

ORIGINAL.

CRITIQUE ON SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMAS.

(Continued from page 228.)

VI. MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

The main circumstances of this piece are said to resemble those in Ariosto's *Ariodant and Ginevra*—the accessories and the denouement differ. So far as we are acquainted with the sources from which he drew, this seems to have been his ordinary procedure: His original supplied him merely with the groundwork, all the colouring, all that gives life and actuality to his productions, is his own. To satisfy ourselves of this, we have but to peruse the *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, of *Silvio*—and if we recognise a similarity of names, and some resemblance as to incidents, we must acknowledge this to be all—the real characters of the stories are essentially different, and Shakespeare is as far above his predecessor as can possibly be imagined.

We esteem this, both as to the plot and the details, one of the best imagined of his comic pieces. With the usual profusion of incident, there is a complete harmony among all the parts, which gives to the whole a highly symmetrical appearance. We could not, as in many other instances, point out a spot where a portion might have been omitted or supplied, or otherwise disposed. By an alteration of the catastrophe, the piece might be easily made into a most moving tragedy, for there is tragic matter enough in it. But it is better as it stands, with all the thrilling interest, but without the painful ending of a tragedy. In some cases it may be said that the principal distinction between his serious and comic performances consists in the conclusion, for in both we have the intermixture of light and shade, of romance and humour, the *Janus* human life represented in its twofold aspect—the only other difference which we could draw between them, being in the proportions which these parts hold to each other. And this is, after all, the grand charm of his productions. It may have been permitted to the ancient Greeks to carry the tragic interest throughout five acts without accessory and without declension, their modern imitators have rarely succeeded in doing as much. Reserving the question, which of the two views of life be the true one, we think that the charm of the Greek tragedy depends much less upon the substance than the form, than is generally supposed; and unless it were possible to transfer their language and their manners upon the stage, we think it essentially impossible that any imitations of their style should succeed.

But to return. The principal charm of this piece consists in the characters of Benedict and Beatrice. Their volleys of wit continue without intermission from beginning to end. Their humour is light, but it is incessant. We must not look into it for that hidden vein of deep thought and pungent satire which we often find in his pieces—it is the expression of the feelings of two light-hearted beings, apparently the declared enemies of all sentiment, but who possess more of it than they know or are willing to allow. It is smart, snappish, petulant, sometimes touching on the extreme limits of good nature and good manners, but never exactly going beyond these. We regard with an extreme interest the process by which these two wild, giddy, sportive creatures, are tamed down to the level of other beings. Their characters are sketched with admirable knowledge of human nature. To prevent them from falling into the class of professional jesters and inveterate wit-mongers, a touch of deeper feeling than they generally display is given them at one moment. Beatrice's generous indignation at her cousin's unmerited disgrace, and Benedict's eagerness to punish the author of this insult at his mistress's bidding, convert the two panterers into most dignified and romantic personages, and prove that they had hitherto shown us but the surface of their characters. But it would have spoiled all to have dwelt long on this topic, and therefore with the same perfect skill with which they were carried up to this point, they are suffered to relapse into their natural strain, and continue to gibe and rail to the end of the piece. It is difficult to explain in what consists the charm of such tempers, especially in the female sex. It must be that the difficulty of conquest appears greater in them; and when we see such spirited maidens as Beatrice tamed down into the loving bride and the obedient wife, we think of the fiery colt, who, in spite of all his struggles, is transformed into the submissive horse, retaining his spirit, but uniting it with ductility. No character has been more frequently copied by modern dramatists and romancers than Beatrice's. Among the most successful imitations are Sheridan's —, and Scott's *Diana Vernon*.

In all combats of wit between the two sexes, Shakespeare uniformly gives the victory to the lady. There is wonderful tragic power in the whole scene where Hero is accused; her horror is too overpowering to permit of speech; her lover's rage which could not altogether subdue his tenderness; the father's dignified surprise succeeded by horror and fury; Beatrice's sympathy for her friend, rage at her accuser, and bold confidence in her innocence—and then the mild, conciliating, and clear-sighted friar, who waits till the first burst of emotion has subsided, to propose the plan which is to clear up the dark mystery,—in all this we see a group of personages and emotions of the most picturesque character.

Leonato is a peculiarly interesting personage. Whether we see him as the hearty hospitable host, observing with quiet joy the

amusements of the younger parties,—as the indignant parent, as the father, first doubting and then disbelieving what he wished to be false, his daughter's infamy,—forgetting his years to challenge to mortal combat the impugner of her innocence, or receiving to forgiveness the unintentional author of her sorrows.

