HOURS IN A LIBRARY.

I.

MASSINGER.

In one of the best of his occasional essays, Kingsley held a brief for the plaintiffs in the old case of Puritans *versus* Playwrights. The litigation in which this case represents a minor issue has lasted for a period far exceeding that of the most pertinacious lawsuit, and is not likely to come to an end within any assignable limits of time. When the discussion is pressed home, it is seen to involve fundamentally different conceptions of human life and its purposes; and it can only cease when we have discovered the grounds of a permanent conciliation between the ethical and the æsthetic elements of human nature. The narrower controversy between the stage and the Church has itself a long history. It has left some curious marks upon English

literature. The prejudice which uttered itself through the Puritan Prynne was inherited, in a later generation, by the High-Churchmen Collier and William Law. The attack, it is true, may be ostensibly directed — as in Kingsley's essay—against the abuse of the stage rather than against the stage itself. Kingsley pays the usual tribute to Shakespeare whilst denouncing the whole literature of which Shakespeare's dramas are the most conspicuous product. But then, everybody always distinguishes in terms between the use and the abuse; and the line of demarcation generally turns out to be singularly fluctuating and uncertain. You can hardly demolish Beaumont and Fletcher without bringing down some of the outlying pinnacles, if not shaking the very foundations, of the temple sacred to Shakespeare.

It would be regrettable, could one stop to regret the one-sided and illogical construction of the human mind, that a fair judgment in such matters seems to require incompatible qualities. Your impartial critic or historian is generally a man who leaves out of account nothing but the essential. His impartiality means sympathy with the commonplace, and incapacity for understanding heroic faith and overpowering enthusiasm. He fancies that a man or a book can be judged by balancing a list of virtues and vices as if they were separate entities lying

side by side in a box, instead of different aspects of a vital force. On the other hand, the vivid imagination which restores dead bones to life makes its possessor a partisan in extinct quarrels, and as short-sighted and unfair a partisan as the original actors. Roundheads and Cavaliers have been dead these two centuries.

> Dumb are those names erewhile in battle loud ;
> Dreamfooted as the shadow of a cloud,
> They flit across the ear.

Yet few even amongst modern writers are capable of doing justice to both sides without first making both sides colourless. Hallam judges men in the throes of a revolution as though they were parties in a law-suit to be decided by precedents and parchments, and Mr. Carlyle cannot appreciate Cromwell's magnificent force of character without making him all but infallible and impeccable. Critics of the early drama are equally one-sided. The exquisite literary faculty of Charles Lamb revelled in detecting beauties which had been covered with the dust of oblivion during the reign of Pope. His appreciation was intensified by that charm of discovery which finds its typical utterance in Keats's famous sonnet. He was scarcely a more impartial judge of Fletcher or Ford than "Stout Cortes" of the new world revealed by his enterprise. We may willingly

defer to his judgment of the relative value of the writers whom he discusses, but we must qualify his judgment of their intrinsic excellence by the recollection that he speaks as a lover. To him and other thoroughgoing admirers of the old drama the Puritanical onslaught upon the stage presented itself as the advent of a gloomy superstition, ruthlessly stamping out all that was beautiful in art and literature. Kingsley, an admirable hater, could perceive only the opposite aspect of the phenomena. To him the Puritan protest appears as the voice of the enlightened conscience; the revolution means the troubling of the turbid waters at the descent of the angel; Prynne's "Histriomastix" is the blast of the trumpet at which the rotten and polluted walls of Jericho are to crumble into dust. The stage, which represented the tone of aristocratic society, rightfully perished with the order which it flattered. Courtiers had learnt to indulge in a cynical mockery of virtue, or to find an unholy attraction in the accumulation of extravagant horrors. The English drama, in short, was one of those evil growths which are fostered by deeply-seated social corruption, and are killed off by the breath of a purer air. That such phenomena occur at times is undeniable. Mr. Symonds has recently shown us in his history of the Renaissance, how the Italian literature,

to which our English dramatists owed so many suggestions, was the natural fruit of a society poisoned at the roots. Nor, when we have shaken off that spirit of slavish adulation in which modern antiquarians and critics have regarded the so-called Elizabethan dramatists, can we deny that there are symptoms of a similar mischief in their writings. Some of the most authoritative testimonials have a suspicious element. Praise has been lavished upon the most questionable characteristics of the old drama. Apologists have been found, not merely for its daring portrayal of human passion, but for its wanton delight in the grotesque and the horrible for its own sake; and some critics have revenged themselves for the straitlaced censures of Puritan morality by praising work in which the author strives to atone for imaginative weakness by a choice of revolting motives. Such adulation ought to have disappeared with the first fervour of rehabilitation. Much that has been praised in the old drama is rubbish, and some of it disgusting rubbish.

