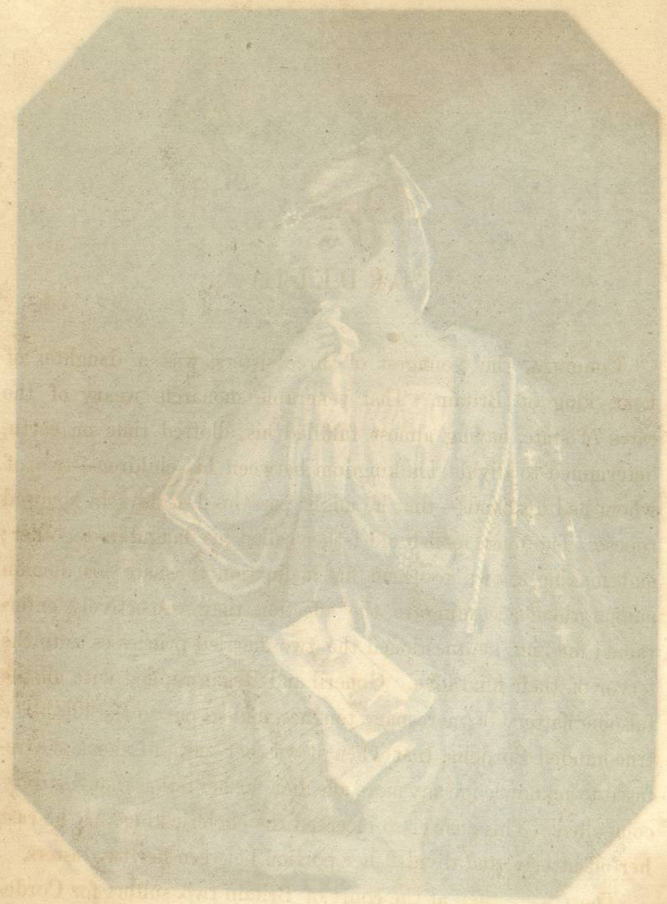
Cordelia

KING LEAR, ACT 4, SC. 3

New York. D. Appleton & Co. 346 & 348, Broadway



CORDELIA.

Cordelia, the youngest of three sisters, was a daughter of Lear, king of Britain. That venerable monarch, weary of the cares of state, having almost fulfilled his allotted time on earth, determined to divide his kingdom between his children—two of whom had husbands—that he might pass his last days in honored repose. The fond, foolish old father called his daughters together; and making known to them his inclination to share his domain among them according to the affection they respectively entertained for him, he questioned the two married princesses as to the fervor of their filial love. Goneril and Regan replied with all the fulsome flattery of mercenary tongues, and so put to the blush the true-minded Cordelia, that when it was her turn to speak she refused to acknowledge any more affection for her father than her duty compelled. This answer so incensed the choleric king that he cast her off utterly, and divided her portion between her two sisters.

There were then at the court of Britain two suitors for Cordelia's hand—the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France: when the duke learned that she would be dowerless, he withdrew his suit; but the King of France was so touched by her lofty spirit, and her forlorn condition, that he married her, and made her queen over his fair kingdom.

The condition on which King Lear had abdicated his sovereign rights, in favor of his daughters and their husbands, was: that he, attended by a hundred chosen knights, should be entertained at their palaces alternately, while he should retain the name and all "the additions to a king."

It was not long before Goneril found it irksome to accommodate her father's attendants, and regarded them as an unnecessary expense; her own servants were therefore instructed to annoy his majesty with petty indignities; and when he remonstrated, she rebuffed him with a cool contempt that astounded him. Appealing from Goneril to Regan, the unhappy father fared even worse; for the latter co-operated with her sister to divest him of all the outward shows of state; and at last she drove him forth in a howling storm at night, when the exposure, added to the sharp sense of his children's ingratitude, drove the poor old man mad.

He was blessed, however, in one faithful follower—the Earl of Kent, whom he had banished for interceding in behalf of Cordelia, but who, in disguise, had returned to the service of his beloved master. This loyal nobleman housed the king in his own castle, and sent letters to the court of France for Cordelia, who was ignorant of her father's wretchedness. Hastening, with an army contributed by her husband, to the rescue of her outraged parent, she found him almost hopelessly crazed; but by kind nursing he was restored sufficiently to recognize and bless her. Unfortunately for the brave and devoted lady, her army was defeated by the superior force with which Goneril and Regan opposed it; Lear and Cordelia were consigned to a prison, where she was hung, by order of Goneril and her paramour; and her father, paralyzed by this last blow, breathed his last on her beloved corse.

In Cordelia we have an exalted example of pure filial devotion, unalloyed by any less heroic passion—a character every attribute of which is subordinate to the highest conception of duty. The admiration she commands is entirely independent of the lighter graces, or those pretty tricks of unconscious coquetry which have attained a legitimate position in the "affairs of woman;" she is a silent, shy, undemonstrative girl, quite outshone in her father's court by the "scornful beauty" and the ready tongues of her sisters.

Compared with any less perfect, but not less charming, lady of this sisterhood, Cordelia will appear transcendently superior, by as much as she who follows the dictates of true religious principle must ever take moral precedence of the creature of mere impulses, whether of passion or caprice; but side by side with Goneril and Regan—those diabolical creations, who are women only physically—she shines an angel of light. It is only by careful study of the few master-strokes with which Cordelia is delineated that we can make out a faithful portrait of this matchless daughter; in fact, throughout the moving record of madness and crime, of which she is the heroine, her "heavenly beauty of soul" is felt rather than seen; although she is almost excluded from the action, her purity is ever present to the mind's eye, in dazzling contrast to the outer darkness of her surroundings.

In the first scene, where Cordelia incurs her royal father's displeasure, she might, by a superficial observer, be accused of sullen obstinacy, in persisting to seem less fond than we know she is, at heart; but it must be remembered that she is not only disgusted with her sisters' deceit, and mortified at the doting credulity of her father, but that she has been virtually bribed to exceed even their bombastic protestations: