

The Old King.

Some of our very best criticism on Shakespeare has lately come from men skilled in the healing art, and bringing to the subject the ripe fruits of scientific study and professional experience. Probably I cannot better approach the consideration of the old King than by quoting a most instructive passage from Dr. Bucknill's essay on *The Psychology of Shakespeare* :—

“Essayists upon this drama have followed each other in giving an account of the development of Lear's character and madness, which we cannot but regard as derogatory to the one, and erroneous in relation to the other. They have described Lear as an old man, who determines upon abdication and the partition of his kingdom, while he is of sane mind, and fully capable of appreciating the nature of the act. Thence it becomes necessary to view the original character of Lear as that of a vain, weak old man ; thence it becomes necessary to view the first acts of the drama as a gross improbability. Such undoubtedly they would be, if they were the acts of a sane mind ; but if, on the contrary, it be accepted that the mind of the old King has, from the first, entered upon the actual domain of unsoundness, the gross improbability at once vanishes, and the whole structure of the drama is seen to be founded not more upon ‘an old story rooted in the popular faith’ than upon the verisimilitude of nature.

“The accepted explanation of Lear's mental history, that he is at first a man of sound mind, but of extreme vanity and feeble power of judgment ; and that, under the stimulus of subsequent insanity, this weak and shallow mind develops into the fierce Titan of passion, with clear insight into the

heart of man, with large grasp of morals and polity, with terrible eloquence making known, as with the voice of inspiration, the heights and depths of human nature ; that all this, under the spur of disease, should be developed from the sterile mind of a weak and vain old man, — this indeed is a gross improbability, in which we see no clew to explanation.

“Gross improbabilities of circumstance are not so rare in Shakespeare. The Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* and the Ghost in *Hamlet* are certainly not more probable as events than the partition of Lear's kingdom. But there is one kind of improbability which is not to be found in Shakespeare, — the systematic development of goodness from badness, of strength from weakness ; the union of that which, either in the region of feeling or of intellect, is antagonistic and incompatible. — The consistency of Shakespeare is in no characters more close and true than in those most difficult ones wherein he portrays the development of mental unsoundness, as in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear* : into these he throws the whole force of his genius ; in these he transcends, not only all that other poets have effected before him, but all that he has ever done himself.”

As a portraiture of individual character, Lear himself holds, to my mind, much the same pre-eminence over all others which I accord to the tragedy as a dramatic composition. The delineation reminds me, oftener than any other, of what some one has said of Shakespeare, — that if he had been the author of the human heart, it seems hardly possible he should have better understood what is in it, and how it was made. And here, I think, may be fitly applied to him one of his own descriptions ; from his poem entitled *A Lover's Complaint* :—

So on the tip of his subduing tongue
 All kind of arguments and question deep,
 All replication prompt, and reason strong,
 For his advantage still did wake and sleep :
 To make the weeper laugh, the laugher weep,
 He had the dialect and different skill,
 Catching all passions in his craft at will.

The Poet often so orders his delineations as to start and propel the mind backwards over a large tract of memory. As in real life, the persons, when they first come to our knowledge, bring each their several dower of good or evil inherited from their past hours. What they are now, remembers what they were long ago ; and in their to-day we have the slow cumulative result of a great many yesterdays. Thus even his most ideal characters are invested with a sort of historic verisimilitude : the effects of what they thought and did long before still remain with them ; and in their present speech and action is opened to us a long-drawn vista of retrospection. And this is done not in the way of narrative, but of suggestion ; the antecedent history being merely implied, not related, in what is given. Sometimes he makes the persons speak and act from their *whole* character at once ; that is, not only from those parts of it which are seen, but from those which lie back out of sight ; from hidden causes, from motives unavowed, and even from springs and impulses of which the subject himself is not conscious. The effect of this is quite remarkable, and such as to outstrip the swiftest wing of analysis. It sends us right beyond the characters to Nature herself, and to the common elementary principles of all character ; so touching the mind's receptive powers as to kindle its active and productive powers.

Lear is among the Poet's finest instances, perhaps his very finest, in this art of historical perspective. The old King

speaks out from a large fund of vanishing recollections ; and in his present we have the odour and efficacy of a remote and varied past. The play forecasts and prepares, from the outset, that superb intellectual ruin where we have "matter and impertinency mix'd, reason in madness" ; the earlier transpirations of the character being shaped and ordered with a view to that end. Certain presages and predispositions of insanity are manifest in his behaviour from the first, as the joint result of nature, of custom, and of superannuation. We see in him something of constitutional rashness of temper, which moreover has long been fostered by the indulgences and flatteries incident to his station, and which, through the crippling of age, is now working loose from the restraints of his manlier judgment. He has been a wise and good man, strong in reason, in just feeling, and rectitude of purpose, but is now decidedly past his faculties ; which however, as often happens, is unapparent to him save as he feels it in a growing indisposition to the cares and labours of his office. So that there is something of truth in what Goneril says of him ; just enough to make her appear the more hateful in speaking of it as she does : "The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash ; then must we look to receive from his age, not alone the imperfections of long-ingrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them." He is indeed full of inconstant starts and petty gusts of impatience, such as are excusable only in those who have not yet reached, and those who have plainly outlived, the period of discretion and self-restraint.

