

[APRIL

THE "MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM."

WE have heard of a member of polite society who on being asked his opinion of some play of Shakespeare's not often represented on the stage, replied, in an aggrieved tone, "I do not like to *read* things of that sort." A play, he intimated, was something to watch with the help of scenery, lights, an orchestra, and good acting; to expect one to study it in a book was as unreasonable as to present a sonata of Beethoven's in response to a petition for a little music. A recent evening at the "Globe" has awakened a certain sympathy with this non-literary hero, whom, indeed, in spite of conventional assumptions, we regard as singular rather in his candour than his practice. We do not deprecate the practice of reading Shakespeare. But we would urge all readers to make acquaintance with our great dramatist, wherever it be possible, through the medium for which he himself intended his production; and we venture to promise all who attend the present performance of the "Midsummer Night's Dream" that however intimate they may be already with Oberon and Titania, Snug, Bottom and Co., they will know them better after the performance. Such at least was our experience, and we would as far as possible share it with our readers.

All admirers of the too sparing genius of Mr. Holman Hunt must have noticed the striking effect produced, in his latest picture, by his inversion of the ordinary rules for any artistic representation of the supernatural. In his "Flight into Egypt" it is the spirits of the murdered innocents which are distinct and brilliant; the mortal travellers show beside them as dim and ghostlike forms. We feel ourselves transported to the new region which those babes have entered and look back on earth as the realm of shadows. A kindred influence is manifest in the most charming and spotless of Shakespeare's

creations. The poet takes us into fairyland as the painter into a more solemn region; this everyday world is pallid in both. Was there ever a less interesting quartette than Helena and Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius? Whether they scold, or whether they woo, they leave us equally unmoved; here and there a gem is spared them from the poet's treasury, but for the most part he seems hardly to attend to his pen as it discourses of them. Theseus and his court have more life, and so have the clodhoppers who appear in masquerade before him; but the true interest of the piece lies in fairyland. Its queen is the central figure, and it is interesting to watch her grow in Shakespeare's imagination, from "that very Mab" of Mercutio—the elf half-hidden in a hazel nut, charioteered by a gnat, whose sole business it is to inspire mortals with fantastic dreams—to the Titania beloved by Theseus, and jealous of Hippolyta, who seems as much of a goddess as of a fairy, and whose quarrel with her spouse might come straight from Homer. She has, in the change, grown as much in outward form as in character; instead of the midge-like Mab, appears a stately queen, for whom a human child is a fitting page; and we see the little hand within that jealous clutch, with which, in the representation at the "Globe," we fully sympathised. She is full of human preference, human jealousy; she cherishes her page from the recollection of his mother, her faithfulness to whom puts to scorn the fitful friendship of Helena and Hermia. Her "young squire," too, has a faint affinity, with classic mythology, but he is more of a modern on the whole. With him the modern fairy tale is born; he survives in that enchanted land where we have all wandered in years gone by; where the happy boy or girl awakens from some mysterious slumber, and finds himself or herself at home amid a quaint bright throng where earth is forgotten. That Indian princeling is the Columbus of fairyland, and all who have trodden its soil since, down to Alice in Wonderland, are followers in his track.

Shakespeare, says Gervinus, is as much a creator of the fairy mythology of Teutonic Europe as Homer is of that of Greece. We might hesitate to accept a tribute perhaps hardly allowing enough to German popular legends, if it were not paid by a German. A similar hesitation might be inspired by the legendary lore of our own country. A well-known ballad of "Robin Goodfellow" would seem to prove (according to the usually received date), that the knavish imp played his pranks before his summons to the court of Oberon, where indeed, according to our text, he appears as somewhat of a stranger. But something like this, probably, may be said of Homeric legends, and still it is Homer who makes the gods and heroes of Greece living figures to the modern world. And Shakespeare in like manner has made the denizens of fairyland familiar objects to the mental vision of all readers, not only of his own country, but of his own civilisation.

He has exchanged the sombre colouring in which our Scandinavian ancestors had clothed the tradition of elf-land for the bright hues in which Oberon and Titania flit before us, and finding Puck a hobgoblin, with horns, hoof, and a tail (the representation given in an old print), the traditional Satan, in short, he has left him a dainty sprite, twin brother of Ariel, a creature hovering between a butterfly and a child, that painters have laboured to portray as the ideal of fantastic loveliness and sportive gaiety.

