

Edmond Spenser's Irish Life

BORN A. D. 1553 — DIED A. D. 1596

A History of Ireland in the Lives of Irishmen

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Spenser, though he, along with many of our noblest names of this period and the following, can be claimed by Ireland only by a partial interest, has yet an unquestionable claim to be commemorated by the historian of her literary worthies. If England was the country of his birth, we deny her not the claim that ranks him among the highest names of her most glorious age ; but we claim a compatriot interest in the poet of Kilcolman : Ireland was the birthplace of his muse.

Like many illustrious persons, who have in those unrecording ages sprung from an humble state by the ascendant qualities of genius, the early part of Spenser's career is little known. It seems to be ascertained that he was born in London, in or about 1553 ; and it appears, from several passages among his dedications, that he claimed kindred with the noble house of Spenser. The claim is also said to have been recognised ; but the recognition is not affirmed by any record of kind offices done, in the course of the poet's long struggles with fortune. The noble by birth will always feel some natural reluctance in admitting such claims, although native nobility of spirit, like conscious innocence, will neither fear nor find reproach where there can be no dishonour. But we apprehend that the noblest house in England would now point back to this coldly received affinity with a far different feeling, and would rejoice if it were to be found among the honourable records of its history, that the noblest of its lineage, in the estimation of time, had some nearer proof of kindred than a doubtful implication of assent. We do not indulge this reflection in the ridiculous spirit of condemnation—the claim may have been uncertain and remote, and circumstances are wholly wanting to warrant any judgment in the case. We merely express the strong suggestion arising from a circumstance, which forces a common and affecting condition of social life upon the heart :—the fact, if such, is but one among those common incidents, thick strewn in the course of every generation. The healthy and elastic sense of tender youth is not more quick to shrink from the revolting aspect of the dead, than the full-blown pride of the world to avoid the humiliating contact of a fallen or struggling relationship : bright and honourable exceptions there are, but such is the spirit of human life : *corruptus' vanis rerum*. And we must in justice add, that it is not altogether from the want of beneficence, but from that species of pride which finds it essential to be separated from the humiliations of circumstance. It is still felt by the crowd which is inflated with adventitious dignity, as intensely as it was by the patrician usurers of old Rome, that there is something in the power of fortune which lowers and degrades : *quod ridiculos homines facit*. But we are led from our purpose. Spenser does not seem, at any period of his life, to have been in any way advantaged by family assistance ; and the only record we can find, on any certain authority, of his youth, is his entrance as a sizar on the books of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge. Here he graduated in 1576. He is said to have sat for a fellowship in competition with Andrew, afterwards bishop of Winchester. That he was not successful is scarcely matter of regret : his subsequent career might have been more usefully and calmly secure, but we cannot doubt that after-ages are indebted rather to the vicissitude and striving with the adverse waves and winds of stern reality, which has imparted so much truth and substance to his chief writings. Instead of being permitted to indulge his dreamy spirit in the lettered trifling of the bookish cloister, he was thrown soon upon the exercise of all his senses, and compelled to infuse a large portion of corrective observation and experience with the Gothic phantasmagoria of his lofty and sequestered spirit. Spenser, how-

ever, in the instance here mentioned, was practical enough to look rather to the present good ; and dreaming little of being starved or buffeted into the admiration of posterity, was as discontented as beaten candidates are wry prone to be ; and was encouraged, by the countenance of some of his university friends, in the complaint of having met with injustice.

Among his warmest friends was the then celebrated Gabriel Harvey, who is mentioned by Warton as being the inventor of the hexameter imitation of the Latin, and who is the “Hobbinal” of Spenser. By Harvey’s advice, Spenser resolved to try his fortune in London. It was an age of literary adventure—the public favour towards poetry stood at a point to which it never again rose until the nineteenth century : but the circumstances of these two periods were wholly different. There was in the Elizabethan age, commonly called the age of poetry, no vast commercial republic of letters, of which the comprehensive and steady organization worked with the uniformity and precision of a factory ; manufacturing books to the public demand, as nearly as possible, by the laws of every other produce of human labour, and with the very lowest application of mental power. Sonnet and lampoon, epigram and eulogy, it is true, like the periodical effusions of the annuals and periodicals of our time, were the universal accomplishment and affectation of the day. But few books were printed—there was no “reading public”—and no book-mill as regular as the market, and almost as needful, to pour out its vast exuberance of publications, planned, bespoken, and conducted by the trade, and wrought by operatives of every grade, from the genius and learning of Scott, Southey, and Moore, to the journeyman tinker of Brummagem books, who does his task to order, in a workmanlike way. At that interesting period, it required no small enthusiasm, and the excitement of no little genius, to brave the perils and mortifications of the tuneful avocation. Like the wayfaring harper, he had to seek fit audience. He had to meet the indifference of the vast crowd of the uneducated, the unsettled taste, or fastidious insolence of the smattering underbred, the insolence of fashion, and the want of the adventurous trade, then but in its infancy. His one resource was a patron, and it expresses the whole :—