These growing infirmities of nature and time are viewed by his children with very different feelings. The two elder are inwardly glad of them. They secretly exult in the de-

cays and dilapidations of his manhood as incapacitating him for his office, and so speeding their hopes of the inheritance. They know it is his disease to be gratified with such hollow and hyperbolic soothing as would else be the height of insolence. And so in the name of duty they study to inflame the waywardness that provokes their scorn. They *crave* reasons for persecuting him, and therefore will say any thing, will do any thing, to pamper the faults which at once prompt and seem to justify their contempt of him. In a word, it is their pleasure to bring oil to his fire, that he may the sooner be burnt out of their way.

With Cordelia all this is just reversed. The infirmities of a beloved and venerated father are things which she does not willingly see; when she sees, she pities them; and in a true filial spirit never thinks of them but as a motive to greater tenderness and respect. That his mind is falling out of tune, inspires her with the deeper reverence: she would rather go mad herself than see him do so. Partly from a conscious purpose, but more from an instinct of dutiful affection, she tries to assuage and postpone his distemper with the temperate speech of simple truth; duty and love alike forbidding her to stimulate his disease with the strong waters of fleering and strained hyperbole. Then too a fine moral tact seems to warn her that the medicine of reason must be administered to the dear old man in very gentle doses, else it will but feed his evil. And her treatment is well adapted to keep his faculties in tune, but that her holy purpose is baffled by the fulsome volubility of her sisters.

The first two speeches of the play inform us that the division of the kingdom has already been resolved upon, the terms of the division arranged, and the several portions allotted. This fact is significant, and goes far to interpret the

subsequent action, inasmuch as it infers the trial of professions to be but a trick of the King's, designed, perhaps, to surprise his children into expressions which filial modesty would else forbid. Lear has a morbid hungering after the outward tokens of affection: he is not content to know that the heart beats for him, but craves to feel and count over its beatings. The passion is indeed a selfish one, but it is the selfishness of a right-generous and loving nature. Such a diseased longing for sympathy is not the growth of an unsympathizing heart. And Lear naturally looks for the strongest professions where he feels the deepest attachment. "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery,"—such is his declared preference of Cordelia. And the same thing comes out still more forcibly when, hearing him speak of her as

Unfriended, new-adopted to our hate,
Dower'd with our curse, and stranger'd with our oath,

the King of France replies, —

This is most strange,
That she, who even but now was your best object,
The argument of your praise, balm of your age,
The best, the dearest, should in this trice of time
Commit a thing so monstrous, to dismantle
So many folds of favour.

And the same doting fondness that suggested the device makes Lear angry at its defeat; while its success with the first two heightens his irritation at its failure with the third. Thwarted of his hope where he has centred it most and held it surest, his weakness naturally flames out in a transport of rage. Still it is not any doubt of Cordelia's love, but a dotage of his trick that frets and chafes him. For the device is a *pet* with him. And such a bauble of strategy would

have had no place in his thoughts, had he been of a temper to bear the breaking of it. Being thus surprised into a tempest of passion, in the disorder of his mind he at once forgets the thousand little daily acts that have insensibly wrought in him to love Cordelia most, and to expect most love from her. His behaviour towards her, indeed, is like that of a peevish, fretful child who, if prevented from kissing his nurse, falls to striking her.

Men sometimes take a strange pleasure in acting without or against reason; since this has to their feelings the effect of ascertaining and augmenting their power; as if they could make a right or a truth of their own. It appears to be on some such principle as this that arbitrariness, or a making of the will its own reason, sometimes becomes a passion in men. Such a stress of self-will proceeds, I apprehend, on much the same ground as Sir Thomas Browne's faith, which delighted in making honours for itself out of impossibilities. That certain things could not be, was, he tells us, his strongest argument for believing them; that is, he felt the surer of his creed as it reversed the laws of thought, and grew by the contradictions of reason. The very shame, too, of doing wrong sometimes hurries men into a barring of themselves off from retreat. And so it appears to be with Lear in his treatment of Cordelia. In the first place, he *will* do the thing because he knows it to be wrong; and then the uneasy sense of a wrong done prompts him to bind the act with an oath; that is, because he ought not to have driven the nail, therefore he *clinches* it. This action of mind is indeed abnormal, and belongs to what may be termed the border-land of sanity and madness; nevertheless something very like it is not seldom met with in men who are supposed to be in full possession of their wits.

