

DIALOGUE.

SCENE is in a chamber, in the upper story of a city boarding house. The room is small but neat and furnished with some taste. There are books, a few flowers, even a chamber organ. On the wall hangs a fine engraving from one of Dominichino's pictures. The curtain is drawn up, and shows the moonlight falling on the roofs and chimnies of the city and the distant water, on whose bridges threads of light burn dully.

To Aglauron enter Laurie. A kindly greeting having been interchanged,

Laurie. It is a late hour, I confess, for a visit, but coming home I happened to see the light from your window, and the remembrance of our pleasant evenings here in other days came so strongly over me, that I could not help trying the door.

Aglauron. I do not now see you here so often, that I could afford to reject your visits at any hour.

L. (Seating himself, looks round for a moment with an expression of some sadness.) All here looks the same, your fire burns bright, the moonlight I see you like to have come in as formerly, and we, — we are not changed, Aglauron?

A. I am not.

L. Not towards me?

A. You have elected other associates, as better pleasing or more useful to you than I. Our intercourse no longer ministers to my thoughts, to my hopes. To think of you with that habitual affection, with that lively interest I once did, would be as if the mutilated soldier should fix his eyes constantly on the empty sleeve of his coat. My right hand being taken from me, I use my left.

L. You speak coldly, Aglauron; you cannot doubt that my friendship for you is the same as ever.

A. You should not reproach me for speaking coldly. You have driven me to subdue my feelings by reason, and the tone of reason seems cold because it is calm.

You say your friendship is the same. Your thoughts of your friend are the same, your feelings towards him are not. Your feelings flow now in other channels.

L. Am I to blame for that?

A. Surely not. No one is to blame; if either were so, it would be I, for not possessing more varied powers to satisfy the variations and expansions of your nature.

L. But have I not seemed heartless to you at times?

A. In the moment, perhaps, but quiet though always showed me the difference between heartlessness and the want of a deep heart.

Nor do I think this will eventually be denied you. You are generous, you love truth. Time will make you less restless, because less bent upon yourself, will give depth and steadfastness to that glowing heart. Tenderness will then come of itself. You will take upon you the bonds of friendship less easily and knit them firmer.

L. And you will then receive me?

A. I or some other; it matters not.

L. Ah! you have become indifferent to me.

A. What would you have? That gentle trust, which seems to itself immortal, cannot be given twice. What is sweet and flower-like in the mind is very timid, and can only be tempted out by the

wooning breeze and infinite promise of spring. Those flowers, once touches by a cold wind, will not revive again.

L. But their germs lie in the earth.

A. Yes, to await a new spring! But this conversation is profitless. Words can neither conceal, nor make up for the want of flowing love. I do not blame you, Laurie, but I cannot afford to love you as I have done any more, nor would it avail to either of us, if I would. Seek elsewhere what you can no longer duly prize from me. Let us not seek to raise the dead from their tombs, but cherish rather the innocent children of to-day.

L. But I cannot be happy unless there is a perfectly good understanding between us.

A. That, indeed, we ought to have. I feel the power of understanding your course, whether it bend my way or not. I need not communication from you, or personal relation to do that,

“Have I the human kernel first examined,
Then I know, too, the future will and action.”

I have known you too deeply to misjudge you, in the long run.

L. Yet you have been tempted to think me heartless.

A. For the moment only; have I not said it? Thought always convinced me that I could not have been so shallow as to barter heart for anything but heart. I only, by the bold play natural to me, led you to stake too high for your present income. I do not demand the forfeit on the friendly game. Do you understand me?

L. No, I do not understand being both friendly and cold.

A. Thou wilt, when thou shalt have lent as well as borrowed.

I can bring forward on this subject gospel independent of our own experience. The poets, as usual, have thought out the subject for their age. And it is an age where the compels and subtle workings of its spirit make it not easy for the immortal band, the sacred band of equal friends, to be formed into phalanx, or march with equal step in any form.

Soon after I had begun to read some lines of our horoscope, I found this poem in Wordsworth, which seemed to link into meaning many sounds that were vibrating around me.

A COMPLAINT.

There *is* a change, and I am poor;
Your Love hath been, nor long ago,
A Fountain at my fond Heart's door,
Whose only business was to flow;
And flow it did; not taking heed
Of its own bounty, or my need.

What happy moments did I count,
Blest was I then all bliss above;
Now, for this consecrated Fount
Of murmuring, sparkling, living love,
What have I? shall I dare to tell?
A comfortless and hidden WELL.

