

SHAKESPEARE AND THE ORDINARY MAN

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IT may be suggested that I should first tell what I mean by the Ordinary Man. But I am not going to be caught. I am one myself, and I am certain there is a vast multitude like me. I used to think that to enter and feed one's soul in the great Shakespearean temple one should carry passports from the capped and gowned gentlemen who occupy the intellectual vantage spots in our colleges and universities, and whose function it is to bring down from the ethereal blue of exalted minds those strange creations which must undergo at their hands much shaping and defining before the ordinary fellow could begin to know what they are all about.

There is, to be sure, no particular harm in this belief, and there is in it, too, the full measure of that truth which acknowledges the value of the specialist in every department of human thought and activity. But it has kept many plain people fearful of their inability to find anything of use without the aid of the trained guide and the erudite specialist. Many ordinary men and women think, therefore, that Shakespeare is not for them; that he is too remote, too difficult, that he occupies a world of unreality fit only for those who like to speculate in the vagaries of the human mind operating in a sphere quite apart from the practical concerns of everyday life. Because I believe such thinking inhibitory and negative in its scope, I wish to say something of Shakespeare and the Ordinary Man.

I

It has been said that if God did not like the poor, He would not have created so many of them. If Shakespeare's "deep and wondrous verse" were meant for an intellectual aristocracy alone, quite likely he would not have drawn so many of his characters from the ranks of the crowd; so much of his philosophy from the normalities and eccentricities of ordinary men and women like ourselves. The Kingdom his matchless mind created is a great and abiding Democracy; all are given a fair hearing, and a wealth of opportunity to call up the best and the worst of their being. His characters are in real life, and are doing what we are trying to

do. Because they are human beings, they are doing things as well and as badly as we do them; they are sinful and saintly, selfish and generous, cruel and kind; woven with malice and intrigue, or open and chivalrous as Gonzalo's Ideal Kingdom; filled with "bloody thoughts" of revenge and hatred, or serene and soft as the bewitching scene at "Belmont", where the "moonlight sleeps upon the banks" and "sounds of music creep into our ears."

If a great, free university were established in our land, where the many parts that men and women must play, from the "mewling infant" to the "second childhood and mere oblivion", were all exposed before the enquiring mind of youth, analysed, interpreted and developed by learned professors schooled in the pedagogic art, it is a fair prediction such a school would have crowded classrooms and that its graduates would go forth knowing life in all its phases; even the "unweeded garden" where the rank things abound would be known and understood. Given the environment and attending data, this graduate could walk with the security arising from profound knowledge among the great and the depraved. He could go up into the courts of royalty and, protected by the "Divinity that doth hedge a King", observe human nature in the gilded trappings of power. With equal comprehension might he weigh the uncouth philosophy of the "grave-diggers", finding everywhere that the wells of human nature never change essentially, whether their waters run through sparkling, gilded fountains, chatter over pebbly ways, or steal through sedgy sods and stagnant pools.

In the world of men and women, he meets no surprises. They are doing what Shakespeare said they would do; for did not this peerless interpreter of men create the stage upon which life's problems and activities must be solved and performed, and then stand by and write down the way men and women did their part? It is the way they always do their part; it is the way they always will. The graduate of such a university should therefore be something of a prophet, when from Shakespeare's world he steps into the realities of men and women and events; where he can either "fret and strut his time upon the stage" and then ignobly disappear; or "grapple to his heart with hooks of steel" the reality and significance of his part, and perform it with such courage and devotion that "Nature might stand up and say to all the world this was a man".

Such a university has no local habitation and no name among us, but its existence is as real as Shakespeare's genius; the most accessible of all educational institutions, it imposes no tests

on the student other than the will to roam at his ease through the myriad creations of this most gifted of all men and allow their beautiful images to sink into his soul; to note throughout all the structures the perfect harmony which we are told is "in immortal souls"—

But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

This university exists in a small corner of our book-shelves, and the building units on its campus are those little volumes of Shakespeare containing within their covers the architecture of human thought and action from the very beginning to "the last syllable of recorded time".

II

I now propose entering this Eternal Kingdom of Shakespeare. It is a walled kingdom, but it is open to the world of men and women by some thirty-five or more gates, any one of which might be called the Gate Beautiful. There is no Keeper of the Gates, and there are no tolls. For centuries they have remained wide open; and it is generally understood that their closing will mark the end of civilization; will mark the time when men and women no longer delight in the glorious achievements of the mind; when the best of our literature and the triumphs of our language evoke no response in our souls; a time of social and economic blackness and oblivion—which can never be seen again upon this earth. Our way into the Shakespearean state is likely to remain as it is to-day, wide, open and inviting.

I am bringing along a companion. He has laid by the tools of his trade for the day in order to accompany me. His name is Mr. Ordinary Man; observant, and with some powers of reflection. We are both, therefore, laymen in the world of literature. I have some qualifications as a guide, inasmuch as during the most of my life I have been a frequent visitor to this Kingdom. I have crept in one or other of the gates at hours of the day or night that offered the most convenience, roamed at will through its streets and parks, its countryside, villages and forests; met and observed its busy men and women at their various avocations, and even crept stealthily to a vantage point in the Forum and the Capitol. Being a good deal of a vagrant, I must collect my impressions from the market-place or wherever the crowds are on business or diversion; consequently, one could not attain that close intimacy with the intellectual subtleness of the Great, which was the privilege of the

visitor of literary acumen, the gowned professor of English and the visionary intellectual acrobat who is going to write a book setting forth new and wonderful interpretations of the plain, straightforward English of William Shakespeare. I suggest to my companion that this is no Alice-In-Wonderland excursion; that while unusual phenomena may be witnessed, our experiences will, on the whole, be concerned with the things that bulk most in the world's thought and activity.

And so we enter at a gate commanding access to a part of the Shakespearean state best calculated to attract and interest the uncertain pilgrim on his first visit. It is an island "set in a silver sea", and its vegetation suggests a subtropical latitude. We had barely begun to drink in its beauties when a violent tempest arose. The sea lashed itself into fury; the sky darkened and the thunder rolled:

the most mighty Neptune
Seem'd to besiege, and make his bold waves tremble.

The spectacle was terrifying, and to enhance its horror a full rigged ship was dashed to pieces right off the coast and its crew and passengers thrown to the mercy of a raging sea. The storm ceased as quickly as it began, and as we roamed about that island, we met members of the crew and passengers who had reached land. We afterwards learned that not a soul was lost—"Not a hair perished".

We heard discourses of astounding interest from the passengers, among whom were a king, a prince, courtiers and counsellors. Drunken sailors with a philosophy and a moral code fitted to their unwonted environment made the most of their opportunities. Through them we came in touch with a native of the island, a strange type of being with many developmental characteristics of the beast, a sort of missing link. Brutal and repellant as he was, we found that someone had implanted in his mind the rudiments of an education in the beautiful things of life that, in a measure, redeemed his repulsive ugliness and contrasted favorably with the crude superficialities of alcoholism and low-brow civilization. We had stumbled upon the most arresting and difficult personage in the whole Shakespearean population. While he urges with vehement ardour his new-found acquaintances to murder his great and noble master and teacher, he upbraids them for their cowardice and superstition, and expresses himself in words of choicest poetry:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not,
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments

Will hum about my ears, and sometimes voices
 That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
 The clouds methought would open and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me; that, when I waked,
 I cried to dream again.

My companion quickly caught the lesson that beauty may be found in most unexpected places, and that there may be "no art to find the mind's construction in the face." I was able to tell him there were many such examples among Shakespeare's people. I could recall but two or three that seemed to have no redeeming grace, and even these, on further observation, may be found with some measure of good.

We came upon a group of distinguished survivors in another part of the isle, and heard a kindly old counsellor setting forth his views on what he called the Ideal State. At home he advised the king on matters of jurisprudence. Here, with the genial spell of the island upon him, and his memory tinged with the malice and intrigues of his political superiors, he tells that in the State over which he would like to rule—

All things in common nature should produce
 Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,
 Sword, pike, knife, gun or need of any engine,
 Would I not have, but nature should bring forth
 Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance
 To feed my innocent people.

He would, too, have no courts, no crime, no one poor, no one rich, yet all possessed of simple abundance, and all acquired without individual effort or labour. My companion, who had helped with election propaganda in a certain country, became strangely reminiscent. There were votes in this old man's system of economics. His own efforts presupposed that someone perhaps might have to do some work; but this system was free from any such shortcomings, and the appeal to the electors would bring results at the polls which, in most democracies, form the last resting-place of the visionary economics of much political propaganda.

We found in this small corner of Shakespeare's Kingdom the highly endowed philosopher; a lover of justice and righteousness; a hater of wrong and of crime. Himself a victim of a foul conspiracy, he was able to enter into the depths of his own being and bring forth such a wealth of spiritual and mental power that he not only purchased happiness for himself and others, but, after

years of righteous contrivance, brought about the undoing of his enemies and the restoration of his former high estate. A striking example of right prevailing over wrong; and an exemplification of the dictum that—

Truth itself will rise, though all the world o'erwhelm it,
To men's eyes.

