

alities in Northern Europe; which token of freedom gave place, in the *seventh*, to their submission to Roman usages. The *eighth* century was marked by "new administration" of the Eastern Empire, under Leo the Iconoclast, and the revival of puissant Northern life by Charles Martel and the Lombard Kings; the *ninth*, by the establishment of a world-empire under Charlemagne. The *tenth* was introduced in England by the national work of Alfred and his successors, while Germany also detached itself from the Carolingian Empire, and France began to acquire a national character under the Counts of Paris. The *eleventh* century saw Imperialism revive, to battle awhile with its spiritual rival in the person of Hildebrand. In the *twelfth* the genius of Teutonic Europe, striving earnestly after great results, found work for itself in the Crusades, and expression for its finer powers in Gothic architecture; while elsewhere the kindred phenomena of lyric poetry, reforming tendencies in the Church, and civic patriotism in Italy, proved that the free energy of Europe was reviving. The *thirteenth* century brought an Innocent III. to dominate the Church and terrify the world; mighty kings arose in the leading nations, and Aristotle became supreme in the schools. The next was the period of Swiss, Scottish and Belgian freedom; of Wycliff's attack on superstition; of the resistance to the Papacy by the nations; of Dante, Petrarch and Chaucer.

Of the later centuries we have already spoken. Let us consider whether any reason can be found for the striking intervention of this element of time in the process of repetition which we have pointed out, and which, in its essential nature, we have seen cause to ascribe partly to the course of human thought in a world full of imperfection, partly to such concurrence of events as compels us to acknowledge Providential interference. Luther compared the progress of society to that of a drunken man, proceeding by a compensation of erratic movements. There is wisdom in the homely comparison, but we prefer to think of alternating waves of advance and retrogression in a flowing tide, and deeper suggestions may be found in the prophetic image of those mighty wheels or circles, so complex, yet so harmonious, which even in a season of corruption and danger were chosen to illustrate the mysterious, yet not wholly secret regulation of the universe.

SHAKESPEARE'S HUMOUR WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO "THE WINTER'S TALE."

The comedies of Shakespeare refuse to be tabulated in deference to any method of classification deserving to be called precise—and several of them are comedies only according to a purely technical use of the term. The comic interest of his plays generally appears as a supplement to the main action in the shape of a bye or under plot, or, if it asserts itself to the reader or spectator as supreme, it is still of its nature incidental to the progress of the action, for it seems a just criticism that of all Shakespeare's comedies but one is in both design and effect a comedy of character proper. This single exception, I need scarcely say, is the "Merry Wives of Windsor," Shakespeare's only play of contemporary manners and direct sketch of middle class English life, a play that is only merry, in which there is no pathos and little plot, and which is dependent for success upon comical and well-constructed situations.

The "Winter's Tale" by its title seems to incite comparison and contrast with that other comedy "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Both contain circumstances unreal and fantastic so artfully interwoven with the tale as no longer to seem improbable—the one a fairy tale, carrying us away to some enchanted land, where the air is purer and the skies are larger than in our world, where the stars are close above our heads and where the flowers harbour visible spirits—elves and ariels clinging to the branches, and dazzling fire-flies tangled in the meadow grass beneath our feet; the other a sadder tale (a sad tale's best for winter, Mamilius tells us), a goblin story of dark suspicion, that, like the escaped genius of the Arabian nights, rises from the little bottle in which he has been imprisoned, in the shape of a thin smoke, which finally assumes gigantic proportions and towers to the skies—a tale (as one of Shakespeare's commentators remarks) told to a circle of poetically disposed listeners,

gathered around the flickering fireside of a peaceful, happy home, on a weird winter's night, while the atmosphere of the joyous assembly mixes with the terrors of the adventures narrated, and with the cold, dismal night." But though the picture presented to us in the "Winter's Tale" is in the main a sad one, it does not leave upon our minds a sad impression. It is relieved by the happy termination of the plot, by the reconciliation of Leontes and Hermione, by the young loves of Florizel and Perdita, and by the merry underplot in which Autolycus plays first fiddle. It is to this merry underplot, and to underplots of a similar character in other plays that I wish to draw attention, endeavoring to find out in what consists that pleasant mirthfulness of the poet so that we can say of him, as Rosaline of Biron:—

A merrier man
Within the limit of becoming mirth,
I never spent an hour's talk withal.

On reflection, however, this task appears rather difficult. Wit and humour are too ephemeral and evanescent to bear analysis. A joke ceases to be a joke as soon as you attempt to dissect it. Laughter is proverbially contagious, and it is often the laughing spirit that carries us on amusing us in spite of ourselves, in spite, indeed, of our decided feeling that really there is nothing to laugh at. We English are assuredly a humorous race, more humorous in all likelihood than any other—this is shown, not only in Shakespeare, Chaucer, Butler, Sterne, Dickens, but in all the incidents of our country and city life, in the quaint colloquy and light chaff of the market place and way side. Merry England is an ancient phrase, and everywhere in Merry England is found a joyous, ever-bubbling humour, inextinguishable by poverty and toil. It is by his ready recognition of this fact that Shakespeare excels as a humorist. He found his characters ready formed by nature, living and acting their parts in the world before his eyes, and with masterful skill he transformed them and reproduced them in his plays. In the old, forgotten coaching days, the days of highwaymen and Court clowns, there was wonderful humour at the wayside inns. Autolycus and Sam Weller were possible then—but in these days of railways and telegraphs, a railway porter has no time to be humorous, and Autolycus, for his first offence, finds himself sent down for six months. Shakespeare, therefore, so far at least as his comic characters are concerned, may be said to have been happy in the times that created them. Keen to see and seize the humorous aspects of affairs, he had also that deeper humour which creates character. There are two tests on the very surface of the true poet. If he describes a scene, you see it; if he describes a man, you know him. Shakespeare's fun grows out of his masterful knowledge of the world, of men and women. In a play of his (as in Romeo and Juliet, for example), you seem in some city of chivalry and romance, where the great knight passes to deeds of high enterprise, and the lovely lady smiles upon him from her balcony, and the troubadour sings of the "Lord of Oe and ho," and all the while you hear the chaffer of the market place, the chatter of the street gossips and the insignificant laughter of the loitering louts. Should we, therefore, be asked to express the greatest debt of the drama to Shakespeare, whether in the tragic or comic art, we should do it by the single word, characterization.

Passing from generalization to what may be called the stock in trade of the comic poet, the means, natural and artificial, by which he contrives to call forth our merriment and laughter, it would be both curious and interesting to ascertain how far Shakespeare adopts and how far he rejects the subjects of laughter that have been turned to good account by other humorists.

There are many kinds of laughter—laughter hideous and contemptible, ay, and even pathetic. Ruin and cynicism, and scorn and spite have their hyena laugh—but it differs wholly from the pleasant laughter of the man to whom the world brings always joyous impulses. On so wide a subject I can do no more than throw out a few suggestions as they occur to me, leaving it for my readers to supplement them by their own reflections, and in endeavouring to do this, I am inclined to include in the category of humorous poets, only