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MACBETH, PP. 1-111, EDITED
BY W. W. LIVENGOOD**

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MACBETH

EDITED BY

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, SHORTRIDGE HIGH SCHOOL
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INTRODUCTION.

THE tragedy of "Macbeth"—one of the grandest and most wonderful creations of Shakespeare's genius—appeared in print for the first time in the folio of 1623, the earliest published collection of the dramatist's plays.

The plot is derived from two independent and wholly unrelated stories in Holinshed's "Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland" (1587), a curious collection of superstitious legends, unreliable traditions, and a very few facts. The play is in no sense historical, though Duncan, King of Scotland, was treacherously murdered in 1040, and Macbeth was his assassin and successor.

The drama may be thus briefly outlined: Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, kinsman of Duncan, King of Scotland, achieves a signal victory over Norway's king, Sweno, who, embracing the opportunity afforded by a rebellion in Scotland headed by the Thane of Cawdor, had invaded the kingdom. Duncan decrees the death of the traitorous thane, whose title he confers on Macbeth, and dispatches two nobles of the court to advise Macbeth of his new "addition" and advancement.

In the mean time, Macbeth and Banquo, crossing a blasted heath, are suddenly confronted by three witches, or "weird sisters," who successively hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane

of Cawdor, and as one who shall be king hereafter ; greet Banquo as "lesser than Macbeth, and greater," that shall be the ancestor of kings, though not a king himself ; and then vanish as suddenly as they had appeared. The messengers from the King then arrive, and salute Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor, assuring him that greater honors await him at the hand of his royal master.

The first prophetic greeting of the witches thus quickly verified, their tempting prediction of regal honors inflames the ambitious desires of Macbeth ; and, being further incited by the inordinate and unscrupulous ambition of his wife, the two contrive the death of their sovereign. An occasion offers when Duncan—with his sons Malcolm and Donalbain, and their retinue—is a guest at their castle ; and they proceed to execute their bloody and perfidious purpose. Lady Macbeth having so drugged the drink of the guardians of Duncan's chamber that they lie in swinish sleep, Macbeth enters the room at dead of night, and with the daggers of the attendants stabs the sleeping king. Dazed by the atrocity of his own act, Macbeth steals from the chamber with the bloody weapons in his hands. He is met by his wife, who seizes the daggers, and replaces them by the side of the snoring grooms, whose faces she smears with blood ; for, as she tells her husband, it must appear that the murder was done by these besotted servants. Malcolm suspects treachery, and flies to England, while Donalbain speeds to Ireland.

Macbeth, the next in succession, assumes the crown ; but his guilty conscience gives him little rest. He suspects and fears all around him. Especially is Banquo the object of his dread and jealous hatred ; and he has Banquo waylaid and killed. Still harassed by "horrible imaginings," Macbeth seeks the weird sisters, and demands that they unfold to him his future fate ; where-

upon three apparitions present themselves to his disordered mind. One warns him to beware of Macduff; the second urges him to be bold and resolute, as none of woman born has power to harm him; and the third assures him he shall never be vanquished till Birnam Wood shall come to Dunsinane. Then Banquo's ghost appears with the semblances of eight kings, the long line of Banquo's descendants, future successors to the crown which Macbeth wears. Although his fear of Macduff is somewhat allayed by the utterances of the second apparition, in order to "make assurance doubly sure" Macbeth sends to Macduff's castle, and, failing to find him, has his wife and children put to death.

The opening of the fifth act is a sleepwalking scene, in which Lady Macbeth enters in her nightdress, holding a lighted taper in her hand, fast asleep, though her eyes are open, and entirely unconscious of her surroundings. Here, in the presence of her astounded physician and her waiting woman, she betrays in fitful mutterings and disconnected sentences the dread secret of the terrible crime in which she had participated. The death of Lady Macbeth, who, "as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands took off her life," occurs before the dénouement of the tragedy.

Macduff having joined Malcolm in England, they raise an army there, unite with a force of Scots already in arms to resist Macbeth, and prepare to besiege the usurper in his stronghold on Dunsinane Hill. As they pass Birnam Wood, Malcolm, in order to conceal the numbers of his force, commands that his followers cut branches from the trees, and that each soldier bear one before him on the march. An astonished sentinel on the walls reports to Macbeth in the castle that, looking towards Birnam, he saw the wood begin to move. Terrified by the announcement, Macbeth at once sallies out with his garrison, gives battle to the besiegers,

and meets Macduff, whom he would have avoided, but who challenges him to personal combat. Macbeth replies that it would be labor lost; that he bears a charmed life, invulnerable to the assaults of any man born of woman. Macduff then reveals the extraordinary circumstances of his birth, and demands that Macbeth fight, or yield. Though appalled by the disclosure, and cursing the "juggling fiends" who had deceived him, Macbeth does not yield, but with the courage of despair will fight to the last, and tells Macduff to do his worst. They encounter. Macbeth is slain; and Malcolm, the rightful heir to the crown, is proclaimed King of Scotland.

Professor Dowden ("Shakespeare") remarks of this tragedy: "While in 'Romeo and Juliet,' and in 'Hamlet,' we feel that Shakespeare now began and now left off, and refined upon or brooded over his thoughts, 'Macbeth' seems as if struck out at a heat, and imagined from first to last with unabated fervor. It is like a sketch by a great master, in which everything is executed with rapidity and power, and a subtlety of workmanship which has become instinctive. The theme of the drama is the gradual ruin, through yielding to evil within and evil without, of a man who, though from the first tainted by base and ambitious thoughts, yet possessed elements in his nature of possible honor and loyalty. The contrast between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, united by their affections, their fortunes, and their crime, is made to illustrate and light up the character of each. Macbeth has physical courage, but moral weakness, and is subject to excited imaginative fears. His faint and intermittent loyalty embarrasses him: he would have the gains of crime without its pains. But when once his hands are dyed in blood, he hardly cares to withdraw

them; and the same fears which had tended to hold him back from murder now urge him on to double and treble murders, until slaughter, almost reckless, becomes the habit of his reign. At last the gallant soldier of the opening of the play fights for his life with a wild and brutelike force. His whole existence has become joyless and loveless, and yet he clings to existence.

"Lady Macbeth is of a finer and more delicate nature. Having fixed her eye upon an end,—the attainment for her husband of Duncan's crown,—she accepts the inevitable means; she nerves herself for the terrible night's work by artificial stimulants; yet she cannot strike the sleeping King, who resembles her father. Having sustained her weaker husband, her own strength gives way; and in sleep, when her will cannot control her thoughts, she is piteously afflicted by the memory of one stain of blood upon her little hand. At last her thread of life snaps suddenly. Macbeth, whose affection for her was real, has sunk too far into the apathy of joyless crime to feel deeply her loss.

"Banquo, the loyal soldier, praying for restraint of evil thoughts, which enter his mind as they had entered that of Macbeth, but which work no evil there, is set over against Macbeth, as virtue is set over against disloyalty.

"The witches are the supernatural beings of terror, in harmony with Shakespeare's tragic period, as the fairies of the 'Midsummer-Night's Dream' are the supernatural beings of his days of fancy and frolic, and as Ariel is the supernatural genius of his later period. There is at once a grossness, a horrible reality about the witches, and a mystery and grandeur of evil influence."

"This tragedy," says Gervinus ("Shakespeare Commentaries," translation of F. E. Bunnett, London, 1875), "has ever been re-