To the objection which considers the marriage between Benedict and Beatrice a job, a stage trick, it may be answered that from the very outset they shew a sneaking liking for each other. Their apparent antipathy is of itself sufficient to lead us to what ensues.

The scene in which Claudio weds Hero, whom he supposes dead, has much romantic beauty in it—to our taste, however, it seems wanting in probability—nothing can be more different than marriage on the stage, and marriage in real life. We suppose that we must yield the dramatist this power of uniting his couples in the summary manner he commonly makes use of. It is a part, probably an essential part, of his privileges. It is a most happy conception to bring about the denouement by means of the watchmen—philosophical, as much as it illustrates the truth, that great events are often produced by blind or insignificant agents, and dramatic, inasmuch as it gives him another opportunity of varying the action by means of the absurdities of Dogberry and his posse comitatus.

We think, upon the whole, that there is somewhat too much of this original, who, amusing as he is, can hardly be termed a new character, the humour in him consisting in that misapplication of words which we see in almost all of Shakespeare's vulgar characters. At times, even in his comedies, a passage stands out from the dialogue—this often happens in his descriptions of nature. His landscapes, as with every true dramatist, are always secondary to the action. They are rapidly drawn, but sometimes of such exquisite beauty that we lament the necessity which prohibits him from dwelling upon them. That Shakespeare, a dweller in cities, should have known the human heart so well, does not astonish; but that his nature should always be so fresh, proves in his case, as in Milton's, the strength of the impressions left upon us in our youth.

Shakespeare is never less intelligible than in his witty passages—much of the humour in this piece requires to be studied.

Dogberry, in his fondness for proverbs, which lead him to forget the thread of his narrative, puts us strongly in mind of Sancho.

Benedict begins to shave and wash when he falls in love, which would seem to prove these virtues not to have been always practised by the soldado of these days.

The ruminations upon the life of Borachio and Conrad, in the garden, appear to us above what might have been expected of their station.

There is no vice against which he inveighs more bitterly than hypocrisy.

It is rare for him to make use of a Scriptural witticism, as when he makes Claudio say, "The Almighty saw him when he was hid in the garden."

The fondness of churchmen for divisions is happily hit off in the heads of Dogberry's discourse.

We see here the same sentiment as in *Hamlet*: "If a man do not erect in this age his own tomb ere he dies, he shall live no longer in monument, than the bell rings, and the widow weeps."

In such passages, in which the age is attacked, and they are numerous in his writings, we think that we see the expression of a high and a wounded spirit, that felt its own superiority, felt the unworthiness of its lot, and yet was too proud to state its wrongs and vindicate its worth in language more direct. Long was the period during which our master spirits were treated thus neglectfully, many among them have left us the proofs of their sense of the indignities they endured, no one among them, not even Milton, has spoken on this cruel subject with half the dignity of Shakespeare.

THE BRICKLAYER'S LABORER.

BY MRS. S. C. HALL.

"Who do you work for now, Larry?"

"A great gentleman entirely, a great builder, though once he wasn't much bittier off than myself. I heard tell he come to London with little to cover him, but the care of the Almighty; and he wasn't altogether a *garsoon* (little boy,) but a fine lump of a young man; and he went to a gentleman, who (the heavens be his bed!) was mighty good entirely to the poor Irish, and he axed for work, and there was a big heap of stones at one corner of the court yard; and the gentleman said, 'if ye want work, my man, carry them stones to the opposite corner,' and the poor stranger set to and did as he was bid; and when he had done, he tould the masther, and axed him what he should do next; and the masther said, 'Take every one of the stones back to where ye found them,' and he did so, and tould the masther again what he had done; and the masther was plazed, ye see, because he did exactly as he was bid, neither more nor less, and axed no questions; and the masther said, 'you'll do for me,' and gave him constant employ; and from that day he riz, like a house afire; and great sense, and great luck he had; he knew the ganeous of the English—quiet, hard-working, aisy going, and no bother nor blarney." During the latter part of these observations, Larry had been investigating the

state of the flue, and, despite the air, again declared he could cure it.

"For how long, Larry?"

