

THE KNOCKING AT THE GATE.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE DRAMATIC IMPRESSIVENESS OF RELIGIOUS RITUAL.

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AMONG the few writings which once read are never forgotten, must surely be included that remarkable little paper of De Quincey's—*On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth*. The very subject of the essay, indicating as it does the recognition of a subtle dramatic device of singular psychological import, is proof of rare discernment, and if De Quincey had done nothing more than print the words upon a blank page he would even thus have strongly appealed to the imagination and convinced us of his sympathetic understanding of Shakespeare's genius.

Of such absorbing human interest is the human problem thus presented by De Quincey that almost breathlessly we follow the ingeniously woven argument, and as the conclusion is reached, and we come upon the final magical apostrophe,—“O mighty poet! thy works are not as those of other men,”—we recall ourselves as from a day-dream with a pleasing shock not unlike the very experience which De Quincey has been analysing for us,—that singular tremor which seizes us when we hear the knocking at the gate of the Castle of Inverness.

The reader of De Quincey will recall how he interprets the knocking at the gate as the poet's device for making known that the pulses of life, after the awful parenthesis of the murder, are beginning to beat again, and the goings-on of the world in which we live have been reëstablished. “All action is best expounded by reaction.” It is this resumption of the ordinary course of the world that makes the knocking at the gate so impressive. And De Quincey felicitously instances the case of a wife, daughter, or sister in a fainting fit where the most affecting moment in the spectacle is that in

will confess, notwithstanding the Puritan in him, to a feeling of awesomeness as the jangle of the bell succeeds with such startling effect to the blare of the tumultuous organ, the majestic chanting of the choir, or it may be but the solitary intonations of the celebrant. And when on the occasion of some high feast of the Church, at the compelling sound of the bell a great congregation stirs and then hushes to silence upon bended knees, and to silence still more profound as again and yet again the tinkling sound is heard, who can deny that after the stoutest opponent of the ritualistic has been heard, something of singular import still remains by which the looker-on is strangely impressed. One cannot be greatly surprised that the Sacrifice of the mass, professedly an *opus operatum*, and the direct antithesis of the personal offering of the devout Protestant, has proved itself powerful enough to capture the allegiance of a Newman not less than the humblest peasants of the Campana. One cannot but acknowledge the profound knowledge of, and deference to, human instincts that the ceremony reveals. For it is dramatic and the human craving for the dramatic is deep and abiding. It satisfies the doubts of reason by permitting a symbolic interpretation, and equally it satisfies those who easily incline their souls to mystery. With a ritual art that is the inheritance of centuries tested by experiment at every point and jealously preserved by authority, the Kyrie eleison, the Gloria in Excelsis, Credo and Sanctus, each an utterance of high spiritual order, and equally impressive, by reason of their dignified language, whether the music be the plain chant of St. Gregory or the richer harmonies of later days, succeed each other. These and every ordinance of the rubric, as the service proceeds, portend some approaching climax,—the repeated bloodless sacrifice of the Lord of Glory upon the consecrated altar. It is not difficult to see that upon those who believe that the great transformation is about to take place as an actual physical miracle, the impression must be stupendous, and that even those who regard it as a purely symbolical representation of the Redemption must be deeply touched. But suddenly, suddenly even to those familiar with the mass, in the midst of the contemplations engendered by this lofty drama, there comes a tone unlike anything yet heard. Conceivably, the organ or some other instrument of music might here be introduced to announce the approaching climax, but for a subtle but important reason the bell and the bell alone,—such a one as is easily rung by hand,—is preferred. The reason is that a tone distinctly differing in quality from all that have hitherto been heard, and yet which is

familiar enough to be recognised instantly and even unconsciously as a purely human and commonly secular implement, is required to create a sense of and to accentuate the immense contrast between things of eternal moment and the things of every day. Once more action is best expounded by reaction. By this simple device the mind is sharply recalled from the heights to which it has been led. Just as the knocking at the gate in Macbeth, by indicating as it does that the normal currents of life are again beginning to flow, deeply impresses the mind with the awfulness of the unseen tragedy, so the ringing of the Sanctus bell at the elevation of the host, calls the mind back to earth, intensifies the sense of mystery, and makes faith easily victorious over reason.