignorant more apprehensive, taught the unlearned the knowledge of many famous histories, instructed such as cannot read in the

* "Defence of Poesy."

discovery of all our English chronicles."* Roughly was that useful work originally done; but it was a reflection of the national spirit, and it produced its effect upon the national character. The early dramatists, if we may credit one of their eulogists, proposed great moral lessons in their representations: "In plays, all cozenages, all cunning drifts, overgilded with outward holiness, all stratagems of war, all the canker-worms that breed on the rust of peace, are most lively anatomised: they show the ill-success of treason, the fall of hasty climbers, the wretched end of usurpers, the misery of civil dissention, and how just God is evermore in punishing of murder."† Such passages have been again and again quoted; but we repeat them to show how thoroughly the English drama became adapted to its time, even before its palmy state. It went forth from the courtly direction of the Master of the Revels at Whitehall and Greenwich, to delight multitudes at the Belle Savage and the Bull. The Bones of Brave Talbot were "new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least."‡ It was a rude stage, in which the place of action was "written in great letters upon an old door;" a stage without scenes, so that "a hideous monster came out with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it [the stage] for a cave."§ And yet the most elaborate mechanism, the most gorgeous decoration, never produced the delight which the unassisted action and the simple dialogue of these early plays excited. The spectators were in a new world. They were there to believe, and not to criticise. "You shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers, and then we must believe the stage to be a garden." The thousands who paid each their penny did so believe. They gave up their imaginations to the delusion, and were taken out of themselves into a higher region than that of their daily labours. When the transition period arrived, in which the first rude utterings of a mimetic life were passing into the higher art of the first race of true dramatists,—of which race Marlowe was the undoubted head—there was extravagance in action and character; bombast in language; learning,—for Marlowe, Peele, Greene, Lodge, Kyd, were scholars—but learning falsely applied; yet there was real poetical power. They dealt in horrors; their comedy was for the most part ribaldry. The Drama, says Sidney, "like an unmannerly daughter, showing a bad education, causeth her mother Poesy's honesty to be called in question." But the

* Heywood's "Apology for Actors,"—Shakspere Society, p. 52.
† Nash. ‡ *Ibid.* § Sidney.

bad education of the unmannerly daughter was to be greatly attributed to the examples of the outer world in which she was born. She asserted her divine origin when strength and refinement had become united, in the greater assimilation of character between the courtly and the industrious classes; when rough ignorance was not held to be the necessary companion of martial prowess; and elegance and effeminacy had ceased to be confounded.

Against the growing refinement which was a natural consequence of the more general diffusion of wealth, the satirist, whether he belonged to the severe religionists or to the class held by them as the licentious, directed his constant invectives. There was a general belief that luxury, as the use of the humblest comforts was termed, was lowering the national character. Harrison denounces the chimneys which had taken the place of the reredosse in the hall; the feather bed and the sheets which had driven out the straw pallet; the pewter vessels which were splendid at the yeoman's feasts, instead of the wooden platters; the carpets and the tapestry, the bowl for wine, and the dozen silver spoons. The town wits held the growing riches of the citizens as the spoils of usury and brokery; and the lawyers who "fatted on gold" were counted the oppressors of the poor. All this is indicative of a great change of manners, resulting from the growing opulence of the middle classes, and the wide increase of competition. There was a general activity of intellect; and it was one of the fortunate circumstances of the social condition of England, that there was a great national cause to fight for, which lifted men out of the selfishness of unwonted industrial prosperity. At such a period arose the two greatest poets of that age, or of any age, Spenser and Shakspere. They each essentially belonged to their time. They each, in their several ways, reflected that time. Spenser dealt much more largely than Shakspere with the events and characteristics of his age. In his "Shepherd's Kalendar," he is a decided Church-reformer. In the "Faery Queen" he shadows forth "the most excellent and glorious person" of Elizabeth; and many historical personages may be traced in the poem. Amongst the numerous allegorical characters we find Una, the true Church, opposed to Duessa, the type of Romanism. But it is not in these more literal marks of the time, that we discover in Spenser the spirit of the time. It is not in his "Mother Hubberd's Tale," where we find the boldest satire against courtly corruption—justice sold, benefices given to the unworthy, nobility despised, learning little esteemed, the many not cared for,—that we must look for the general reflection in Spenser's verse of the spirit of his age. His fate had been "in suing long to bide," and he took a poet's revenge for the neglect. It is in the general elevation of the tone of "the Faery Queen," and of the other poems of his matured years, that we may appreciate the moral and intellectual tastes of the educated classes of Elizabeth's latter period. Unquestionably the poet, by his creative power, may in some degree shape the character of an age, instead of being its mirror; but in the relations of a great writer to his readers there is a mutual action, each inspiring the other. The tone of Spenser's poetry must at any rate have been in accordance with the mental condition of those with whom "the Faery Queen" became at once the most popular of all books. It ceased to be popular after two generations had passed away, and the Rochesters and Sedleys were the great literary stars. The heroic age to which Spenser belonged was then over. "Fierce wars and faithful loves" had become objects of ridicule. The type of female perfection was not "heavenly Una, with her milk-white lamb," but "Mistress Nelly" in the side-box. "The goodly golden chain of chivalry" was utterly worthless compared with the price paid for Dunkirk. Such were the differences of morals and intellect between 1600 and 1670. Spenser was the most popular of poets while the ideal of chivalry still lingered in the period that had produced Sidney, and Essex, and Raleigh, and Grenville—when the rough Devonshire captains fought the Spaniard with an enthusiastic bravery and endurance that the Orlandos and the Red Cross Knights of Ariosto and Spenser could not excel. The great laureate's popularity was gone when the Dutch sailed up the Medway; for the spirit of the Elizabethan "golden time" was gone.

