

SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES.

(BY PROFESSOR PANCHANAN MITRA, M. A.)

I. *Early imitations.*

It is seldom recognised that it is not the 'mystic, wonderful' that counts, the novelty, originality that comes to stay and so the greatest masters have always been the best imitators. For their task is more like resonant recorders to reverberate and voice the most delicate vibrations of their nation and civilisation and to provide permanent habitation and a name to what would otherwise have been lost in the space. So as the man is the product of the 'moment,' the 'milieu' itself can live only through 'the man.' And such a one alone can we call with Napoleon '*Voilà ! un homme*'—behold ! a man,—be he a Válmiki of Post-Vedic Hinduism, a Homer of heroic Hellenism, a Shakespeare of English nationalism or a Goethe of aesthetic 'Europeanism.'

So, however much we may talk of the 'sources' of Shakespeare as being not the glittering gems as they shine in the dramatist's page, but wretched little worms crawling painfully away, there is no denying that the 'originals of the plot' of almost all his dramas are always there. Thus, what would our oft-called 'unlettered Muse' (1) do but begin his novitiate as a learned man of letters imitating and emulating the fashionable classics of the day and trying to 'shake the scene' by novelty of imagination and originality of conception ? The result is we have almost full 'occult projections' of the Latin Plautus in the first comedy of incidents and errors and of 'Euphues Lyly' in the next two comedies of illusions of love's labours and midsummer dreams. Thus, at the start, the Plautan confusion of identities is carried on in what we are tempted to call the Mark Twainian fashion, only, as some critic has happily suggested, to make improbabilities more improbable. And then the fresh-blooded hunt for 'something novel, something new' gives us a three-days' wonder, an entirely original plot though much of the love's labours lost on plot-artifice would have been better bestowed on individualisation and character-

development. But there is always a fashion in this originality, a method in these maiden meditations fancy-free and thus the minor episodes always smell of the Court 'Lyly' or the people's 'Greene'—all the more curious in one who made a 'golden legacy shine no better than the dross' with the minor parts of a Jacques or a Touchstone. Thus the self-revocation of the Prince and the three Lords keeps in view the confession of the Nymphs in Galathea* while the dream-apology as well as Puck and Oberon come after a careful hunting of the records of Lyly and Greene as the idea of the twins came perhaps from Amphitryon. So what with their artistic laboriousness and flashy splendour, these plays stand as a class apart perhaps to satisfy such critical tastes as prefer the Samson Agonistes to Paradise Lost.

Then again the Shakespeare of these Plays is not as we would know him later on, and figures only as a good plodding artist of the common run beside the future free and self-secure genius giving us his unblotted thousands. In fact, with all respect to the shade of Dowden, we are forced to admit that Lope's Labours Lost is no nearer to the Twelfth Night or As You Like It than Sheridan is to Shakespeare. For the Comedy of Errors where he overcrowds the canvas of the lack-plot Plautus only shews what a great Terentian he should have been and the 'homœopathic' treatment of Holofernes and Armado shows him on the path of a Jonsonian comedy of 'humour.' But while an 'Every Man in His Humour' develops and flowers straightway into a Bartholomew Fair by practice and experience alone—can any such direct development be discerned in Shakespeare? Though as a man cannot but walk on his own shadow, there are unmistakable Shakespearean touches even in the first plays—they are so few and divergent, that the conclusion almost forcess itself on us that the great dramatist developed only by bye-paths. The reason is not far to seek. He had no clear-cut scheme of his own and the only thing he cared for was going straight to the heart. Herein lay his unique greatness and strength. Thus while a Thackeray or a Ben Jonson is after

*A drama by Lyly.

'hunting the traffles' and crying down the follies from the start to the finish, our 'Johannes factotum' though the sweetest child of fancy was perhaps even innocent of the canon 'that a comedy is to do good to us through laughter.'

[(To be continued)]

SMILES AS AN ESSAYIST.

After the perusal of the master-pieces of Smiles, we are impressed with his vast knowledge of facts and details of all the common writers. Smiles's pen is pregnant with thoughtful details of events of the past as well as of the present age. He vividly and at the same time in a lucid and easy style gives us the lives of all great men in any department whatsoever. His "SELF-HELP" and "CHARACTER" bear testimony to the above statement. The general characteristics of his writing are simplicity and instructiveness and the examples of actual biographies of great men. He is always content with examples and not with precepts. "Example" he says "is one of the most potent of instructors, though it teaches without a tongue." His watchword is perseverance, diligence, duty to parents, family thrift and such-like everyday qualities which are of vital importance. His 'SELF-HELP' which begins with the universal proverb—"Heaven helps those who help themselves" is a great testimony to his belief in Providence and to his faith in diligence.

One of the special points which the present writer has been able to pick out from the book referred to after going through it not less than two dozen times is that the book is filled with examples of those great men who have succeeded not at the first chance but by repeated trials. He on one occasion quotes the observation of one of the greatest of the political geniuses—Mr. Fox. The passage runs as follows:—"It is all very well to tell me that a young man has distinguished himself by a brilliant first speech. He may go on or he may be satisfied with his first triumph but show me a young man