His fairies indeed are bright creatures, though all their associations are of the night. They trip after the moon's sphere, they take flight before sunrise; but they are no spectres banished at cock-crow, they linger, as Oberon reminds us:—

“Even till the eastern gate, all fiery-red,
Opening on Neptune with fair blessed beams,
Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.”

There is a moment in every morning and evening when night and day seem to embrace; when the flower in the hedge is as clear as the planet in the sky, when all commonplace objects seem half-luminous, and the painter who merely copies them accurately presents us with a poem on canvas. This moment, we know, is the kiss of the wave of amber light that floats for ever around this earth, and in this dim yet glowing atmosphere the fairies live and move. They come with the evening twilight, they linger till the morning, but they know nothing of darkness till they call it up for their own purposes; they are like those cloudlets in the northern sky, of which Scott says that

“Morning weaves
Her twilight with the hues that evening leaves.”

While Earth is dull and dark, they are bathed in opalescent radiance, which falls on the dewdrop or the cowslip as they draw near, and does not desert them as they enter the house where all lie wrapt in slumber. They bring a “glimmering light” into the palace of Theseus when the embers are dying on the hearth (we refuse to surrender that radiance at the bidding of the commentators), and the glimmer is altogether of good omen, prognosticating a happy awakening from the slumbers that are thus watched. Their visits can be no more unwelcome than that of the dawn which is their atmosphere and their home.

The influence of the Renaissance is less visible here than in many plays which would appear to give less scope for it. The reminiscences of classic mythology which we have noted are not, on the whole, so numerous as we should have expected in a drama for which Shakespeare has chosen the scenery of legendary Athens. The dewy, bird-haunted glades with their cowslip border, the green corn seen through the tree stems, and the lark singing above—all are English, the elves are their fitting inhabitants, and we meet no fawn or dryad.

It is not, as in the fairy-land created by an imaginative Frenchman—Edgar Quinet—where the gods of Greece are discovered to have shrunk and dwindled into the elves of the northern mythology. That is the imagery of satire, not poetry. The genius of Hellas expands the legends of the north, but does not fade into them. Yet something there is akin in the two; the spring-time of the Renaissance, we feel as we read, was the budding-time of a mythology that found a new Olympus at the Court of Oberon, and a new Cupid in Robin Goodfellow. And when we turn to the human court, so much less interesting than that of Oberon, we feel the influence of the same spirit which lights up the legends of heathen mythology and renders natural on the page of Shakespeare much classic allusion which would be intolerably pedantic in any similar utterance of our own day. The picture of the Athenian prince, as compared with the authorities from which Shakespeare drew it, manifests very clearly the charm possessed by every classic name in the world of the poet. The reader who will peruse that laborious piece of antiquarianism, Plutarch's "Life of Theseus," will probably allow that the tiresome half-hour so spent has yielded no single distinct or vivid conception whatever. Yet from this *hortus siccus* of withered legends, Shakespeare has drawn the ideal of a princely and finished gentleman, which seems to stand in some relation to this legendary lore, because it has a certain similarity to the only picture of Theseus worthy of being placed by its side, and which was painted 2000 years previously. We suppose it must be mainly accident that Theseus in the "Midsummer Night's Dream" recalls here and there Theseus in the "Œdipus at Colonus." Shakespeare can hardly have read Sophocles, and Sophocles certainly never read Plutarch. And yet there is something in the prince who shelters the weary Œdipus, and the prince who defends and counsels the runaway lovers, which seems to point to a common type. To one who is familiar with the earlier conception, the later one seems to point backwards.