How deeply the old King, in this spasm of willfulness, violates the cherished order of his feelings, appears in what follows, but especially in his shrinking soreness of mind as shown when the Fool's grief at the loss of Cordelia is mentioned. The sense of having done her wrong sticks fast in his heart, and will not let him rest. And his remorse on this score renders him the more sensitive to the wrongs that are done him by others. He could better endure the malice of his other daughters, but that it reminds him how deeply he has sinned against her love who has ever approved herself his best. Hence, when Goneril is stinging her ingratitude into him, he exclaims, —

O, most small fault,
How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!
Which, like an engine, wrench'd my frame of nature
From the fix'd place, drew from my heart all love,
And added to the gall.

But the great thing in the delineation of Lear is the effect and progress of his passion in redeveloping his intellect. For the character seems designed in part to illustrate the power of passion to reawaken and raise the faculties from the tomb in which age has quietly inurned them. And so in Lear we have, as it were, a handful of tumult embosomed in a sea, gradually overspreading and pervading and convulsing the entire mass.

In his conscious fulness of paternal love, Lear confides unreservedly in the piety of his children. The possibility of filial desertion seems never to have entered his thoughts; for so absolute is his trust, that he can hardly admit the evidence of sight against his cherished expectations. Bereft, as he thinks, of one, he clings the closer to the rest, assuring himself that they will spare no pains to make up the loss.

Cast off and struck on the heart by another, he flies with still greater confidence to the third. Though proofs that she too has fallen off are multiplied upon him, still he cannot give her up, cannot be provoked to curse her; he *will* not see, will not own to himself the fact of her revolt.

When, however, the truth is forced home, and he can no longer evade or shuffle off the conviction, the effect is indeed terrible. So long as his heart had something to lay hold of and cling to and rest upon, his mind was the abode of order and peace. But, now that his feelings are rendered objectless, torn from their accustomed holdings, and thrown back upon themselves, there springs up a wild chaos of the brain, a whirling tumult and anarchy of the thoughts, which, till imagination has time to work, chokes down his utterance. Then comes the inward, tugging conflict, deep as life, which gradually works up his imaginative forces, and kindles them to a preternatural resplendence. The crushing of his aged spirit brings to light its hidden depths and buried riches. Thus his terrible energy of thought and speech, as soon as imagination rallies to his aid, grows naturally from the struggle of his feelings, — a struggle that seems to wrench his whole being into dislocation, convulsing and upturning his soul from the bottom. Thence proceeds, to quote Mr. Hallam, “that splendid madness, not absurdly sudden, as in some tragedies, but in which the strings that keep his reasoning powers together give way one after the other in the frenzy of rage and grief.”

In the transition of Lear's mind from its first stillness and repose to its subsequent tempest and storm; in the hurried revulsions and alternations of feeling, — the fast-rooted faith in filial virtue, the keen sensibility to filial ingratitude, the mighty hunger of the heart, thrice repelled, yet ever strength-

ened by repulse; and in the turning-up of sentiments and faculties deeply imbedded beneath the incrustations of time and place; — in all this we have a retrospect of the aged sufferer's whole life; the abridged history of a mind that has passed through many successive stages, each putting off the form, yet retaining and perfecting the grace of the preceding.

Lear's Madness.

As to the picture here given of madness, it is such that I scarce dare undertake to speak of it in any words of my own. And probably the best I can do is by saying, what is indeed true, that men of the solidest science are accustomed to hold it as an authority in questions of that kind, consulting it and quoting it, as they would the history of an actual case. Nor am I aware of its having ever been faulted as untrue to nature in a single point. Of course there can be nothing stronger or more decisive than this as to the merit of the workmanship: the praise implied is almost too great to be inherited by a man. That the Poet should have entered so perfectly into the consciousness of insanity as thus to project, not a mere likeness of the thing, but the very thing itself, is perhaps the greatest mystery of his genius. No philosophy has yet explained or begun to explain the secret of it. To be sure, the same holds true of his other representations of madness. But this of Lear is in some respects the most wonderful of them all: for it is the resurgence of a decayed intellect, with the faculties wrenched into unhingement, and thrown into exorbitancy, by the fearful violence that has evoked them from their repose.

I must add somewhat touching the methods used for recovering the old King. — Cordelia asks the Physician, “What