The age of Elizabeth may pre-eminently claim the distinction of having called up a great native literature. The national mind had already put forth many blossoms of poetry, and in the instance of Chaucer the early fruit was of the richest flavour. But in the latter part of Elizabeth's reign England had a true garden of the Hesperides. It has been most justly observed that "in the time of Henry VIII. and Edward VI., a person who did not read French or Latin could read nothing or next to nothing."* Hence the learned education of the ladies of that period. The same writer asks, "over what tragedy could lady Jane Grey have wept, over what comedy could she have smiled, if the ancient dramatists had

* Macaulay, "Essays," art. "Bacon."

not been in her library?" Lady Jane Grey meekly laid her head upon the block in 1554. Had she lived fifty years longer she would have had in her library all Shakspere's historical plays, except King John and King Henry VIII.; she would have had Romeo and Juliet, Love's Labour Lost, the Merchant of Venice, Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado about Nothing, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Hamlet,—for all these were printed before that period. She might have seen all these acted; and she might also have seen As you Like it, All's Well that Ends Well, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Twelfth Night, Othello. Her pure and truly religious nature would not have shrunk from the perusal of these works, which might worthily stand by the side of her Terence and her Sophocles in point of genius, and have a far higher claim upon her admiration. For they were imbued, not with the lifeless imitation of heathen antiquity, but with the real vitality of the Christian era in which they were produced; with all the intellectual freedom which especially distinguished that era from the past ages of Christianity. The deities of the old mythology might linger in the pageants of the court; but the inspiration of these creations of the popular dramatist was derived from the pure faith for which the lady Jane died. From no other source of high thought could have originated the exquisite creations of female loveliness which Shakspere, and Spenser equally, presented. Some portion of what was tender and graceful in the Catholic worship of "Our Lady," passed into the sober homage involuntarily paid to the perfectness of woman by the two great Protestant poets. In Shakspere was especially present a more elevated spirit of charity than belonged to the government of his times, although his toleration must have abided to a great extent amongst a people that had many common ties of brotherhood whatever were their differences of creed. Hence the patriotism of Shakspere—a considerate patriotism founded upon that nationality by which he is held "to have been most connected with ordinary men." * But Shakspere lived in an age when nationality was an exceeding great virtue, which alone enabled England, in a spirit of union, to stand up against the gigantic power which sought her conquest through her religious divisions. All around the dramatist, and reflected by him in a thousand hues of "many-coloured life," were those mixed elements of society, out of whose very differences results the unity of a prosperous nation. There was a great industrious class standing between the noble and the peasant, running over with individual originality of character, and infusing their spirit into the sovereign, the statesman, and the soldier. The gentlemen of Shakspere are distinct from those of any other poet in their manly frankness; and the same quality of straightforward independence may be traced in his yeomen and his peasants. His clowns even, are the representatives of the national humour, which itself was a growth of the national freedom. There was a select lettered class, who, having shaken off the trammels of the scholastic philosophy, were exploring the depths of science and laying the foundations of accurate reasoning. Shakspere stood between the new world of bold speculation that was opening upon him, and the world of submission to authority that was passing away. Thus, whilst he lingers amidst the simplicity and even the traditionary superstitions of the multitude with evident delight—calls up their elves and their witches, and their ghosts, but in no vulgar shapes—he asserts his claim to take rank with the most elevated of the world's thinkers in the investigation of the hardest problems of man's nature. Such are a few of the relations in which the art of Shakspere stood to the period in which he lived; and although it has been truly said, "he was not for an age, but for all time," we hold that he could not have been produced except in that age, and in the country of which he has become the highest glory. There must have been a marvellous influence of the social state working upon the highest genius, to have called forth those dramas for the people, which having their birth in a yeoman's house at Stratford,