And then, on the other hand, in the attitude of Theseus towards the supernatural, there is something essentially modern. It is very much in the manner of Scott, or rather there is something in it that reminds one of Scott himself. We see, wherever our great novelist enters the world of magic and legend, that he regards it through the medium of a cool, shrewd, eighteenth-century scepticism. He is ready to turn an unbelieving ear to the best accredited instance of the supernatural the moment it appears under the guise of history; yet, on the ground of imagination, he welcomes it with an impulse of taste and sympathy so deeply seated that we can hardly speak of the logical denial as amounting to unbelief. He thought that any contemporary who believed himself to have seen a ghost must be insane; yet when he paints the appearance of the grey,

spectre to Feargus MacIvor, or what seems to us his most effective introduction of the supernatural, that of Alice to the Master of Ravenswood, we feel that something within him believes in the possibility of that which he paints, and that this something is deeper than his denial, though that be expressed with all the force of his logical intellect. It seems to us that the eighteenth-century element in this is exactly what is given in the well-known speech of Theseus:—

"'Tis strange, my Theseus, that these lovers tell of,"

says Hippolyta; and he replies:—

"More strange than true, I never may believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
* * * * *
Such tricks has strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy,
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!"

The genius of Shakespeare takes in the genius of Scott, what the lesser *was* the greater *imagined*. Theseus, explaining away the magic of the night, is Scott himself when he drew Dousterswivel, or when he describes the Antiquary scoffing at a significant dream. And the other half of Scott—that in which the legendary beliefs of his ancestors survived in some dim region of his being and swayed his imagination towards all that enriches our human world with a borderland of the invisible—this is here too and fills the whole foreground of the picture. The dual impulse gives exactly the right point of view for an artistic representation of the supernatural. To paint it most effectually, it should not be quite consistently either disbelieved or believed. Perhaps Shakespeare was much nearer an actual belief in the fairy mythology he has half created than seems possible to a spectator of the nineteenth century. And yet Theseus expresses exactly the denial of the modern world. And we feel at once how the introduction of such an element enhances the power of the earlier views; the courteous, kindly, man-of-the-world scepticism somehow brings out the sphere of magic against which it sets the shadow of its demand. The belief of the peasant is emphasised and defined, while it is also intensified, by what we feel the inadequate confutation of the prince.

The play of the tradesmen which at first one is apt to regard as a somewhat irrelevant appendix to the rest of the drama, is seen, by a maturer judgment, to be as it were a piece of sombre tapestry, exactly adapted to form a background to the light forms and iridescent colouring of the fairies as they flit before it. But this is not its greatest interest, to our mind. It is most instructive when we watch

the proof it gives of Shakespeare's strong interest in his own art. It is one of three occasions in which he introduces a play within a play, and in all three the introduction, without being unnatural, has just that touch of unnecessariness by means of which the productions of art take a biographic tinge, and seem as much a confidence as a creation. How often must Shakespeare have watched some player of a heroic part proclaim his own prosaic personality, like Snug, the joiner, letting his face be seen through the lion's head. We are told, indeed, that the incident is copied from one which did actually "create great sport" at some pageant of the day, and which is reproduced in Scott's "Kenilworth." But its interest lies in the satire, rather than the history embodied in the speech of Snug the joiner, and the satire lies near the deepest pathos. In the speech of Theseus ordering the play, we may surely allow ourselves to believe that we hear not only the music, but the voice of Shakespeare, pleading the cause of patient effort against the scorn of a hard and narrow dilettantism. "What are they," he asks "that do play it?" and Philostrate, the courtier and fine gentleman, answers scornfully:—

"Hard-handed men, that work in Athens here,
Which never laboured in their minds till now,
And now have toiled their unbreathed memories
With this same play, against your nuptial.
The. And we will hear it.
Phil. No, my noble lord,
It is not for you; I have heard it over,
And it is nothing, nothing in the world
Unless you can find sport in their intents,
Extremely stretched and conned with cruel pain,
To do you service.
The. I will hear that play,
For never anything can be amiss
When simpleness and duty tender it.
Hipp. He says they can do nothing in this kind.
The. The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.
Our sport shall be to take what they mistake,
And what alone poor duty cannot do,
Noble respect takes it in might, not merit."