Many kinds of discourse we heard from the lips of this glorious old sage. He would teach us that all human effort and all the structures we build up should serve one supreme purpose of good; and that well served, they may, like ourselves, pass as the baseless fabric of a vision. Or, in the words of this most exquisite poetry:

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

We break the spell of the bewitching Ariel and move to a remote part of the Shakespearean Kingdom. Our transition is rapid as thought itself; we find ourselves in a foreign court and listening to the measured diction of a great and noble prince suffering from a profound melancholy. His state of mind is due to a crushing sequence of events combined with "metaphysical aid". We hear his story and "season our admiration" while we watch men and women sweeping along on the current of every human emotion—of passion, of intrigue and murder and treachery; of lust and deceit; a surging, eddying torrent that tended to suck into its swirl the homely virtues of love and honour and courage. It ends, as it must, in terrible tragedy; but we who stood on the bank saw and heard things that must abide as long as "memory holds a place in this disturbed globe". Much of what we experienced men will discuss, to agree and differ; but the grandeur and thrilling beauty of it all will remain while human nature exists and our language continues to serve mankind.

With much cause for the blackest pessimism, the prince, in a burst of sublime poetry, left us still with faith in the essential nobility of man:

What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason, how infinite
in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable!

In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like
a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!

Our minds caught a bit of the melancholy of our environment, and fagged under the weight of majestic philosophies and metaphysics; and so we sought out the pastoral delights of "The Forest of Arden". Here, Nature's haunts are unspoilt. The native woods, the wild game, the sylvan streams, the adjoining fields where shepherds tend their flocks, the whole rustic routine of the daily life of men and women and children—all made a picture of great tranquillity and sequestered beauty. We found here others than those who were "forest born". An exile Duke and certain erst-while courtiers were finding here the peace and security the "envious court" could not bestow.

The Duke is a philosopher, and translates the "stubbornness of fortune" into pleasant and useful pursuits. He reads Nature from her original page, interprets her ways, and finds that while her meaning may be obscure at times she always tells the truth. Her wisdom, therefore, is apart from the superficialities of courts, the inconstant pronouncements of human society and the arresting mutterings of selfish politicians. He is happy with his lot; finds, as he says,

tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

He tells of the uses of adversity:

Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.

We meet other exiles in the "Forest of Arden". Among them the most fascinating woman in all Shakespeare:

From the east to western Ind,
No jewel is like Rosalind;

All the pictures fairest lin'd
Are but black to Rosalind

Interesting beyond measure was a sort of vagrant philosopher who revelled in the possession of a specially compounded "melancholy" of his own making and a kind of "humorous sadness". His discourses were full of "wise saws and modern instances". He divided life into seven ages; men and women were but actors

on a world stage, and "each one in his time plays many parts". A typically Shakespearean surprise came from a most unexpected source. A wayfaring court jester, in motley coat, gave us in a few words the whole story of man's physical growth and decay:

And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe;
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot;
And thereby hangs a tale.

My companion loses his fatigue; the touch of Nature in our sylvan rambles and the loves and romance of the forest population refresh us and whet our desire for further journeyings. We find ourselves shortly in very different environment.

It is a "blasted heath" set in a northern land. The air is murky and heavy; black clouds, rolled together like an inky ocean in the sky, seem to approach the barren desert with almost sinister calculations. Long braids of lightning strike across the low hanging vault, and a hoarse, echoing thunder keeps continuous accompaniment. Into this scene comes a great General in the full flush of recent victories won for his King and Country. At once there appear weird persons "that look not like the inhabitants of the earth, and yet are on it". "They should be women, yet their beards forbid me to interpret that they are". They hail the victorious warrior, and promise him great rewards, ending with the prophecy that he shall finally become King.

They are the agents of evil, and their mission is to play upon a weakness often found even in noble and courageous men. They have seized upon the time when it is most susceptible to subtle influence; for unrestrained ambition is likely to be born when the womb of conscious power is vitalized and stimulated by successful undertakings. He is tempted on the spot to murder the King in order to reach the throne, but puts the horrible thought away from him; and it is almost certain he would have proceeded "no further in the matter" were it not for the influence of a really terrible woman, his wife. But once in her whole career did she give the least evidence of possessing any of the "milk of human kindness". Able and remorseless, and with the tigress's love of her mate, she has her way. The King is murdered; her warrior husband and herself become King and Queen; the promises of the powers of darkness are implemented, and the guilty pair become great, majestic and profoundly devilish.

