THE KNOCKING AT THE GATE.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE DRAMATIC IMPRESSIVE-NESS 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

which "a sigh and a stirring announce the recommencement of suspended life." We can easily conceive that Shakespeare might have suggested the mere return to normal life after the rolling away of the murder scene by other means than this knocking at the gate;—by the porter, for instance (who in his contrasted character of clownish but sweet innocence also contributes in a subtle way to the effect of the scene), soliloquising in some other strain than grumbling at his disturbed slumbers, or by the entrance of Macduff and Lenox without knocking as is the usual vogue upon the stage. But it is manifest, I think, that something peculiar and even awesome attaches to mere knocking, especially if it be unexpectedly heard. All sudden noises are more or less perturbing at night, although they seldom if ever create annoyance or resentment; they always challenge our attention and arouse our curiosity or our fears.

"Those damp, black, dead Nights in the Tower; . . . Toll of a bell, Stroke of a clock, the scurrying of a rat Affrighted me and then delighted me, For there was life."

A friend of mine declares that a knock never comes to the door of his study, even if it prove to be but the housemaid with some trivial message, without his experiencing a momentary trepidation; and he can distinctly recall the sensation almost at any time, by himself rapping on his own desk or table. It is most vivid, however, when he is thus interrupted in some cogitation.

Beethoven, who knew the human soul well, and the entire gamut of its emotions, felt doubtless the very thrill that moves the play-goers listening to the knocking of Macduff and Lenox, when he wrote the opening bars of the Fifth Symphony:



The knocking of Fate,—the riddle of life, the eternal question of the Sphinx—thus do the interpreters variously read the abrupt challenging phrase that the master has so wonderfully developed and expounded in that great poem of music.

It may seem a far cry from the knocking at the gate in the second act of Macbeth to the ringing of the Sanctus bell in the Roman Catholic mass, but these two sounds are clearly in the same category. And who that recalls his first hearing of the latter but

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, 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.