

Kent and Edgar.

If the best grace and happiness of life consist, as this play makes us feel that they do, in a forgetting of self and a living for others, Kent and Edgar are those of Shakespeare's men whom one should most wish to resemble. Strikingly similar in virtues and situation, these two persons are notwithstanding widely different in character. Brothers in magnanimity and in misfortune; equally invincible in fidelity, the one to his King, the other to his father; both driven to disguise themselves, and in their disguise both serving where they stand condemned; Kent, too generous to control himself, is always quick, fiery, and impetuous; Edgar, controlling himself even because of his generosity, is always calm, collected, and deliberate. For, if Edgar be the more judicious and prudent, Kent is the more unselfish of the two: the former disguising himself for his own safety, and then turning his disguise into an opportunity of service; the latter disguising himself merely *in order* to serve, and then perilling his life in the same course whereby the other seeks to preserve it. Nor is Edgar so lost to himself and absorbed in others but that he can and does survive them; whereas Kent's life is so bound up with others, that their death plucks him after. Nevertheless it is hard saying whether one would rather be the subject or the author of Edgar's tale:—

Whilst I was big in clamour, came there a man
Who, having seen me in my worst estate,
Shunn'd my abhorr'd society; but then, finding
Who 'twas that so endured, with his strong arms
He fasten'd on my neck, and bellow'd out
As he'd burst heaven; threw him on my father;
Told the most piteous tale of Lear and him
That ever ear received; which in recounting,

His grief grew puissant, and the strings of life
Began to crack: twice then the trumpet sounded,
And there I left him tranced.

Albany.

But who was this?

Edgar. Kent, sir, the banish'd Kent; who in disguise
Follow'd his enemy King, and did him service
Improper for a slave.

It is rather curious to note how the characteristic traits of these two men are preserved even when they are acting most out of character: so that, to us who are in the secret of their course, they are themselves and not themselves at the same time. For example, in Kent's obstreperous railing at the Steward, and his saucy bluntness to Cornwall and Regan, we have a strong relish of the same impulsive and outspoken boldness with which he beards the old King when the latter is storming out his paroxysm against Cordelia, and meets his threats by daring him to the worst: "Do; kill thy physician, and the fee bestow upon the foul disease." Of course, in those transports of abusive speech and of reckless retort, he is but affecting the slang-whanger as a part of his disguise: moreover he wants to raise a muss, and embroil Lear with his two daughters, and thereby draw the latter into a speedy disclosure of what he knows to be in their hearts; because his big manly soul is still on fire at the wrong Lear has done to Cordelia, and he would fain hasten that repentance which he knows must sooner or later come: still it is plain enough to us that his tumultuous conduct is but an exaggerated outcome of his native disposition; or, in other words, that he is truly himself all the while, only a good deal more so; a hiding of his character in a sort of overdone caricature. So too the imitative limberness and versatility which carry Edgar smoothly through so many abrupt shiftings of his masquerade are in perfect

keeping with the cool considerateness which enables him to hold himself so firmly in hand when he goes to assume the style of a wandering Bedlamite. He acts several widely different parts, but the same conscious self-mastery and the same high-souled rectitude of purpose, which form the backbone of his character, are apparent in them all.

In Kent and Oswald we have one of those effective contrasts with which the Poet often deepens the harmony of his greater efforts. As the former is the soul of goodness clothed in the assembled nobilities of manhood; so the latter is the very extract and embodiment of meanness; two men than whom "no contraries hold more antipathy." To call the Steward wicked were a waste of language: he is absolutely beneath the sense of that term; one of those convenient pack-horses whereon guilt often rides to its ends. Except the task of smoothing the way for the passions of a wicked mistress, no employment were base enough for him. None but a reptile like him could ever have got hatched into notice in such an atmosphere as Goneril's society: were he any thing else, there could not be sympathy enough between them to admit the relation of superior and subaltern.

General Remarks.

This play has many scenes and passages well worth our special noting. I must content myself with glancing at two or three.

The scene of Edgar and the eyeless Gloucester, where the latter imagines himself ascending the chalky cliff at Dover, and leaping from it, is a notable instance of the Poet's power to overcome the inherent incredibility of a thing by his opulence of description. Great as is the miracle of Gloucester's belief, it is in some sort authenticated to our feel-

ings by the array of vivid and truthful imagery which induces it. Thus does the Poet, as occasion requires, enhance the beauty of his representation, so as to atone for its want of verisimilitude.

Some of Lear's speeches amid the tempest contain, I think, the grandest exhibition of creative power to be met with. They seem spun out of the very nerves and sinews of the storm. It is the instinct of strong passion to lay hold of whatever objects and occurrences lie nearest at hand, and twist itself a language out of them, incorporating itself with their substance, and reproducing them charged with its own life. To Lear, accordingly, and to us in his presence, the storm becomes all expressive of filial ingratitude; seems spitting its fire, and spouting its water, and hurling its blasts at his old white head. Thus the terrific energies and convulsions of external nature take all their meaning from his mind; and we think of them only as the glad agents or instruments of his daughters' malice, leagued in sympathy with them, and taking their part in the controversy. In this power of imagination thus seizing and crushing the embattled elements into its service, there is a sublimity almost too vast for the thoughts. Observe, too, how the thread of association between moral and material nature conducts Lear to the strain of half-insane, half-inspired moralizing, which he closes with the pathetic exception of himself from the list of those to whom the tempest speaks as a preacher of repentance and "judgment to come."

The surpassing power of this drama is most felt in the third and fourth Acts, especially those parts where Lear appears. The fierce warring of the elements around the old King, as if mad with enmity against him, while he seeks shelter in their strife from the tempest within him; his pre-