“Toil, envy, want, the patron and the gaol.”

Much of this Spenser was destined to experience ; but it appears that his first introduction was smoothed by the friendship of the noble and gallant Sidney, to whom he received an introduction from the kindness of his college friend, Gabriel Harvey. Two different stories are told concerning this introduction, which might be reconciled only by a very considerable change in the order of the incidents of Spenser’s early life. According to one account, we should be compelled to assume, that either his introduction to Sidney was later than the time stated, or that he received, in the first instance, a very small portion of his patron’s countenance, and was soon forgotten. The story runs thus :—That when Spenser had completed the ninth canto of the first book of the *Fairy Queen*, he repaired to Leicester House, and sent in a copy to Sidney, who, on reading a few stanzas, was so astonished and delighted at the description of Despair, that, turning to his steward, he bade him give fifty pounds to the person who brought these verses : on reading the next stanza, he ordered him to give a hundred. The amazed steward thought fit to make some delay, in hopes that his lord might come to his senses, and estimate the verses more nearly at the current rate of scribbling ; but after the next stanza, Sidney raised the sum to two hundred, and forbade any further delay, lest he might be tempted to give away his whole estate. The story must have some ground in reality ; but that which it would displace is founded on a larger combination of occurrences, and occupies more space in his history. According to the more received account, Spenser’s first movement on leaving college was a visit to his own family in the north of England. There he produced some minor poems, and continued in some uncertainty as to his future course, when his friend Harvey wrote to him from London, where he was himself gaining ground as a poet, strongly urging him to try his fortune in the same adventurous field. Spenser was easily persuaded ; and on his arrival was introduced by his friend to Sidney, who, at once recognising his high pretension, took him into his household, and carried him with him to Penhurst, where he made use of his taste and judgment in the compositions on

which he was himself engaged. This is the more probable and best sustained account : it has also the merit of offering to the reader's mind a sweet and singular picture of the high communion of the two noblest hearts and loftiest intellects of their age, in the sequestered haunts of contemplation and fancy, while the affections, and the aspirations of ambition were young in both.

In the course of his northern residence, during which some conjecture, with no small likelihood, that he was engaged in tuition, Spenser is said to have fallen in love with the lady whom, under the name of Rosalind, he celebrates in his pastorals ; which are full of her cruelty and her lover's despair. But as the lady is as much the appendage of poesy as of chivalry, it is very probable that the fierceness of his despair found a full vent in the poem which first raised him to reputation, and took its permanent station in the poetry of England. These compositions were the best introduction to the favour of Sidney.

As is usual with the youthful poet, Spenser appears, during his residence with his patron, to have been engaged in wide speculations as to the adoption of a path worthy of his growing powers. The first was one highly illustrative of the age, but little worthy of the poet. The new enthusiasm for classic antiquity—the imperfection of English style, and the exquisite grace and finish of those great standard works of Greek and Roman genius, which alone seem equally attractive in every change of language, literature, and climate most naturally suggested the adoption of the metre of Virgil and Ovid, the favourites of the age—with these, of course, the whole train of Latin harmonies would be attempted. In this curious appropriation, Spenser, with many other writers, was for a time employed ; and the conception was not unworthy of the richest genius of the age: its disadvantage could only be discovered by trial. [1] Fortunately, Spenser, after some time, discovered a track more suited to the character and powers of his native tongue, and adapted with curious felicity to the rich Gothic solemnity of his genius. But of this we shall say more before we have done.

