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CHARLES LAMB

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"Syllables govern the World."—JOHN SELDEN

TALES FROM SHAKSPEARE

Designed for the Use of Young People

BY

CHARLES LAMB

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY THE

REV. HUGH REGINALD HAWEIS, M.A.

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INTRODUCTION

BY THE REV. H. R. HAWEIS, M.A.

HE must indeed be a bold man who could hope to say anything fresh about Shakspeare. It is no news indeed that "Pericles" and "Timon of Athens," although included in Lamb's Tales, are probably not by Shakspeare. The great dramatist's name, like those of David, Solomon, Æsop, or Homer, covers a certain amount of "school" literature; but on the whole not so much as might have been expected, unless, with some critics, we suppose that the "Divine Williams," as the enthusiastic Frenchman called him, is a mere figure-head, and that in reality Lord Bacon wrote all his plays, whilst the "bard that sleeps on Avon" was but an indifferent actor and a poor hack.

Archbishop Whately, in dealing with a question of Biblical criticism, has shown that the sort of destructive criticism employed to prove that Shakspeare's plays are not by Shakspeare, would be available to throw doubt on the historical existence of Napoleon Bonaparte. Certainly Shakspeare's stories are not his own—they

were culled from Italian romance, Scottish or English history, or popular fairy tales—indifferently. He wrote for the market as Raphael painted or Handel composed for the market, but beneath his touch the dross became gold, and whilst others may have written occasionally like him, and sometimes as well, both before and after him, yet time has done the great creative genius of Shakspeare justice. We enthrone the man who actually summed up in himself the most powerful intellectual imaginative and dramatic forces of the golden Elizabethan age, not only high above all his cotemporaries, but above every dramatist of modern times. There he sits, and no criticism is now likely to hurl him from his lofty pedestal.

It has always seemed to me singular that Charles Lamb, the exquisite essayist and fastidious literary connoisseur, should have thought it worth while to put Shakspeare into prose, but the enduring popularity of these "tales" proves that he knew what he was about, and that a large number of people who will not read poetry will devour a prose story.

Lamb has executed his task with an earnestness and grace characteristic of the enthusiast and the artist; and the fact that the tales "tell" so well in prose is one more proof of the excellence of Shakspeare's general outline.

H. R. HAWEIS.

February, 1886.

TALES FROM SHAKSPEARE.

ROMEO AND JULIET.

THE two chief families in Verona were the rich Capulets and the Montagues. There had been an old quarrel between these families, which was grown to such a height, and so deadly was the enmity between them, that it extended to the remotest kindred, to the followers and retainers of both sides, insomuch that a servant of the house of Montague could not meet a servant of the house of Capulet, nor a Capulet encounter with a Montague by chance, but fierce words and sometimes bloodshed ensued; and frequent were the brawls from such accidental meetings, which disturbed the happy quiet of Verona's estate.

Old lord Capulet made a great supper, to which many fair ladies and many noble guests were invited. All the admired beauties of Verona were present, and all comers were made welcome if they were not of the house of Montague. At this feast of Capulets, Rosaline, beloved of Romeo, son to the old lord Montague, was present; and though it was dangerous for a Montague to be seen in this assembly, yet Benvolio, a friend of Romeo, persuaded the young lord to go to this assembly in the disguise of a mask, that he might see his Rosaline, and seeing her, compare her with some choice beauties of Verona, who (he said) would make him think his swan a crow. Romeo had small faith in Benvolio's words; nevertheless, for the love of Rosaline he was persuaded to go. For Romeo was a sincere and passionate lover, and one that lost his sleep for love, and fled society to be alone, thinking on Rosaline, who disdained him, and never requited his love with the least show of courtesy or affection; and Benvolio wished to cure his friend of this love by showing him diversity of ladies and company. To this feast of Capulets then young Romeo with Benvolio and their friend Mercutio went masked. Old Capulet bid them welcome, and told them that ladies who had their toes unplugged with corns would dance with them. And the old man was light-hearted and merry, and said that he had worn a mask

when he was young, and could have told a whispering tale in a fair lady's ear. And they fell to dancing, and Romeo was suddenly struck with the exceeding beauty of a lady that danced there, who seemed to him to teach the torches to burn bright, and her beauty to show by night like a rich jewel worn by a blackamoor: beauty too rich for use, too dear for earth! like a snowy dove trooping with crows (he said), so richly did her beauty and perfections shine above the ladies her companions. While he uttered these praises, he was overheard by Tybalt, a nephew of lord Capulet, who knew him by his voice to be Romeo. And this Tybalt, being of a fiery and passionate temper, could not endure that a Montague should come under cover of a mask, to sleet and scorn (as he said) at their solemnities. And he stormed and raged exceedingly, and would have struck young Romeo dead. But his uncle, the old lord Capulet, would not suffer him to do any injury at that time, both out of respect to his guests, and because Romeo had borne himself like a gentleman, and all tongues in Verona bragged of him to be a virtuous and well-governed youth. Tybalt, forced to be patient against his will, restrained himself, but swore that this vile Montague should at another time dearly pay for his intrusion.