> "Show, sustain, and nourish all the world."

The lyrical poetry of the Elizabethan time was chiefly written to be married to music. As Shakspere's drama was drama to be acted, so his songs were songs to be sung. Their grace, their simplicity, their variety of measure, were qualities which are found in the lyrical poems of Marlowe, Green, Lodge, Raleigh, Breton, Drayton, and others less known to fame, who contributed to the delight of many a tranquil evening in the squire's pleasure garden, and by the citizen's sea-coal fire-side, where Morley's "Airs," and other popular collections, were as familiarly known as Moore's "Melodies" in our own day. It was not that the musical taste of England was first developed in this period, but that it had spread from the court to the people. There was a greater diffusion of wealth, and therefore more leisure for the cultivation of the elegancies of life. Property was secure. The days of feudal tyranny

* Frederick Schlegel.

were past. The whole aspect of the country was necessarily changed. If we open the county histories of this period we find an enumeration of "principal manor-houses," which shows how completely the English gentleman, of moderate fortune, had in every parish taken the place of the baron or the abbot, who were once the sole proprietors of vast districts. A poet of the period has noticed this change in his description of rural scenery.

> "Here on some mount a house of pleasure vanted
> Where once the warring cannon had been planted."

These lines are from the "Britannia's Pastorals" of William Browne, whose poems, unequal as they are, contain many exquisite descriptions of country life. But nearly all the poetry of this age shows how thoroughly the realities of that life had become familiar to the imaginative mind. The second-hand images with which town poets make their rural descriptions wearisome are not found in the Elizabethan poets. The commonest objects of nature uniformly present their poetical aspects in Shakspere, as they did in Chaucer. The perpetual freshness and variety of creation were seen by these great masters with that rapid power of observation which belongs to genius. But the minor poets of the end of the sixteenth century evidently studied rural scenery with that feeling of the picturesque which is always a late growth of individual or national cultivation. The country, to the educated proprietor of the soil, had become something more than the source of his revenue. His ancestral trees had now for him a higher interest than to furnish logs for his hall-fire. His garden was no longer a mere place for growing kail and pot-herbs;—it was to have choice flowers and shady seats—the stately terrace and the green walk—the fountain and the vase. The poets reflect the prevailing taste. They make their posies of the peony and the pink, the rose and the columbine. They go with the huntsman to the field, and with the angler to the river. They are found nutting with the village boys, and they gather strawberries in the woods. They sit with the Lady of the May in her bower, and quaff the brown ale at the harvest-home. The country has become the seat of pleasant thoughts; and the poets are there to aid their influences.