"Ah, thin, what doctor could answer such a question as that? we'll git rid of the disease for the prisint, any how; and then, I must go home, where I'm wanting; for you see I'm raythur tired to-day, and I'll tell ye how it was. When I quitted the sod (left Ireland), I left no one at home with my poor mother but my little brother Barney, a slip of a boy, and her heart and soul was in the child; but he turned out wild, and left the country. It's little I could do for the poor lone mother; and she so far off, but I often thought of her, and would send her a thrifle now and again, and a word, telling how I was treading the ladder of life—now up, now down, the same as the quality, who, many of 'em, are done up, like the houses, with the *Roman Cimint*—Heav'n bless it—to look like what they aint; but that's not my business; only there's nothing like the rale lime and stone, afther all. Well, my wife says to me one day, or raythur night—it was of a Sathurday; and I had earned a power that week, for it was task-work, and I had slaved over hours, and felt wake in myself, and she was making me a sup of punch, and I had taken out my money, and laid a couple of shillings together for a throwel for the neighbor's jobs, and another thrifle for a pair of shoes, besides the rint; and there was a little over, and Peggy says to me—'Larry,' says she, 'our Heavenly Father's very good to us in a strange country,' says she, '(for she was always a God-fearing woman;)' and ye'r a good husband, and a good father, and the quietest man in, or out of Ireland, when the drop's not in,' she says, '(I'd be ashamed to be praising myself, only them war the words she spoke;)' and I often see ye sit solid as a pillar, looking out of yer eyes, straight forward, saying and seeing nothing, until yer eyes, avourneen, swim in tears; and thin, Larry, I know you do be thinking of your ould mother, and she alone in her latter days, and here,' she says, taking out the remnant of a leather apron, tied into a bag—'here is what will bring her over: what I've saved out of my washing at the laundry; and put that thrifle to it: I havn't touched a drop of beer, nor wouldn't, for the last four months; and ye'll be happy all out, then, Larry; and we'll make the ould woman happy; and sure she'll take delight in the grand-childre. Often, when I've been putting the bread in my mouth, I've thought that your mother had nothing, may-be, but a *wet* paratee! And do, Larry, send for her, in God's name; we'll be nothing the poorer for it, for a mother's breath is a blessing in a poor man's house! Well, I had Peggy in her young days; and at first her two cheeks war like two roses, and now they are as white as lime; but I thought I never see any thing look so handsome as she did then; and while her poor, hard, slaving hand trembled in mine, I couldn't spake, but I hid my face in her apron, and cried as much tears as would make a bed of mortar—the poor craythur! denying herself—and for my mother!

"Well, the ould woman came, and we would have been very happy, only the poor mother could not forget Barney, the boy that left her; and this very morning, we war mighty busy entirely with the new houses—and the masther gives a hand's turn to many a boy (God bless him for it!)—and I see two or three strangers among them—the labourers, I mane—and one poor looking fellow; and I observed him mighty wake. 'My man,' says I, 'don't fill the hod, for you'll not be able for it; and keep steady,' I says, 'and I'll go behind ye.' With that, he shoulders it mighty awkward, like a young soldier with his musket on first drill, and with a laugh, 'I never could keep steady,' he says. Well, the laugh, and the look of his pale, rowling, but bright eyes, dull and starved looking, made my flesh creep. Death is bad enough to look at when it is cold and stiff; but just so much life left as keeps fire in the eye, while every thing else is all as one as dead, is shocking to see; and somehow, as I followed him up the ladder, I felt as if I was following a corpse.

"He had not gone up six rungs of the ladder, when he stumbled; but I let my own load go, and cotched him just as he went over the side. I carried him down; he was as light as a child of two years ould—no weight in him. With that, one of your half-gentlemen, who was passing, looks at him; 'He's drunk,' he says; I couldn't make him no answer, for I war choked with the injustice of the world (the boy's breath had been on my cheek not three minutes before, and was as innocent of spirits as a new born babe's); but Jerry Clure—a fine tongue has Jerry, when he lets it go, and fine edication—makes answer, 'He is drunk from the fulness of want: sorra a bit or sup has passed his lips these twenty-four hours, and it is a sin and a shame for the likes of you, who have plenty, to turn such a word on a stranger. If a poor boy reels with the wake-ness of starvation; he is drunk; if a rich one reels afther a dinner that would satisfy a wife and five children, he is excited,'—them war his words; and at the same time, just as we war all gathered about him, one with wather, another with wiskey—all according to their ability—my poor mother comes up with the bit of dinner. 'What's the matter?' she says; and some one tould her: and with that, she makes into the throng; for she's a feeling woman. 'Give him air,' she says; and as they drew back, she looks in his face; and then—my grief!—the shriek of her would pierce a heart of stone. She threw up her arms in the air, with one wild cry, and fell upon the poor stranger.

"I knew who it was then," and Larry, turning away to conceal an emotion which does honour to a man, and which, nevertheless,