And his rebuke to his bride is in the same strain as that to the courtier. "This is the silliest stuff I ever heard," says Hippolyta, and his answer, while it calls up deeper echoes, is full of the pathos that belongs to latent memories. "The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination mend them." Here the poet is speaking to the audience; in Hamlet, when he addresses the players, his sympathy naturally takes the form of criticism; what the Athenian prince would excuse the Danish prince would amend. But in both alike we discern the same personal interest in the actor's part, and feel ourselves listening as much to a confidence as to a creation. We learn that the greatest genius who ever lived was the one who could show most sympathy with incompleteness and failure. There is nothing scornful, nothing merely critical in his delineation of the

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rough clowns who shadow forth the loves of Pyramus and Thisbe. On the contrary, almost every touch has a certain delicacy. With the exception of a single obscure allusion, they utter hardly a word that might not fall from the most refined among the audience. Shakespeare throws himself into the part of the actor. He remembers all the patient effort needed to produce a very mediocre result, he pleads that this result shall be regarded through a medium of sympathy. He seems to write of actors with the feeling expressed in his own Sonnet :—

"Oh for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means which public manners breeds."

We catch the accent not only of the immortal poet, but of one who has felt himself "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," who has "troubled deaf Heaven with his bootless cries, desiring this man's art, and that man's scope." Whatever be the feeling which inspired the lament of the Sonnets, it is not wholly out of relation to the art which delineates the performance of the Athenian tradesmen, the criticism of the unsympathetic spectators, and the pleading in which the Prince unites the canons of the truest art with those of the widest courtesy, and the deepest human kindness.

For Shakespeare's sympathy with the members of his special craft is as a window, whence he looks on life as a whole, and sees in its hurry, its transiency, its strange misfit of capacity to claim, of knowledge to impulse, a repetition of the experience of the player. That truth, which is wrought into the very structure of language, whereby the Latin name for a mask has become the modern *person*, reminding us that there is within each of us that which "sounds through," not only our outward surroundings, but much that in the eyes of other men makes up ourselves; this could not but haunt the mind of one who knew the players' part both from within and without. "All the world's a stage;" every man is in some sense an actor, most often an untrained actor, ill at ease in his part, and often tempted to exclaim :—

"The time is out of joint, O cursed spite
That I was ever born to set it right."

The sense of all that is difficult in the part of the actor passes into a type of life's vain efforts, and varied futilities :—

"We are such stuff as dreams are made of."

That line haunts us all through the "Midsummer Night's Dream." We feel the adventures of the night no mere play of fancy, but a parable of the confusions, the mistakes, the shifting vicissitudes, the inexplicable changes of human attraction and repulsion.

"The course of true love never did run smooth,"

seems a bitter theme for so sweet and fanciful a setting, but it is the theme of the whole play. Theseus and Hippolyta have begun with conflict, they may perhaps have a serene interval before them, but we doubt even so far as to Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena, Oberon and Titania. Even poor Pyramus and Thisbe, murdered by the clowns, how does their history in its caricature repeat the lesson of misfit, barriers, impediments; and then when these are removed, mistakes and misunderstandings, which have just been set before us in the adventures of the night. Was the whole play an expansion of that compliment to Elizabeth, which naturally links itself with the lament over the course of true love? Did Shakespeare mean to imply that "the imperial votaress who passed on in maiden meditation, fancy free," had chosen the better part? Was he repeating the lesson which his hero receives from the weary Œdipus in the other play, in which a kindred genius has given a representation so curiously similar?

"Oh Theseus, gods alone know nought of death.
All else Time, the victorious, withereth.
Faith fades and perishes, distrust is born:
What man or State has loved, each learns to scorn.
The sweet grows bitter, then again a joy,
And lightest touch can firmest bond destroy."

Doubtless the instability of all human relation was in his mind, the feeling which led Madame de Stael to exclaim mournfully in reviewing her life: "J'ai aimé qui je n'aime plus, j'ai estimé qui je n'estime plus." But we hear the voice of Bottom, waking from his metamorphosis, "Man is but an ass, if he go about to expound my dream." What can the wisest of us add to that reflection of the awakened clown, reviewing the part he has unawares been called on to play, so strangely contrasted with the heroic character he has chosen? As the time of awakening draws near, do we not all with the most varied memories and anticipations echo those words of his? Do we not feel the summary of all the confessions, all the vain hopes, all the bitter disappointments, and then the wonderful revivals of our human experience gathered up in that decision, "The dream needs some wiser exponent than he who has dreamed it, or than any son of man."

JULIA WEDGWOOD.