We watch with interest for the answer to the all-time question, does crime pay? And the reply is as old as Cain—No. This

royal couple never knew happiness again. In order to hold what they wrongly obtained they had to keep on in blood and murder until nature herself rebelled. The Queen goes insane and dies; the King is virtually a raving, bloody madman when he is finally beaten, his throne taken from him and he himself slain.

As elsewhere, in the rapidly moving events of the Shakespeare Kingdom, we observe that the good of human nature is either present or near at hand, even when rampant evil seems in full control. As in living nature, when the lowest forms of life strive to destroy the higher, the organism meets the challenge to its right to live by calling up all the resources of its being, so that there come into the visible conflict resourceful, potent defenders whose very existence had formerly been unnoticed. It is only "in the fatness of these pursy times virtue itself of vice must pardon beg". In the long run, goodness and righteousness win out, as they do in the conflict we just witnessed.

By the miracle of Shakespeare's glorious poetry and speech, we lose near the end our intensive hatred for the cruel, bloody king. Some touch of the good in him before the agents of evil got control still remained. This is the wail of a heart-broken man, and no one can be indifferent to it:

Seyton, I am sick at heart:

I have lived long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not.

And again, his heart-rending appeal to the doctor in behalf of his wife, whom he loved, despite the fact that she was largely responsible for his downfall:

Cans't thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Purge the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

With nerves a bit frayed from beholding such dramatic episodes of life, we sought the moonlit banks at "Belmont" where the "soft stillness and the night", the "sounds of music" and the "floor of heaven inlaid with patines of bright gold" might attune our

minds to an appreciation of the "harmony" which is "in immortal souls". Musicians enter here and "wake Diana with a hymn". They sing to the accompaniment of the harp the songs of Shakespeare. We hear again the twangling vibrations of the Ariel strings, whose bewitching melody allayed our fears and entranced us when we first entered the Shakespearean world:

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey and a ho, and a hey nonino, etc.

Tell me where is fancy bred
In the heart or in the head? etc.

Blow, blow, thou winter wind
Thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude, etc.

Is she kind as she is fair, for beauty lives with kindness,
Love doth to her eyes repair to help him of his blindness, etc.

We are aroused at last to the lateness of the hour and the time for our return. We have been able only to visit but fragments of Shakespeare's wonderful Empire. We are told that hard by is a land of great and absorbing interest, teeming with history, statesmanship, war, politics, science, literature, religion; the home of a breed of men and women who have built up an empire of world-wide extent and renown; the birthplace of the peerless creator of the Kingdom we are now leaving. We pass through a small corner of it on our way to the Gate we have chosen for an exit. We approach an ancient Abbey and observe whom we take to be the Superior of the Order standing expectantly at the entrance. As we watch, a tall, stooped, haggard man approaches. His broad forehead and strongly lined face bespeak one born to action and o'erweening ambition. His clerical garb and red hat, worn and soiled with travel and neglect, proclaim him nevertheless a Cardinal of the Church. His whole demeanour tells of former greatness and present misery and distress. Tottering to the gate, he bows humbly, and, in breaking voice says: "Father Abbot, I come to lay my bones amongst you", adding:

Had I but served my God with half the zeal
I served my King, he would not in my age
Have left me naked to my enemies.

My companion, whose memory and notebook were equally diligent during our rambles, much moved by the incident, quoted appropriately:

Thou seest we not all alone are unhappy;
 This wide and universal theatre
 Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
 Wherein we play in.

We pass out through the gateway in the quiet starlit night as the hour of twelve is striking:

'Tis midnight's holy hour, and silence
 Now like a brooding spirit
 Sleeps on a calm and pulseless world.

My companion is silent; but I know that "in the quick forge and working house of thought" he had already moulded the habit of frequent returns.

III

I suppose I need not suggest to anyone who should read these bits of commentary that my plea is Shakespeare for the ordinary or average man and woman. I am not thereby entering the realm of education officially presided over by our universities; nor am I daring to make suggestion to the generals and staff officers of the mightiest power ever placed in the hands of a nation—I mean, of course, public education. Of the many reasons why one refrains from assuming a rôle where angels even might show timidity, one is that I know little of the technique of education, and the second, that the value of Shakespeare study has long been recognized by those institutions, and a place found for it in the curricula.