It seems that he soon recovered from an error which would have committed his labours to the waste-paper grave of scholastic theology ; and it is thought that he then began the *Fairy Queen*. This we are, however, inclined to consider as a doubtful point. His labours, whatever was their subject, quickly met with an interruption. His patron's influence soon introduced him for a time into other scenes than the civilized and tranquil shades of Penhurst. He was sent over to Ireland with Lord Grey of Wilton, who was appointed to the government of this island in 1580. Spenser was retained as his secretary; and, in scenes of civil strife and barbarism, so uncongenial to the muse, his course is for a time lost to the eye of history. Grey returned to England in two years ; but Spenser obtained a grant of three thousand acres in the county of Cork, as a compensation for his service. It is supposed that he at this time had returned to England, where he remained until the death of Sidney, who, the reader is aware, was slain in the Low Countries in 1586. This afflicting incident closed the gate of preferment, and Spenser returned to fulfil the condition of his grant by residing on his estate.

Kilcolman Castle, or rather its ruin, is still to be seen, and is described by most historians of the county of Cork. It had belonged to the earls of Desmond, the former lords of the poet's estate, and of the whole district in which it was contained. The river Awbeg, on which it stood—the “ Gentle Mulla” of the poet—rises near Buttevant, and enters the river Blackwater near Bridgetown. It wended with a smooth course through the (then) wooded and romantic solitudes of a widely pastoral district, presenting along its tranquil course numerous diversities of the lone and solemn scenery which fancy loves to people with her creatures of romance. The poet's dwelling was within about four miles of the present village of Doneraile, and looked out over a far expanse of plain, bounded by the distant eastward hills of the county of Waterford. The Rathnoure mountains closed the aspect on the north, the Nagle mountains on the south, and on the west the mountains of Kerry.

“ The ruins present the remains of a principal tower, in a castellated building of some extent. The outlines and vestiges of several apartments may still be distinctly traced. The lower of these rooms seems to have been used as a hall or kitchen, and is arched with stone. The stairway of the tower still exists, and leads to the decayed remains of a small chamber. Little can be added concerning this interesting ruin, except that the remaining windows command extensive prospects.” [2]

Here, then, Spenser began to reside in the year 1587, seven years from his first arrival in Ireland. And it has been observed, that the rural and scenic descriptions contained in many of his poems, and especially in the “ Fairy Queen,” are entirely drawn from the surrounding country : hence the “ wild forests,” and “ wasteful woods,” and the whole characteristic sylvan colouring of this poem. Nor would it be possible, without many a bold reach of conjecture, to trace the numerous latent transformations by which the incidents of time and place have become metamorphosed into the visions of poetic combination. Who that reads the opening of the twelfth canto—

“ Then, when as cheerless night so covered had
Fair heaven with an universal cloud,
That every wight, dismay with darkness sad,
In silence and in sleep themselves did shroud,
She heard a shrilling trumpet sound aloud,”—

and recollects how faithfully the characteristic incident of Irish insurrection is presented, will fail to remember how often sadly familiar to the poet’s ear must have been the “ shrilling” horn from the nightly hills ? The sudden harmony of “ many bagpipes” among the thickest woods, and the “ shrieking hubbubs” (an Irish word), can have no prototype in nature but the one. The scenery of the country is directly described in the following lines : — [3]

“ Whylome, when Ireland flourished in fame
Of wealth and goodness, far above the rest
Of all that bear the British island’s name,
The gods then used, for pleasure and for rest,
Oft to resort thereto, as seemed them best :
But none of all therein more pleasure found
Than Cynthia, that is sovereign queen profest
Of woods and forests which therein abound,
Sprinkled with wholesom waters, more than most on ground.”

The manner in which the fawns, satyrs, and hamadryads, and all appears to us decisive of the point—that here this poem was commenced, although the conception, and perhaps some rough sketching, may have previously existed.

It was while engaged in this retreat in the composition of his immortal work, that he was visited by Raleigh—the incident is described in “ Colin Clout’s come home again,” in which he describes his friend who had just returned from Portugal as the “ shepherd of the ocean,”

“ I sate as was my trade
Under the foot of Mole, that mountain here ;
Keeping my sheep amongst the coolly shade
Of the green alders by the Mulla’s shore,
There a strange shepherd chanced to find me out ;
Whether allured with my pipe’s delight
Whose pleasing sound shrilled for about,
Or thither led by chance, I know not right ;

Whom when I asked, from what place he came ?
And how he hight ? himself he did ycleep
The shepherd of the ocean by name,
And said he came far from the main sea deep !