The dancing being done, Romeo watched the place where the lady stood; and under favour of his masking habit, which might seem to excuse in part the liberty, he presumed in the gentlest manner to take her by the hand, calling it a shrine, which if he profaned by touching it, he was a blushing pilgrim, and would kiss it for atonement. "Good pilgrim," answered the lady, "your devotion shows by far too mannerly and too courtly: saints have hands, which pilgrims may touch, but kiss not." "Have not saints lips, and pilgrims too?" said Romeo. "Ay," said the lady, "lips which they must use in prayer." "O then, my dear saint," said Romeo, "hear my prayer and grant it, lest I despair." In such like allusions and loving conceits they were engaged, when the lady was called away to her mother. And Romeo inquiring who her mother was, discovered that the lady whose peerless beauty he was so much struck with, was young Juliet, daughter and heir to the lord Capulet, the great enemy of the Montagues; and that he had unknowingly engaged his heart to his foe. This troubled him, but it could not dissuade him from loving. As little rest had Juliet, when she found that the gentleman that she had been talking with was Romeo and a Montague, for she had been suddenly smit with the same hasty and inconsiderate passion for Romeo, which he had conceived for her; and a prodigious birth of love it seemed to her, that she must love her enemy, and that her affections should settle there, where family considerations should induce her chiefly to hate.

It being midnight, Romeo with his companions departed; but they soon missed him, for unable to stay away from the house where he had left his heart, he leaped the wall of an orchard which was at the back of Juliet's house. Here he had not remained long, ruminating on his new love, when

Juliet appeared above at a window, through which her exceeding beauty seemed to break like the light of the sun in the east; and the moon, which shone in the orchard with a faint light, appeared to Romeo as if sick and pale with grief at the superior lustre of this new sun. And she leaning her hand upon her cheek, he passionately wished himself a glove upon that hand, that he might touch her cheek. She all this while thinking herself alone, fetched a deep sigh, and exclaimed, "Ah me!" Romeo was enraptured to hear her speak, and said softly, unheard by her, "O speak again, bright angel, for such you appear, being over my head, like a winged messenger from heaven whom mortals fall back to gaze upon." She, unconscious of being overheard, and full of the new passion which that night's adventure had given birth to, called upon her lover by name (whom she supposed absent): "O Romeo, Romeo!" said she, "wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father, and refuse thy name, for my sake; or if thou wilt not, be but my sworn love, and I no longer will be a Capulet." At this loving word Romeo could no longer refrain, but taking up the dialogue as if her words had been addressed to him personally, and not merely in fancy, he bade her call him Love, or by whatever other name she pleased, for he was no longer Romeo, if that name was displeasing to her. Juliet, alarmed to hear a man's voice in the garden, did not at first know who it was, that by favour of the night and darkness had thus stumbled upon the discovery of her secret; but when he spoke again, though her ears had not yet drunk a hundred words of that tongue's uttering, yet so nice is a lover's hearing, that she immediately knew him to be young Romeo. "How came you into this place," said Juliet, "and by whose direction?" "Love directed me," answered Romeo: "I am no pilot, yet wert thou as far apart from me, as that vast shore which is washed with the farthest sea, I should adventure for such merchandise." A crimson blush came over the face of Juliet, yet unseen by Romeo by reason of the night, when she reflected upon the discovery which she had made, yet not meaning to make it, of her love to Romeo. She would fain have recalled her words, but that was impossible. Romeo had heard from her own tongue, when she did not dream that he was near her, a confession of her love. So with an honest frankness, which the novelty of her situation excused, she confirmed the truth of what he had before heard, and addressing him by the name of *fair Montague* (love can sweeten a sour name), she begged him not to impute her easy yielding to levity or an unworthy mind, but that he must lay the fault of it (if it were a fault) upon the accident of the night which had so strangely discovered her thoughts.

Romeo was beginning to call the heavens to witness that nothing was farther from his thoughts than to impute a shadow of dishonour to such an honoured lady, when she stopped him, begged him not to swear: for although she joyed in him, yet she had no joy of that night's contract; it was too rash, too unadvised, too sudden. From this loving conference she