The question, however, remains, how far we ought to adopt either view of the situation? Are we bound to cast aside the later dramas of the school as simply products of corruption? It may be of interest to consider the light thrown upon this question by the works

of Massinger, nearly the last of the writers who can really claim a permanent position in literature. Massinger, born in 1584, died in 1639. His surviving works were composed, with one exception, after 1620. They represent, therefore, the tastes of the play-going classes during the rapid development of the great struggle which culminated in the rebellion. In a literary sense it is the period when the imaginative impulse represented by the great dramatists was running low. It is curious to reflect that, if Shakespeare had lived out his legitimate allowance of threescore years and ten, he might have witnessed the production, not only of the first but of nearly all the best works of his school; had his life been prolonged for ten years more, he would have witnessed its final extinction. Within these narrow limits of time the drama had undergone a change corresponding to the change in the national mood. The difference, for example, between Marlowe and Massinger at the opening and the close of the period—though their births were separated by only twenty years—corresponds to the difference between the temper of the generation which repelled the Armada and the temper of the generation which fretted under the rule of the first Stuarts. The misnomer of Elizabethan as applied to the whole school indicates an implicit perception

that its greater achievements were due to the same impulse which took for its outward and visible symbol the name of the great Queen. But it has led also to writers being too summarily classed together who really represent very different phases in a remarkable evolution. After making all allowances for personal idiosyncrasies, we can still see how profoundly the work of Massinger is coloured by the predominant sentiment of the later epoch.

As little is known of Massinger's life as of the lives of most of the contemporary dramatists who had the good or ill fortune to be born before the days of the modern biographical mania. It is known that he, like most of his brethren, suffered grievously from impecuniosity; and he records in one of his dedications his obligations to a patron without whose bounty he would for many years have "but faintly subsisted." His father had been employed by Henry, Earl of Pembroke; but Massinger, though acknowledging a certain debt of gratitude to the Herbert family, can hardly have received from them any effective patronage. Whatever their relations may have been, it has been pointed out by Professor Gardiner[1] that Massinger probably sympathised with the political views represented by the two

[1] "Contemporary Review" for August 1876.

sons of his father's patron, who were successively Earls of Pembroke during the reigns of the first James and Charles. On two occasions he got into trouble with the licenser for attacks, real or supposed, upon the policy of the government. More than one of his plays contain, according to Mr. Gardiner, references to the politics of the day as distinct as those conveyed by a cartoon in "Punch." The general result of his argument is to show that Massinger sympathised with the views of an aristocratic party who looked with suspicion upon the despotic tendencies of Charles's government, and thought that they could manage refractory parliaments by adopting a more spirited foreign policy. Though in reality weak and selfish enough, they affected to protest against the materialising and oppressive policy of the extreme royalists. How far these views represented any genuine convictions, and how far Massinger's adhesion implied a complete sympathy with them, or might indicate that kind of delusion which often leads a mere literary observer to see a lofty intention in the schemes of a selfish politician, are questions which I am incompetent to discuss, and which obviously do not admit of a decided answer. They confirm, as far as they go, the general impression as to Massinger's point of view which we should derive from his writings without

special interpretation. "Shakespeare," says Coleridge, "gives the permanent politics of human nature" (whatever they may be!), "and the only predilection which appears shows itself in his contempt of mobs and the populace. Massinger is a decided Whig; Beaumont and Fletcher high-flying, passive-obedience Tories." The author of "Coriolanus," one would be disposed to say, showed himself a thoroughgoing aristocrat, though in an age when the popular voice had not yet given utterance to systematic political discontent. He was still a stranger to the sentiments symptomatic of an approaching revolution, and has not explicitly pronounced upon issues hardly revealed even to

> The prophetic soul
> Of the wide world dreaming of things to come.

The sense of national unity evolved in the great struggle with Spain had not yet been lost in the discord of the rising generation. The other classifications may be accepted with less reserve. The dramatists represented the views of their patrons. The drama reflected in the main the sentiments of an aristocratic class alarmed by the growing vigour of the Puritanical citizens. Fletcher is, as Coleridge says, a thoroughgoing Tory; his sentiments in "Valentinian" are, to follow the same guidance, so "very slavish and reptile" that it is a trial of charity

to read them. Nor can we quite share Coleridge's rather needless surprise that they should emanate from the son of a bishop, and that the duty to God should be the supposed basis. A servile bishop in those days was not a contradiction in terms, and still less a servile son of a bishop; and it must surely be admitted that the theory of Divine Right may lead, illogically or otherwise, to reptile sentiments. The difference between Fletcher and Massinger, who were occasional collaborators and apparently close friends (Massinger, it is said, was buried in Fletcher's grave), was probably due to difference of temperament as much as to the character of Massinger's family connection. Massinger's melancholy is as marked as the buoyant gaiety of his friend and ally. He naturally represents the misgivings which must have beset the more thoughtful members of his party, as Fletcher represented the careless vivacity of the Cavalier spirit. Massinger is given to expatiating upon the text that

> Subjects' lives
> Are not their prince's tennis-balls, to be bandied
> In sport away.

The high-minded Pulcheria, in the "Emperor of the East," administers a bitter reproof to a slavish "projector" who

> Roars out
> All is the King's, his will above the laws;