This visit was the means of drawing Spenser from his retreat : he read the three first books to his guest, whose enthusiastic spirit was fired with admiration. He conjured the poet to lose no time in its publication, and urged him so warmly to repair at once to London, that Spenser accompanied him, and the three first books were printed in the year 1590. Of his adventures on this occasion, the accounts are neither very abundant nor authentic. It is stated, with the highest probability, being in fact a matter of course, that he was introduced by Raleigh to the Queen, who appointed him Poet Laureate ; but it is (with much probability) asserted by some without any pension. It is however affirmed, that the lord-treasurer, Burleigh, whose prudent parsimony exceeded his taste for verse, and his jealousy of court favour either his love of economy or his regard for merit, exerted his powerful influence to intercept the queen's favour. The fact seems ascertained by the complaints of Spenser, which with a pension of £50 would have been quite out of place. A story is told by all biographers, that the queen having read the *Fairy Queen*, ordered a gratuity of one hundred pounds to be paid to the author. Burleigh, to whom this command was addressed, with a well-feigned expression of surprise replied— “ What ! all this for a song ? ” “ Then give him what is reason,” answered Elizabeth, whose prudence was not less though her taste was more. Burleigh's estimate of “ What is reason ? ” was slight indeed ; and when Spenser, after an interval of suspense, discovered that he was likely to be without his expected recompense, he came to a determination to remind the queen of her promise, which he did by these lines :

“ I was promised on a time
To have reason for my rhyme ;
From that time, unto this season,
I received not rhyme nor reason.”

The queen, who thus learned the remissness of Burleigh, peremptorily commanded the payment of her order. The patent for his pension, may perhaps have succeeded this incident. There is another passage of Spenser, which seems to be descriptive of the incident here mentioned :—

“ Full little knowest thou that hast not tried
What ill it is in suing long to bide :
To lose good days that might be better spent ;
To waste long nights in pensive discontent ;
To speed to-day to be put back to-morrow ;
To feed on hopes to pine with fear and sorrow :
To have thy prince's grace, yet want her peers ;
To have thy asking, yet wait many years ;
To fret thy soul with crosses and with cares ;
To eat thy heart with comfortless despairs ;
To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run.
To spend, to give, to want, to be undone.
Unhappy wight, born to disastrous end
That doth his life in so long tendance spend.” [4]

But the favour of courts, proverbially uncertain, and the invidious dislike of intriguing ministers, were in some degree compensated by the friendship and admiration of the higher spirits of the age. If his fortunes did not advance with the rapidity of expectation, he must have at least felt the triumph of his genius. His publisher afforded the certain proof of the

success which was most to be desired, by a spirited effort to collect and publish all his other pieces at the time extant.

Not long after this event, Spenser once more sought his poetical retirement on the banks of the Mulla ; and with the short interval of a visit to London in the winter of 1591, continued for many years in the assiduous composition of the remaining books of the Fairy Queen and other well known works. It was during this period that he formed an attachment to the beautiful daughter of a merchant of Cork. Spenser was now approaching his fortieth year : he was compelled to experience the bitter sweets of a long and of course anxious probation ; and often perhaps to be painfully reminded of his youthful attachment to the perfidious and fickle Rosalind. The Irish lady was remarkable for her due sense of the dignity of her sex, and her pride is celebrated by her lover.

“ For in those lofty looks is close implied
Scorn of base things disdain of foul dishonour ;
Threatening rash eyes which gaze on her so wide,
That loose they be who dare to look upon her.” [5]

In another sonnet he celebrates her

“ Mild humbless mixt with awful majesty.”

And again,

“ Was it the works of nature or of art
Which tempered so the features of her face,
That pride and meekness roixt by equal part,
Do both appear to adorn her beauty's grace ?”