A Well of love, it may be deep,
 I truth it is, and never dry;
 What matter? if the Waters sleep
 In silence and obscurity,
 Such change, and at the very door
 Of my fond heart, hath made me poor.

This, at the time, seemed unanswerable; yet, afterwards, I found among the writings of Coleridge what may serve as a sufficient answer.

A SOLILOQUY.

Unchanged within to see all changed without,
 Is a blank lot and hard to bear, no doubt.
 Yet why at other's wanings shouldst thou fret?
 Then only might'st thou feel a just regret,
 Hadst thou withheld thy love, or hid thy light
 In selfish forethought of neglect and slight,
 O wiselier, then, from feeble yearnings freed,
While, and on whom, thou mayst, shine on! nor heed
 Whether the object by reflected light
 Return thy radiance or absorb it quite;
 And though thou notest from thy safe recess
 Old Friends burn dim, like lamps in noisome air,
 Love them for what they *are*; nor love them less,
 Because to *thee* they are not what they *were*.

L. Do you expect to be able permanently to abide by such solace?

A. I do not expect so Olympian a calmness, that at first, when the chain of intercourse is broken, when confidence is dismayed and thought driven back upon its source, I shall not feel a transient pang, even a shame, as when

“The sacred secret hath flown out of us,
 And the heart been broken open by deep care.”

The wave receding, leaves the strand for the moment forlorn, and weed-bestrown.

L. And is there no help for this? Is there not a pride, a prudence, identical with self-respect, that could preserve us from such mistakes?

A. if you can show me one that is not selfish forethought of neglect or slight, I would wear it and recommend it as the desired amulet. As yet, I know no pride, no prudence except love of truth.

Would a prudence be desirably that should have hindered our intimacy?

L. Ah no! it was happy, it was rich.

A. Very well then, let us drink the bitter with as good a grace as the sweet, and for to-night talk no more of ourselves.

L. To talk then of those other, better selves, the poets. I can well understand that Coleridge should have drunk so deeply as he did of this bitter-sweet. His nature was ardent, intense, variable

in its workings, one of tides, crises, fermentations. He was the flint from which the spark must be struck by violent collision. His life was a mass in the midst of which fire glowed, but needed time to transfuse it, as his heavenly eyes glowed amid such heavy features. The habit of taking opium was but an outward expression of the transports and depressions to which he was inly prone. In him glided up in the silence, equally vivid, the Christabel, the Geraldine. Through his various mind

“Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea,”

He was one of those with whom

“The meteor offspring of the brain
Unnourished wane,
Faith asks her daily bread,
And fancy must be fed.”

And when this was denied,

“Came a restless state, ’twist yea and nay,
His faith was fixed, his heart all ebb and flow;
Or like a bark, in some half-sheltered bay,
Above its anchor driving to and fro.”

Thus we cannot wonder that he, with all his vast mental resources and noble aims, should have been the bard elect to sing of Dejection, and that the pages of his prose works should be blistered by more painful records of personal and social experiences, than we find in almost any from a mind able to invoke the aid of divine philosophy, a mind touched by humble piety. But Wordsworth, who so early knew and sought, and found the life, and the work he wanted, whose wide and equable thought flows on like a river through the plain, whose verse seemed to come daily like the dew to rest upon the flowers of home affections, we should think he might always have been with his friend, as he described two who has grown up together,

“Each other’s advocate, each other’s stay,
And strangers to content, if long apart,
Or more divided than a sportive pair
Of sea-fowl, conscious both that they are hovering
Within the eddy of a common blast,
Or hidden only by the concave depth
Of neighboring billows from each other’s sight.”

And that we should not find in him traces of the sort of wound, nor the tone of deep human melancholy that we find in this Complaint, and in the sonnet, “Why art thou silent.”

A. I do not remember that.

L. It is in the last published volume of his poems, though probably written many years before.

“Why art thou silent? Is thy love a plant
 Of such weak fibre that the treacherous air
 Of absence withers what was once so fair?
 Is there no debt to pay, no boon to grant?
 Yet have my thoughts for thee been vigilant,
 (As would my deeds have been) with hourly care,
 The mind’s least generous wish a mendicant
 For nought but what thy happiness could spare.
 Speak, though this soft warm heart, once free to hold
 A thousand tender pleasures, thine and mine,
 Be left more desolate, more dreary cold,
 Than a forsaken bird’s nest filled with snow,
 Mid its own bush of leafless eglantine;
 Speak, that mu torturing doubts their end may know.”

A. That is indeed the most pathetic description of the speechless palsy that precedes the death of love.

“Is there no debt to pay, no boon to gran?”

