

ROUND THE TABLE.

"Shall I be thought fantastical," asks Lamb, "if I confess that the names of some of our poets sound sweeter and have a finer relish to the ear—to mine at least—than that of Milton or of Shakspeare? It may be that the latter are more staled and rung upon in common discourse. The sweetest names, and which carry a perfume in the mention are Kit Marlowe, Drayton, Drummond of Hawthornden, and Cowley." To this fanciful declaration I will set my hand freely enough; but I could not be made to go to the same length as one of us in the sanctum who says that there should be a statute providing against the writing of poetry on the part of a man with such a tuneless, unmusical name as Fogg. But if Fogg be dowered with the poet's intellect and passion, if the gloom and glory of life, bearing in upon his soul, makes him too one of the inspired, and constrain him to utter forth his vision of the future,—shall he crush down and trample the heaven-sent fire within him? Far better he should mourn melodiously in his verse, in that his father had been one of the ilk of Fogg.

You have read, no doubt,—and I hope with an eleemosynary smile,—Lamb's rather tenuous little comedy, *Mr. H—*, (the damning of which on its first night he took sorely to heart, it was so hissed and cried out upon.) And yet, as we all know, the Ettrick Shepherd went through this world as Mr. Hogg, without even the saving grace of an added *e*. If the soul of Shakspeare had come down from heaven to any other than the child born in Stratford-upon-Avon, you, if you ever met with the name nowadays, would mark it in your note book for its picturesque queerness. Dobson is the most charming and graceful of our writers of light verse; if you saw "Dobson" over a general store in some straggling village you would cry "Phœbus, what a name!" One can scarcely imagine a more ridiculous patronymic than Longfellow; but I have never yet been conscious that anything of the ludicrous presented itself prominently to me, in connection with the poet's name.

This calls into my mind an anecdote which you may have never heard. A Mr. Longworth, on being introduced to the poet, made a remark on the similarity of their names. Longfellow, however, insisting that they could not be made to approach, quoted the line from Pope,—

"Worth makes the man, the want of it the fellow."

But to return to Shakspeare,—*"Old Bill," salva reverentia*, as we in the sanctum love to call him. Have you noticed that in William Black's *Judith Shakspeare*,—well, talk *will* fly off on a tangent at the most unexpected times; but have you noticed that throughout the novel Judith's father is never spoken of save with the words I have just used. One comes upon even such clumsy collocations as "Judith's father's return from London." There is of course a certain suggestiveness in the book, which prompts you to keep in mind that Shakspeare is in the next room, as it were; this was to be expected from Black. But he is brought before us in person very sparingly, and never otherwise than as the kindly father of the household in the touching, graceful scenes where he shows his affection for his daughter, and as a man of substance in Stratford town. The artifice to which I alluded has about it, indeed, a graceful air of diffidence, an acknowledgement of unattainment, a consciousness that the creative power demanded to do greater and higher things is wanting. It is really the touch of a true artist; and Thackeray himself could not have offered Shakspeare a finer tribute than he did in these words:—

"I should like to have been Shakspeare's boot-black—just to have lived in his house, just to have worshipped him,—to have run on his errands, and seen that sweet serene face."

Did you ever sit down and calmly take stock, as it were, of your mental outfit, try to cull from the heterogeneous mass of theories and beliefs what might be worked up into a fair and symmetrical system? Try it and you will be surprised at the variance amongst the ideas to which you have given an asylum. Could our thoughts and beliefs, by some exercise of art-magic or diablerie, become embodied and visible to us, what a curious scene it would be! All the rags and finery of Petticoat Lane on parade! Let us walk through and survey our own, both past and present. But what's all this hub-bub? We listen and hear confusedly, as the dealers march up and down—"Old clo', old clo'; great bargains—brand new honesty cheap for cash—only been worn once—no further use to the owner, who is going into business."