After a courtship of three years, this proud young beauty relented, and some graceful verses describe the intoxicating delight of her first smiles. He was married in Cork, in 1554, and has left the record of one day's unalloyed happiness in the epithalamium he wrote on the occasion :—

“ Behold while she before the altar stands
Hearing the holy priest that to her speaks,
And blesses her with his two happy hands,
How the red roses flush up in her cheeks,
And the pure snow-white lovely vermeil stain,
Like crimson dyed in grain !
That even the angels, which continually
About the sacred altar do remain,
Forget their service, and about her fly,
Oft peeping in her face, which seems more fair
The more they on it stare.
But her sad eyes, still fixed upon the ground,
Are governed with a godly modesty
That suffers not a look to glance away
Which may let in a little thought unsound.
Why blush ye love ! to give to me your hand ?
The pledge of all our band.”

Such was the happy commencement of a brief and troublous interval.

Not long after his marriage, Spenser paid a short visit to London, where he published three more books of the *Fairy Queen*, and presented his “View of the State of Ireland” to the queen. The next year he returned home, and for a little longer every thing wore the air of peaceful prosperity : he was happy in his wife, who had made him the father of two fair sons ; and his character as a resident proprietor, as well as his reputation as a poet, began to win him golden opinions in the city and surrounding territory. He was recommended also by the crown, to the office of sheriff for Cork. But the rebellion of Tyrone broke upon these goodly prospects, and surrounded every peaceful habitation with restless disquietudes and apprehensions. The inmates of one of Desmond’s castles could not sleep undisturbed by the terrors which left no home secure. Frightful rumours were the daily conversation ; the quiet woods which the poet so long had peopled with the fawns, satyrs, and hamadryades in which his fancy loved to revel, teemed with no imaginary groups of wolvisk kernes and ruffian bonaghts fiercely looking out upon his castle and awaiting the night : night was haunted by fearful apprehensions—evil noises mingled in the winds, and the echoing signal was heard among the hills. Hapless is their state who are under the influence of such terrors—inflicting by anticipation the sufferings which may not arrive. But this was not the good fortune of poor Spenser, of whose felicity we more lament the ruin because it was so complete. Blest in the union he had formed, a happy father, a husband much loving and much loved, admired, respected, and after a life of toil possessed of a growing fortune : one fatal hour reversed his fortunate position and sent him a houseless fugitive with his helpless family, again to try his fortune in the uncertain favour of which he had so long experience.

We cannot here offer any precise detail of the dreadful particulars of a disaster, the horror of which is perhaps better to be understood from a single incident than from any description. The poet with his family were compelled to fly with such precipitation, that their youngest infant was left behind. It was perhaps the error of the wretched parents, inexperienced in popular convulsion, to imagine that a helpless and innocent babe could not be really in any risk ; and they conceived that they had provided fully for its safety, by leaving the necessary directions for its journey on the following day, in a manner more accommodated to its tender age. The castle was plundered and burned, and the infant perished in the flames. The family only escaped by the promptness of their flight. They reached London, where they took lodgings in King Street.

Spenser never recovered from the shock of this calamity. Despair and discouragement clouded his breast, and his health sunk rapidly under the combination of grief, want, and the renewal of a painful servitude upon the capricious friendship of the great. We do not believe that he was utterly deserted in this distressing condition, because we do not believe in the utter baseness of mankind it would imply : feeling, generosity, and truth, can have no existence but in fable, if they are not to be found in the ranks of a high and polished aristocracy. But a just estimate of human nature, and a precise experience of the moral workings of society, is sufficient to account for the neglect which neither high worth, nor the possession of many friends, are enough to ward off. The generosity of the world is but an impulse, which its prudence more constant, is ever trying to limit and escape from : when the effort to relieve has been made, it is an easy thing to be satisfied that enough has been done, and to lay the blame of its actual insufficiency on the imprudence of the sufferer. The kindness is for the most part accompanied by counsel, for the most part inconsiderate, because it cannot be otherwise. It cannot be expected that any one will apply to the emergency of another that clear and elaborate scrutiny into the whole combination of their advantages and disadvantages which is necessary for conduct under the pressure of difficulty : counsel is cheap and easy, and all are ready to bestow it ; but sound and considerate advice few have at their disposal when they need it for themselves. Our application of these reflections, is but conjectural, and the result of our own long observation of the ways of the world. But it is certain that Spenser had many high and influential friends, and claims of no slight order upon the sympathy of the good and wise, and upon the gratitude of all—the proudest ornaments of the

