

Edmund.

For the union of wit and wickedness, Edmund stands next to Richard and Iago. His strong and nimble intellect, his manifest courage, his energy of character, and his noble person, prepare us on our first acquaintance to expect from him not only great undertakings, but great success in them. But, while his personal advantages naturally generate pride, his disgraces of fortune are such as, from pride, to generate guilt. The circumstances of our first meeting with him, the matter and manner of Gloster's talk about him and to him, go far to explain his conduct; while the subsequent outleakings of his mind in soliloquy let us into his secret springs of action. With a mixture of guilt, shame, and waggery, his father, before his face, and in the presence of one whose respect he craves, makes him and his birth a theme of gross and wanton discourse; at the same time drawing comparisons between him and "another son some year elder than this," such as could hardly fail at once to wound his pride, to stimulate his ambition, and to awaken his enmity. Thus the kindly influences of human relationship and household ties are turned to their contraries. He feels himself the victim of a disgrace for which he is not to blame; which he cannot hope to outgrow; which no degree of personal worth can efface; and from which he sees no escape but in the pomp and circumstance of worldly power. Nor is this all:

Whatever aptitudes he may have to filial virtue are thwarted by his father's open impiety towards his mother: the awe with which we naturally contemplate the mystery of our coming hither is prevented by his father's coarse levity respecting his birth and her who bore him. Thus the very beginnings of religion are stifled in him by the impossibility

of honouring his father and mother: as they have no religion towards each other, so he has none towards them. He rather despises them for being his parents; and the consciousness of being himself a living monument of their shame tends to pervert the felicities of his nature.

Then too, by his residence and education abroad, he is cut off from the fatherly counsels and kindnesses which might else compensate, in part, the disgraces entailed upon him. His shame of birth, however, nowise represses his pride of blood: on the contrary, it furnishes the conditions wherein such pride, though the natural auxiliary of many virtues, is most apt to fester into crime. For, while his shame begets scorn of family ties, his pride passes into greediness of family possessions: the passion for hereditary honours is unrestrained by domestic attachments: no love of Edgar's person comes in to foreclose a lust for his distinctions; and he is led to envy as a rival the brother whom he would else respect as a superior.

Always thinking, too, of his dishonour, he is ever on the watch for signs that others are thinking of it; and the jealousy thence engendered construes every show of respect into an effort of courtesy; a thing that inflames his ambition while chafing his pride. The corroding suspicion, that others are perhaps secretly scorning his noble descent while outwardly acknowledging it, leads him to find or fancy in them a disposition to idemnify themselves for his personal superiority out of his social debasement. The stings of reproach, being personally unmerited, are resented as wrongs; and with the plea of injustice he can easily reconcile his mind to the most wicked schemes. Aware of Edgar's virtues, still he has no relentings; but shrugs his shoulders, and laughs off all compunctions with an "I must"; as if

justice to himself were a sufficient excuse for his criminal purposes.

With "the plague of custom" and "the curiosity of nations" Edmund has no compact: he did not consent to them, and therefore holds himself unbound by them. He came into the world in spite of them; perhaps he owes his gifts to a breach of them: may he not, then, seek to thrive by circumventing them? Since his dimensions are so well compact, his mind so generous, and his shape so true, he prefers Nature as she has made him to Nature as she has placed him; and freely employs the wit she has given, to compass the wealth she has withheld. Thus our free-love philosopher appeals from convention to Nature; and, as usually happens in such cases, takes only so much of Nature as will serve his turn. For convention itself is a part of Nature; it being no less natural that men should grow up together in families and communities than that they should grow up severally as individuals. To be somewhat more particular, the sacredness and inviolability of marriage and of the family state is a natural as well as a Divine provision for the continuance and health of the human kind; and it is an altogether spurious and diabolical gospel which would subordinate to the alleged rights of the individual that great law of our social constitution. But with Edmund the same spirit that prompts the appeal orders the tribunal. Nor does Nature, in such cases, contradict, or debate, or try conclusions with men; but just nods assent to their propositions, and lets them have their own way, as knowing that "the very devils cannot plague them better."

Nevertheless there is not in Edmund, as in Iago, any spontaneous or purposeless wickedness. Adventures in crime are not at all his pastime: they are his means, not his end;

his instruments, not his element. Nay, he does not so much make war on Duty, as bow and shift her off out of the way, that his wit may have free course. He deceives others indeed without scruple, but then he does not consider them bound to trust him, and tries to avail himself of their credulity or criminality without becoming responsible for it. True, he is a pretty bold experimenter, rather radical in his schemes, but this is because he has nothing to lose if he fails, and much to gain if he succeeds. Nor does he attempt to disguise from himself, or gloss over, or anywise palliate, his designs; but boldly confronts and stares them in the face, as though assured of sufficient external grounds to justify or excuse them.

Edmund's strength and acuteness of intellect, unsubjected as they are to the moral and religious sentiments, exempt him from the superstitions that prevail about him. He has an eye to discern the error of such things, but no sense for the deeper truth they involve. For such superstitions are the natural development of the religious instincts unenlightened by Revelation. So that he who would not be superstitious without Revelation would probably be irreligious with it; and that there is more of truth in superstition than in irreligion, is implied in the fact of religious instincts. In other words, Edmund is a free-thinker; not in the right philosophical sense of the term, but in the old historic sense; that is, one in whom the intellect owns no allegiance to the conscience. No awe of Duty, no religious fear to do or think wrong, is allowed to repress or abridge his freedom of thought. Thus it is merely the atheism of the heart that makes him so discerning of error in what he does not like; in which case the subtleties of the understanding lead to the rankest unwisdom.