The Architecture of the reign of Elizabeth is essentially characteristic of the period, not only in the simple manor-house of the squire, but in the "great house" of the noble. Sidney had described his own Penshurst, in the early half of that period, when

the old massive style, adapted for security rather than convenience, had not wholly passed away:—"They might see (with fit consideration both of the air, the prospect and the nature of the ground) all such necessary additions to a great house, as might well show that provision is the foundation of hospitality, and thrift the fuel of magnificence. The house itself was built of fair and strong stone, not affecting so much any extraordinary kind of fineness, as an honourable representing of a firm stateliness. The lights, doors, and stairs, rather directed to the use of the guests than to the eye of the artificer; and yet, as the one chiefly heeded, so the other not neglected; each place handsome without curiosity, and homely without loathsomeness; not so dainty as not to be trod on, nor yet slubbered up with good fellowship; all more lasting than beautiful, but that the consideration of the exceeding lastingness made the eye believe it was exceedingly beautiful."* The "firm stateliness," the "exceeding lastingness," became of secondary importance when the lord of the house and his retainers had ceased to dine in the great hall; and that principal apartment became little more than an entrance to those rooms dedicated to privacy or to state. There was to be provided, in the latter part of the century, a gorgeous gallery "for feasts and triumphs," as Lord Bacon held; —such a gallery as may still be seen at Hardwick. Here all the quaint forms of decoration in carving and colour were lavished. The walls were covered with portraits, almost the only branch of art then cultivated or encouraged in England. In these places there were tapestried "chambers of presence;" many bed-chambers for the family and their guests; lodgings for the various officers of the household; bake-houses and brew-houses; the great court in the centre; and the whole distribution of the private rooms often regulated by "My lord's side" and "My lady's side." The garden was an especial object of artistical decoration. Hentzner, in his "Travels in England," in 1598, has described the garden of Theobalds, one of the mansions of lord Burleigh. It was "encompassed with a ditch full of water, large enough for one to have the pleasure of going in a boat, and rowing between the shrubs; here are great variety of trees and plants; labyrinths made with a great deal of labour; a *jet d'eau*, with its bason of white marble; and columns and pyramids of wood and other materials up and down the garden. After seeing these, we were led by the gardener into the summer-house, in the lower part of which,

* "Arcadia."

built semi-circularly, are the twelve Roman emperors in white marble, and a table of touchstone; the upper part of it is set round with cisterns of lead, into which the water is conveyed through pipes, so that fish may be kept in them, and in summer time they are very convenient for bathing; in another room for entertainment very near this, and joined to it by a little bridge, was an oval table of red marble." From the gardens and terraces of these great houses the hall was entered; but now, when the grandest apartments were above, there was a staircase in the hall, of the most decorated character. At such mansions Elizabeth rested during her progresses, when her nobles vied with each other in the most lavish hospitality to welcome their queen; and soon turned their old dreary castles into gorgeous palaces, by the magic art of John Thorpe, the great constructive genius of that age. He perfected that union of the Italian style with the Gothic, which produced what we call the Tudor architecture. Some of these palatial edifices still stand, although for the most part dilapidated. Their faded splendours carry us back to the days of "mask and antique pageantry," when the lavish magnificence had something poetical even in its discomfort.

The Elizabethan manor-house is too well known to need any description. It is generally a plain building, with two projecting wings and a central porch. The initial letter of Elizabeth has been held to have suggested this form. In its homely provision for domestic convenience, the manor-house is more completely identified with the prevailing character of English society than the more gorgeous mansion. The manor-house had its hall and its buttery; its dining-room and its parlour; sometimes its chapel; always its great kitchen. It was surrounded with a moat; it possessed its little flower-garden. When the tobacco which Raleigh introduced ceased to be worth its weight in silver, the smoking-room was added. On great festival days the rich plate is brought out, and displayed on the "court-cupboard" of the dining-parlour; and "it is merry in hall, when beards wag all."

The reign of Elizabeth, which witnessed such an outburst of our native literature, had not neglected that cultivation of ancient learning, upon which sound literature and correct taste must in a great degree be built. New colleges had been founded at Oxford and Cambridge. Elizabeth had also founded Trinity College, Dublin. James VI. had erected the university of Edinburgh, in addition to the Scottish academical institutions; and Marischal

College, Aberdeen, was built in his reign. To the London Grammar Schools of St. Paul's and Christ Church had been added Westminster School, by the queen, and Merchant Tailors' School, by the great city company of that name. The grammar-schools were essentially the schools of the people; and it is a sufficient praise of Elizabeth's new foundation of Westminster to say that Camden there taught, and that Jonson there learnt.