Elizabethan age are Spenser and Shakespeare, with either of whom (different as they are) no other can be named. Poor Spenser with a family—stripped of his estate—with the claim of service and the noble title of genius—was, if not absolutely deserted, allowed to sink into neglect and penury. It is said, and not authoritatively contradicted, that when reduced to the most abject want, lord Essex sent him a sum of money which the poet's pride induced him to refuse. The circumstance is very likely to have received the exaggerations, so commonly attendant upon all incidents which can be distorted into scandal against the upper classes. We have already in another memoir, [6] had occasion to examine a very similar story. We however think it sufficiently confirms the general inference of his having suffered from want ; nor can we entertain any doubt that his spirit must have been shattered and his pride diseased into a morbid irritability by the sufferings and mortifications ever attendant upon such misfortunes.

It is, in the midst of these painful circumstances, cheering to contemplate the fact that his wife—the haughty beauty whom he had wooed for three years, and who adorned and exalted his short interval of worldly happiness—did not wrong the deep love and the immortalizing praises of the poet ; but with the attachment and constancy peculiar to her sex, walked with him like a ministering angel in the fiery furnace of affliction and bitterness : confirming her claim in sober history, to the encomium with which poetry has handed down her name.

Spenser only survived his flight from the country of his adoption, “ a little more than kin and less than kind,” for five years, and died at his inn in King street, in January, 1598, in the 45th year of his age. The world, which felt that he was to be no longer a burden, but thenceforth an honour, showered upon his heedless grave its most unavailing honours and distinctions. His funeral was conducted with a pomp more suited to his real merits, than to his fortunes. The earl of Essex contributed the cost, and the poets of the day came to shower their verses into his grave. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, next to Chaucer, the only other name that could yet be named with his. His wife is understood to have survived him for some years, but not to have married again. His two sons had descendants, but have left no trace in our history ; they found their way to their native country, but did not recover their father's estate. Sylvanus married a Miss Nangle of Moneanymy, in the county of Cork : by her he had Edmund and William Spenser. The other son, Peregrine, left also a son, who was afterwards reinstated by the court of claims, in all that could be ascertained of the Kilcolman estate. He was however afterwards outlawed for his adherence to James II. The property was again recovered to the family by William Spenser, the grandson of Sylvanus, by means of lord Halifax. It has however long passed away, and with it all distinct traces of the family. They are not however the less likely to be still existing : property is the stem of the genealogical tree, of which the leaves and branches cannot long survive the support.

It is a part of our most especial duty to offer something more than the mere history of the *Fairy Queen*, a production of which neither the characteristic style nor the local origin can be separated from the woods and streams of the county of Cork. Milton, whose mind was more deeply imbued with the poetry of Spenser than seems to have been noticed, describes this poem with his usual graphic precision in his divine *Il Penseroso* :—

“ And if ought else great bards beside
In sage and solemn tunes have sung
Of turneys and of trophies hung,
Of forests and enchantments drear,
When more is meant than meets the ear.”

Besides its intrinsic merits as a great masterpiece of English poetry, the *Fairy Queen* is a composition of peculiar interest both to the antiquary and the moral historian, on account of the fidelity with which it may be said to reflect the opinions, manners, superstitions, and the

whole spirit of the age. The full evidence of this, is only to be collected from a more intimate acquaintance with the numerous neglected writings, and the forgotten and exploded superstitions with which those obscure records are replete.

