

Literary.

MACBETH.

A rib of Shakespere makes a Milton, a rib of Milton all other English poets.

When the glory of her Periclean age was stimulating the English mind, some mode of expression must be found. The cold simplicity of Grecian sculpture could not satisfy; neither could the emotional pleasures of Italian music; but the drama with its actions and feelings of men and women in real life. Although all poetry must be imitative of life, the drama seems to reach the inner treasury of nature. In the hand of its great master it placed upon the stage specimen individuals with lives laid open to perusal, or, to use another figure, it placed before us mirrors in which we see reflected the unknown contour of our hearts.

Among the great dramatist's many and varied characters, we find none more transparent than that of Macbeth. Here is none of the ambiguity of Hamlet, but every feature is shown in plainest type. The history of this character is of intense interest. Had a born villain, such as Iago, been chosen to act the part of Macbeth, we should scarcely have kept our eyes open during the play. Horrible deeds would have been the foregone conclusion. On our introduction we find a man of tender conscience, with a strong impulse to deal honorably by his friends. We believe him one of the many, who could they have paid the full price of gain in one instalment, would never have invested. She who knew him best says—

"Thy nature is too full o' the milk of human kindness;
Art not without ambition . . . but without
The illness should attend it . . . would not play false
And yet would wrongly win."

Hawthorne has observed: "There is evil in every human heart which may remain latent through life; or may be roused by circumstances to activity." The latent evil in Macbeth is ambition; the circumstances his own success and the simplicity of Duncan.

The struggle is closed between his better nature and mental weakness on the one hand, and ambition together with the pricking of his wife upon the other. At one time, moved by cowardice and the lavish kindness of the king, he decided to abandon the desperate enterprise; but the next moment the

opposing forces gain the permanent mastery. The stifling cry of the good:—

"False faces must hide what the false heart doth know,"
reminds one of the expression of Brutus when on his way to the fatal senate:—

"That every like is not the same, O Caesar,
The heart of Brutus yearns to think upon."

The progress in degeneration has been well indicated:—

"Oh! what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive."—*Marmion*.

We have the last glimpse of conscience in Macbeth where the murderer cannot say "Amen" to the sleeper's "God bless us." If, as some theologians argue, a soul in its evil course may pass a moral Cape Ann from which return is impossible, our subject has now gone beyond this fatal point. Henceforth he is wholly given over to evil. How swift the course of moral poisoning! He who had to be urged on to the very thrust of the dagger is now carrying out, unknown to his life's companion, dreadful deeds.

"Which must be acted ere they may be scanned."

Our pity is aroused for the poor creature who, with "soul full of scorpions," and bewildered by the difficulties gathering around him, curses the servant by whom he is informed of Malcolm's approach. Amid these misfortunes comes the news of the death of Lady Macbeth, for whom we must believe he had held real affection. Notice the strong analogy between Macbeth's conduct on this occasion and that of Brutus under similar circumstances at Philippi. But the former is the apathy of one steeped in crime; the latter the stoic endurance of a brave man.

Yet the heaviest blow was still to come. His last pillar of support was to fall with crushing weight upon himself. Thus far, he had been sustained by the assurance from the "weird sisters" that he should never be vanquished till Burnham wood should move to Dunsinane, and that he should not be harmed by one horn of woman. Now he beholds the moving forest and meets MacDuff "not of woman born." Yet he will not yield to heaven or earth. There is an element of the sublime in the way in which Macbeth clings to his joyless existence. He fights for life; not as the gallant general of Duncan's forces, but with a fierce and brute-like madness.

To what extent the author intended the acts of