But Laurie, how could you ever fancy a mind of poetic sensibility would be a stranger to this sort of sadness?

What signifies the security of a man’s own position and choice? The peace and brightness of his own lot? If he has this intelligent sensibility can he fail to perceive the throb that agitates the bosom of all nature, or can his own fail to respond to it?

In the eye of man, or in the sunset clouds, from the sobs of literature, or those of the half-spent tempest, can he fail to read the secrets of fate and time, of an over-credulous hope, a too much bewailed disappointment? Will not a very slight hint convey to the mind in which the nobler faculties are at all developed, a sense of the earthquakes which may in a moment upheave his vineyard and whelm his cottage beneath rivers of fire. Can the poet at any time, like the stupid rich man, say to his soul, “Eat, drink, and be merry.” No, he must ever say to his fellow man, as Menelaus to his kingly brother,

“Shall my affairs
 Go pleasantly while thine are full of woe.”

Oh never could Wordsworth fail beside his peaceful lake to know the tempests of the ocean. Beside, to an equable temperament sorrow seems sadder than it really is, for such know less of the pleasures of resistance.

It needs not that one of deeply thoughtful mind be passionate, to divine all the secrets of passion. Thought is a bee that cannot miss these flowers.

Think you that is Hamlet had held exactly the position best fitted to his nature, had his thought become acts, without any violent willing of his own, had a great people paid life-long homage to his design, had he never detected the baseness of his mother, nor found cause to suspect the untimely fate of his father, had that “rose of May, the sweet Ophelia,” bloomed safely at his side, and Horatio always been near, with his understanding mind and spotless hands, do you think all this could have preserved Hamlet from the astounding discovery that

“A man may smile, and smile, and be a villain?”

That line, once written on his tables, would have required the commentary of many years for its explanation.

L. He was one adapted by nature to “consider too curiously,” for his own peace.

A. All thoughtful minds are so.

L. All geniuses have not been sad.

A. So far as they are artistic, merely, they differ not from instinctive, practical characters, they find relief in work. But so far as they tend to evolve thought, rather than to recreate the forms of things, they suffer again and again the pain of death, because they open the gate to the next, the higher realm of being. Shakspeare knew both, the joy of creation, the deep pang of knowledge, and this last he expressed in Hamlet with a force that vibrates almost to the centre of things.

L. It is marvelous, indeed, to hear the beautiful young prince catalogue

“The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, * * * *
* * The whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
The pangs of despised love, * * *
* * * * The spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,”

To thee, Hamlet, so complete a nature,

“The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The noble and most sovereign reason,
The unmatched form and feature of blown youth,”

Could such things come so near? Who then shall hope a refuge, except through inborn stupidity or perfected faith?

A. Ay, well might he call his head a globe! It was fitted to comprehend all that makes up that “quintessence of dust, how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties; 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!” yet to him, only a quintessence of dust!

L. And this world only “a sterile promontory.”

A. Strange, that when from it one can look abroad into the ocean, its barrenness should be so depressing. But man seems to need some shelter, both from wind and rain.

L. Could he not have found this in the love of Ophelia?

A. Probably not, since that love had so little power to disenchant the gloom of this period. She was to him a flower to wear in his bosom, a child to play the lute at his feet. We see the charm of her innocence, her soft credulity, as she answers her brother,

“No more, but so?”

The exquisite grace of her whole being in the two lines

“And I of ladies most dejected and wretched
That sucked the honey of his music vows.”

She cannot be made to misunderstand him; his rude wildness crushed, but cannot deceive her heart. She has no answer to his outbreaks but

“O help him, you sweet Heavens!”

But, lovely as she was, and loved by him, this love could have been only the ornament, not, in any wise, the food of his life. The moment he is left alone, his thoughts revert to universal topics; it was the constitution of his mind, no personal relation could have availed it, except in the way of suggestion. He could not have been absorbed in the present moment. Still it would have been

“Heaven and earth!
Must I remember?”

L. Have you been reading the play of late?

A. yes; hearing Macready, one or two points struck me that have not before, and I was inclined to try for my thousandth harvest from a new study of it.

Macready gave its just emphasis to the climax —

“I’ll call thee Hamlet,
King, father, royal Dane,”

So unlike in its order to what would have been in any other mind, as also to the two expressions in the speech so delicately characteristic,

“The glimpses of the moon.”

and

“With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls.”

I think I have in myself improved, that I feel more than ever what Macready does not, the deep calmness, always apparent beneath the delicate variations of this soul’s atmosphere.