My appeal is to read Shakespeare for the pleasure of reading him, and to keep it up until the practice becomes a fixed habit. I have watched boys and girls struggle along at the piano, while a music teacher laboured, and perhaps suffered with ourselves. But, finally came an appreciation of the notes and stops of the instrument, a new vista opened up to the young student, and this "barren footstool whereon each must play his part" began to cover itself with spangled verdure and re-echo to the lullaby of babbling brooks and singing birds. "This muddy vesture of decay" had opened a new window so that the light of a bigger world and the "music of the spheres" might reach the imprisoned soul.

We need to learn no difficult technique in order to enjoy the glories of Shakespeare. It means nothing more than developing a taste for good literature, the superlative value of which is best expressed in this striking sentence from a scholarly and eloquent address on Shakespeare recently delivered by the Right Hon. Arthur Meighen: "After all accumulations of wealth and harvests

of science, good literature is still our finest possession, and reading is vastly the most profitable occupation of our leisure". The vivid intensity of Shakespeare's drama, wherein we are brought by the superb power of living, pulsing, winged language into most intimate relation with our fellows, moving on, like ourselves, through the numerous and rugged trails of Destiny, should have an especial appeal to all who stop to think betimes of the unravelled puzzle of existence; as well, too, as to the vast majority of us who are concerned mostly with observing what the multitude of people are doing along the way. The man who can sit, after his day's toil, and read with pleasure a play of Shakespeare, might not have seen the inside of a high-school, but I should like to prepare his brief against him that would call such a one illiterate.

In my days in the country in Nova Scotia, it was a common enough occurrence for a young member of a family to pick up a fiddle, an instrument found in most homes in those times, and, without, apparently, any training, start to play bits of music, crooned over his cradle perhaps and now a living part of himself. He took to it as a duck to water, and no principality or power could ever keep this young fellow from following his bent. There are some such with a natural gift to seek the beauty of the stars through the channels of literature; but for the most of us the impulse, if it exists at all, is latent, and much persistent effort is needed to awaken, develop and embellish it before it can take on the Wings of the Morning.

If you have a liking for Shakespeare from your school days, all right; nothing need be said; if not, and early education is meagre, some resolution may be required. The nuggets the favoured ones can pick up from the very start may not be your luck. You may have to work through much stone and shale before the glittering metal is reached, but the certainty that it is there should stimulate your effort.

A good many years ago, in a small Cape Breton mining town a few persons of professional standing conceived the idea of establishing a Shakespearean class. Those who enrolled themselves in the enterprise were the clergymen, doctors, teachers, shop-keepers, some farmers and a goodly number of coal miners. Many of them had never read a line of Shakespeare in their lives, and many of their early interpretations of the texts and their reactions to the message of the drama were simply magnificent in their originality. The class was a splendid success. Most of its charter members are to-day scattered here and there; some are gone to

the "undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns"; but new ones filled the broken ranks, and this little group of real disciples are, at the end of twenty-six years, still carrying on; and the class is conducted by one of its first members, then a coal miner and labour organizer, who is now, and has been for a long time, one of the best informed Shakespearians in the Province. He is now seventy years of age, and but recently he told me that no one could estimate the pleasure and profit the new world opened to him a quarter of a century back.

Despite the fact that man is a social animal and does not live to himself alone, it is nevertheless true that he spends most of his time with the creations of his own mind. They make good company or bad, according to their character. They are often fashioned in our idle hours, and it is well that our models be obtained from minds of surpassing genius and recognized as such by the common consensus of mankind. For myself, and probably many others similarly placed, Shakespeare has widened our outlook, broadened our sympathies and increased our tolerance, respect and forbearance for the opinions, rights and eccentricities of the vast multitude of men and women, who through sunshine and storm move with ourselves along the road on what we believe to be our journey to immortality. We learned that few, if any, individuals are wholly bad, and that finding the better elements may be a pleasant and profitable exercise. In a busy professional life, I have found that even my necessarily limited acquaintance with this Master Mind of human nature has enabled me to understand human character and individual eccentricities. This has served me well in the practice of a calling that, by its very nature, must ever remain as much of an art as a science, because there are more things both of Heaven and of Earth in the psychic composition of the human unit than chemistry may explain or the keenest laboratory research uncover.

What the Right Hon. Stanley Baldwin says in his fine address, "The Classics and the Plain Man", may with an equal measure of significance be quoted here:

So far as I have a sense of proportion, it has helped me to assess the personal equation of the individuals, distinguished and undistinguished, who formed the House of Commons. So far as I have acquired a standard of values, it has helped me to estimate speech and the written word, and has saved me many a time from bowing to the idols of the market-place. So far as I have had respect for the truth of words, I have been helped to detect the fallacy lurking in the tropical growth of oratory, and I have endeavoured to use a speech plain and unambiguous.