

"Kynde Kit Marlowe."

BY MINNERMUS.

"Pardon, gentles all,
The flat, unraised spirit that has dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object."

—SHAKESPEARE ("King Henry V.," chorus).

THE greatest of Shakespeare's immediate predecessors was Christopher Marlowe, familiarly known as "Kit." The son of a shoemaker, and born at Canterbury in 1564, his unmistakable genius seems to have gained him friends, who looked after his early education, and sent him, at the age of seventeen, to the University of Cambridge. He was intended for the Church, but the Church had, as may readily be imagined, no attractions for such a mind. The study of theology only succeeded in making him a determined enemy of religion in general, and the Christian superstition in particular. Marlowe's statue is fittingly erected *outside* the gates of Canterbury Cathedral. There was no element in Marlowe's untamable nature favorable to the growth of religiosity. He was, indeed, one of the proudest and fiercest of intellectual aristocrats. Scepticism in him naturally took the form of contempt rather than of mere negation. From the statements of Richard Bame, the informer, we may assume that he occasionally gave vent to Rabelaisian pleasantries on the subject of the Christian dogmas.

Before the age of twenty-three we find Kit Marlowe in London, an actor and a playwright, and the author of "the great sensation work" of his time—the tragedy of "Tamburlaine"—in which Greene perceived Marlowe's attempt at "daring of God out of heaven." This portentous melodrama, a strange compound of inspiration and desperation, has the hall-mark of real genius equally on its absurdities and its sublimities. In the first play, written in blank verse for the popular stage, the versification has an elasticity, freedom, and variety of movements which makes it as much the product of Marlowe's extraordinary mind as the thoughts and passions it so finely conveys.

It had no precedent in the verse of preceding writers. It is constructed, not on merely mechanical rules, but on vital principle. It is the effort of the real genius disdainful to creep along well-trodden paths, and boldly opening a new road for itself. Intellectual daring is the source of Marlowe's wonderful originality. Throughout "Tamburlaine" strange gleams of the purest splendors of poetry more than redeem the bombast into which it occasionally drops. Now and again we meet with glorious strokes of impassioned imagination, as in the celebrated scene in which Tamburlaine is represented in a chariot drawn by captive kings, and rating them for their slowness:

"Hallo! ye pampered jades of Asia!
What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day?

The horses that guide the golden eye of heaven,
And blow the morning from their nostrils,
Making their fiery gait above the clouds,
Are not so honored in their governor
As you, ye slaves, in mighty Tamburlaine."

Blank verse was not only brought into existence by Marlowe, but was also carried to some degree of perfection by him. He could temper his blank verse to different moods and passions. Listen to the speech in "Edward II.," in which the indignant King first gives way to anger and then to misery:

"Mortimer! who talks of Mortimer,
Who wounds me with the name of Mortimer,
That bloody man? Good father, on thy lap
I lay this head with mickle care;
O, might I never ope these eyes again,
Never again lift up this drooping head,
O never more lift up this dying heart."

What didactic dignity we find in the following lines:

"Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world,
And measure every wandering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,
And always moving as the restless spheres,
Will us to wear ourselves, and never rest
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all."

Here is another example of his full-voiced harmony. Faustus exclaims:

"Have I not made blind Homer sing to me
Of Alexander's love and Cæsar's death?
And hath not he, who built the walls of Troy,
With ravishing sound of his melodious harp
Made music with my Mephistophiles?"

We feel at once that this is the work of a rare genius. In fact, the soliloquy in which the doomed Faustus watches his last moments ebb away might be quoted as a perfect instance of variety and sustained effect in a situation which could only be redeemed from a wearisome monotony by consummate art.

One scene, which contains the memorable address to Helena, seems to have influenced Shakespeare and other poets. It contains that wonderful passage commencing,

"Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
And burnt the topmost towers of Ilium?"

and concluding with

"All is dross that is not Helena."

It is simply aflame with impassioned loveliness.

Marlowe could introduce the lilt of indefinable melody with the most unpromising material. Take the descriptive lines from "The Jew of Malta":

"Bags of fiery opals, sapphires, amethysts,
Jacinths, hard topaz, grass-green emeralds,
Beauteous rubies, sparkling diamonds,
And sold seen costly stones of so great price,
As one of them, indifferently rated,
May serve, in peril of calamity,
To ransom great kings from captivity."

Marlowe's "Faustus" perhaps best reflects his whole genius. The subject seems to have taken hold of his nature, as it afterwards did that of the argus-eyed Goethe. The characters of Faustus and Mephistophiles are both conceived with great depth and strength of imagination, and the last scene dangerously approaches perfection.

Marlowe's life, though short and reckless, was fertile in work. Besides, his plays, his translations from Ovid, and his poem of "Hero and Leander," would alone give