“The readiness is all.”

This religion from the very first harmonizes all these thrilling notes and the sweet bells, even when most jangled out of tune, suggest all their silenced melody.

From Hamlet I turned to Timon and Lear; the transition was natural yet surprising, from the indifference and sadness of the heaven-craving soul to the misanthropy of the disappointed affections and wounded trust. Hamlet would well have understood them both, yet what a firmament of spheres lies between his “pangs of despised love,” and the anguish of Lear.

“O Regan, Goneril!

Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave you all —
O that way madness lies, let me shun that,
No more of that.”

* * * *

“I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, called you children.”

It rends the heart only; no grief would be possible from a Hamlet, which would not, at the same time, exalt the soul.

The outraged heart of Timon takes refuge at once in action, in curses, and bitter deeds. It needs to be relieved by the native baseness of Apemantus’s misanthropy, baseness of a soul that never knew how to trust, to make it dignified in our eyes. Timon, estranged from men, could only die; yet the least shade of wrong in this heaven-ruled world would have occasioned Hamlet a deeper pain than Timon was capable of divining. Yet Hamlet could not for a moment have been so deceived as to fancy man worthless, because many men were; he knew *himself* too well, to feel the surprise of Timon when his steward proved true.

“Let me behold

Thy face. — Surely this man was born of woman. —
Forgive my general and exceptless rashness,
You perpetual sober gods! I do proclaim
One honest man.”

He does not deserve a friend that could draw higher inferences from his story than the steward does.

“Poor honest lord, brought low by his own heart,
Undone by goodness! Strange, unusual blood,
When man’s worst sin is, he does too much good!
Who then dares to be half so kind again?
For bounty that makes gods, doth still mar men.”

Timon tastes the dregs of the cup. He persuades himself that he does not believe even in himself.

“His semblable, even himself, Timon disdains.”

* * * *

“Who dares, who dares

In purity of manhood to stand up
And say *this man's flatterer*, if one be
So are they all.”

L. You seem to have fixed your mind, of late, on the subject of misanthropy!

A. I own that my thoughts have turned of late on that low form which despair assumes sometimes even with the well disposed. Yet see how inexcusable would it be in any of these beings. Hamlet is no misanthrope, but he has those excelling gifts, least likely to find due response from those around him. Yet he is felt, almost in his due sense, by two or three.

Lear has not only one faithful daughter, whom he knew not how to value, but a friend beside.

Timon is prized by the only persons to whom he was good, purely from kindness of nature, rather than the joy he expected from their gratitude and sympathy, his servants.

Tragedy is always a mistake, and the loneliness of the deepest thinker, the widest lover, ceases to be pathetic to us, so soon as the sun is high enough above the mountains.

Were I, despite the bright points so numerous in their history and the admonitions of my own conscience, inclined to despise my fellow men, I should have found abundant argument against it during this late study of Hamlet. In the streets, saloons, and lecture rooms, we continually hear comments so stupid, insolent, and shallow on great and beautiful works, that we are tempted to think that there is no Public for anything that is good; that a work of genius can appeal only to the fewest minds in any one age, and that the reputation now awarded to those of former times is never felt, but only traditional. Of Shakspeare, so vaunted a name, little wise or worthy had been written, perhaps nothing so adequate a Coleridge's comparison of him to the pine-apple; yet on reading Hamlet, his greatest work, we find there is not a pregnant sentence, scarce a word that men have not appreciated, have not used in myriad ways. Had we never read the play, we should find the whole of it from quotation and illustration familiar to us as air. That exquisite phraseology, so heavy with meaning, wrought out with such admirable minuteness, has become a part of literary diction, the stock of the literary bank; and what set criticism can tell like this fact how great was the work, and that men were worthy it should be addressed to them?

L. The moon looks in to tell her assent. See she has just got above that chimney. Just as this happy certainty has with you risen above the disgusts of the day.

A. She looks surprised as well as complacent.

L. She looks surprised to find me still here. I must say goodnight. My friend, good night.

A. Good night, and farewell.

L. You look as if it were for some time.

A. That rests with you. You will generally find me here, and always I think like-minded, if not of the same mind.

An ancient sage had all things deeply tried,
And, as result, thus his friends he cried,

“O friends, there are no friends.” And to this day
Thus twofold moves the strange magnetic sway,
Giving us love which love must take away.
Let not the soul for this distrust its right,
Knowing when changeful moons withdraw their light,
Then myriad stars, with promise not less pure,
New loves, new lives to patient hopes assure,
So long as laws that rule the spheres endure.

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