What a rag-fair it is! What's this that now presents itself for my inspection? Surely I was never of such a stature as to wear that! Pah! it reeks of age, is mouldy and moth-eaten. That has never been worn for many a long year. A stately garment it was in its day if one may judge from its proportions—I declare: it seems familiar enough too; seen it before, I think—no—yes—fact, that's my Ethical Standard. When I was a young man, you know—in high-minded youth—long out of use. I had almost for-

gotten it. You may put that away carefully. Handle that gently, sir! It's very fragile, patched as it is with various odds and ends, till the original texture can hardly be made out. That? That, an it please you, is my working Hypothesis—my every-day suit of morality. Over there, looking rather uncomfortable in its gloss and ungainly newness, is my Sunday suit—little worn you may notice, for principles likewise wear best that are worn the least. This tatter—is that all that's left of Honour? This shred? Well, well; we are pretty ragged, most of us, after travelling some distance on life's thorny path. But there, tripping along lightly, is a garb that breathes yet of the joyous freshness and grace of youth—the grand passion. Ah! stay for me! I would fain put thee on again.

Much that the exigencies of rhyme demand must be forgiven the poet. A usage of allowable rhymes has long since grown up. It is probable that the greater proportion of such, if not all, have their origin in times when they actually did rhyme, and having been enshrined in the poetic literature of the day, became part of the poet's stock-in-trade. Thus Pope, whose ear can easily be trusted, rhymes *take* and *speak*, *obey* and *tea*. Are we to conclude, then, that these words were pronounced *speak* and *tea*? It seems so. The explanation of the peculiarities of Irish pronunciation confirms such a theory. Contemporary English was introduced into Ireland in the Elizabethan age, and, an exile as it were, was cut off from the springs of change which were at work in England to modify her language. There was a vital principle in English, which like all organisms could not remain stationary, but had its growth and decay. The Irish-English, then, is not a caricature, but in its main peculiarities of orthoepy, is a tolerably correct representation of English as Shakspeare spoke it.

It is an old saying that only the skilled can dance in fetters; and rhyme which has been described as the purple band on the princely toga of the poet, may with equal felicity be styled a golden fetter. It is sometimes a source of much amusement to observe the whimsical results of a struggle in rhyme.

The above was suggested by an extract from a quaint old carol called *Dives and Lazarus*, to be found in "*Ancient Mysteries Described*," by William Hone, published in London in 1823. Carol-singing was a regular profession, and the chanter was wont to draw out to its utmost length the last line of the stanza. So conceive the effect in this instance, which yet seems to have been gravely listened to by that song-loving age:—

"As it fell out upon a day,
Rich Dives sickened and died,
There came two serpents out of hell,
His soul therein to guide.
Rise up, rise up, brother Dives,
And come along with me,
For you have a place provided in hell,
To sit upon a serpent's knee."

Irving, in his rendition of Hamlet, has departed somewhat from stage tradition in the scene at Ophelia's grave. The time-honoured custom was that the first gravedigger divested himself of an incontinent number of waistcoats before proceeding to business; very much in the style of the ordinary circus trick of a rider throwing off his civilian clothes, and finally, much to the relief of the spectators, appearing in the usual glittering uniform. In Hamlet, also, the curious have discovered what in modern stage cant are "local gags." "Go, get thee to Vaughan; fetch me a stoup of liquor," says the first clown to his fellow. It is more than conjectured that Vaughan, corrupted from Johann, John, was the given name of a landlord of a hostel near the Globe Theatre. Shakspeare, then, must have found it necessary to relieve the profound gloom of the tragedy by bits of by-play and local hits, "which the same," as Truthful James would say, "I do despise."

The following thought, which is quoted in *Obiter Dicta* from Latham's book on the "Action of Examinations," though it may be familiar to many, is one that no student will resent to have put before him more than once. Its bearing is to be seen at a glance:

"A man who has been thus provided with views and acute observations may have destroyed in himself the germs of that power which he simulates. He might have had a thought or two now and then if he had been let alone, but if he is made first to aim at a standard of thought above his years, and then finds he can get the sort of thoughts he wants without thinking, he is in a fair way to be spoiled."

"I have been looking into the essay on Carlyle in that book," said the ingenious man. "After admitting that Carlyle's *dicta* are not final, and that he has not said the last word on many men and things, the *Obiter Dicta* man writes: 'But last words should be reserved for the last man, to whom they would appear to belong!'" This assumption seemed to surprise him.

"Well," some one said, "you surely don't think that the last man will be dumb?"

"How do you know that he'll not be married?" asked the ingenious man.

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