



Ophelia

HAMLET, ACT 4, SC. 5.

Henceforth, self-dedicated to retribution, Hamlet counterfeited a harmless insanity, with fantastic tricks and "wild and whirling" words, calculated to distract attention from his secret purpose.

The king and queen, believing that the death of his father had occasioned this deplorable result, devised amusements to divert his mind: a company of players having been summoned to court, Hamlet seized the opportunity, and made use of them to prove to his own satisfaction the truth of the ghost's communication. He contrived for their representation a play, to be performed before the king, which should reproduce to the life the scene of his father's murder, as described by the ghost—the wife marrying with the poisoner of her husband.

The snare was successful; the guilty fears of the king betrayed him; with incoherent exclamations he interrupted the play, and retreated, all aghast, from the apartment.

Immediately after this scene of confusion, Queen Gertrude summoned Hamlet to her closet, intending to remonstrate with him upon his indecorous behavior; and during the somewhat violent altercation between them, he heard a noise behind the hangings of the room. Suspecting that the king was concealed there, he exclaimed, in an assumed frenzy, "A rat! a rat!" and pierced the arras with his sword, thereby killing the wily old statesman, Polonius, who had been posted to take note of the interview.

This fatal mistake served as a pretext for sending Hamlet out of the country—there being much disaffection among the people consequent upon the unwarrantable murder of Polonius; and the king despatched him to England, with secret papers providing for his assassination immediately on his arrival. The ship being attacked by pirates on the voyage, Hamlet boarded their vessel during the fight, and the king's creatures put off at once, leaving him to his fate. The pirates, on learning the rank of their captive,

treated him with singular respect, and in consideration of his promise to exert a merciful influence in their behalf, landed him, unharmed, on the shores of Denmark.

In the meanwhile, however, the gentle lady Ophelia, overwhelmed with grief for the madness of her lover, and horror of her father's murder by his hand, had languished and "pined in thought," till her mind became hopelessly imbecile. She wandered about at her own lost will, bedecked with fantastic finery, chanting snatches of old ballads, her modest tongue now babbling coarse jests; and one day, climbing a willow that grew on the margin of a brook, to hang a garland on its far-reaching bough, the slender limb broke, and she was precipitated into the stream:

Her clothes spread wide,
And, mermaid like, a while they bore her up:
Which time, she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indu'd
Unto that element. But long it could not be,
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

The funeral of the hapless lady was celebrated with all affection and honorable ceremony, the king and queen in person taking part in her obsequies; and it was this sad spectacle which greeted Hamlet on his return home—the procession entering the churchyard while he was loitering there, in conversation with his friend Horatio. Frantic with grief, cruelly augmented by such sudden intelligence of Ophelia's death, and the manner of it, he leaped into her grave, vowing to be buried alive with her whom he had loved so fondly, till the horrible purpose of his life had driven every other emotion from his harassed mind.



OPHELIA.

OPHELIA, daughter of Polonius, lord-chamberlain to Claudius, King of Denmark, was beloved by Prince Hamlet, son of the previous, and nephew of the then reigning sovereign; for Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, had with indecent haste married her deceased husband's brother. The shame of this unseemly conduct in his mother, added to grief for the death of his revered father, had so preyed on the mind of Hamlet, that a morbid melancholy took possession of him, and, it would seem, endowed him with supernatural prescience to suspect that his father had been murdered by his uncle, who had crowned his wicked ambition by marrying the queen-widow. While in this state of distracting doubt, he was informed, by some gentlemen of the court, that as they were on guard before the palace, the ghost of the late king, his noble father, had appeared to them three successive nights; whereupon, Hamlet watched with them, to test the truth of their words. At midnight the ghost appeared, and beckoned to Hamlet to follow it to a retired spot, where to his amazed ears it revealed the story of its murder by the treacherous brother, and commanded Hamlet to avenge the foul deed, but to leave the punishment of the guilty queen to Heaven and her own conscience: and then, as the cock crew, the poor ghost vanished.