To attempt even a summary of this would involve us in the discussion of a variety of topics, not easily dismissed within the limits we should wish to preserve. The literature of England and that of our island, yet continued remotely apart from each other both in material and character. The literature of Ireland was, like her language, the relic of a remote civilization, for centuries on the decline and tending to no revival. English literature was just breaking fresh from the shackles, and impediments of a long but retarded progress into a fresh and glorious adolescence—under the head and heart expanding influence of the reformation. The prejudices and superstitions of earlier times rejected from the enlarging dominion of reason were delivered up to the fancy or imagination : from reality they melted into the sombre magnificence of poetry. All that was solemn, terrific, or magnificent—all that was influential over character and feeling—all that had possessed the spirit and given its whole form to the external manners of the previous age—yet held a modified power over the heart of the world, and a venerable charm in its recollections. Such is the law of moral transition—the expansion of the intellect long precedes the real alteration of the moral constitution of the breast. It is on this principle that the ghost and fairy have so long held their place in modern fiction : there is a faith of the imagination, which long outlives the stern exposures of reason. There is not indeed, when we would truly estimate the extent to which the poetry of an age reflects its actual spirit, a more essential consideration than this, that it is not in the knowledge of its books, or by the actions of its leading characters (all that history records), the world is to be truly seen : it is not so in this age of diffusive education, and was not so when knowledge was nearly confined to those, who were engaged in the extension of its bounds. As the German poet, (or his translator) says—

“ To us, my friend, the times that are gone by
Are a mysterious book, sealed with seven seals :
That which you call the spirit of ages past
Is but in truth the spirit of some few authors,
In which those ages are beheld reflected
With what distortion strange, Heaven only knows.”

From the surviving lucubrations of the academy or the cloister, in which little of external life can be *felt* (the only knowledge of life,) or from history which is but an abstract of gross results, or a record of facts, connected by the webwork of the writer's art ; [7] there is little to convey the true character of a remote age,—it is to be inferred only from an intense realization of circumstances to be laboriously gleaned from a large collation of remains and records: but the nearest approach must ever be made, by a fair allowance for the representation of the poet, and the record of transmitted customs and superstitions.

The real spirit of the public mind of the age of Elizabeth, was not materially varied from the quaint and simple character of many previous generations—a few loftier pinnacles had emerged into the upward beams of morning light—but the plains and valleys lay in twilight. The fairy people played their feats and gambols on the forest glade—and the bar-ghosts and goblins of midnight were indistinctly visible. The student still endeavoured to draw responses from the stars—or brooded over the furnace and crucible, in the feverish vigil of “ hope defer-red.” The Gothic pageantry—the chivalric spirit of all the quaint solemnities with which a long lapse of ages of growing civilization had endeavoured to refine and ornament life, held a customary sway over the mind of every class and order, and moulded the age. These features are apparent in a multitude of ancient writers now little known, and may be traced in every record of manners in the Elizabethan age. Amid the splendour of the genius and wisdom of that glorious age, may be discerned the ghastly empiricism which passed for

knowledge—the absurd traditions which passed for history—the quaint and scholastic, but often just and lofty ethics, stiffened with a pasteboard panoply of conceits and allegories by the taste for mysticism which is so congenial to the infancy of knowledge, as well as by the seemingly opposite but equally allied tendency to give a palpable form and representation to the invisible and spiritual. Hence indeed the gorgeous masques, moralities and mysteries, with their grotesque and cumbrous machinery of virtues, graces, and mythologic beings, the delight of that generation to which they were fraught with an intense ideal and moral interest, unintelligible to the children of our shrewd age. “In the reign of queen Elizabeth,” says Warton, “a popular ballad was no sooner circulated than it was converted into a moralization.” The moralization passed into a pageantry, which was but a costly improvement on the cap and bells of simpler times. In a coarse and simple age the passions are likely to occupy a prominent place in the productions of taste or fancy. “No doubt,” writes an author of that period, “the cause that books of learning seem so hard, is, because such and so great a scull of amorous pamphlets have so preoccupied the eyes and ears of men, that a multitude believe there is none other style or phrase worth gramercy. No books so rife or so friendly read, as be these books. But if the setting out of the wanton tricks of a pair of lovers, as for example, let them be called Sir Chauncicleere and Dame Partilote, to tell how their first combination of love began, how their eyes floated, and how they anchored, their beams mingled one with the other’s beauty. Then, of their perplexed thoughts, their throes, their faulies, their dryric drifts, now interrupted, now unperfitted, their love days, their sugred words, and their sugred joys. Afterwards, how envious fortune, through this chop or that channer, turned their bless to bale, severing two such beautiful faces and dutiful hearts,” &c. We have made so long an extract because, though much of this ridicule is equally applicable to the love tale of any age, it represents the fiction of the Elizabethan, with the precision of a general formula for practice ; and will be found to have a peculiar though much refined and purified application to the *Fairy Queen*.

In a period when the scope of literature was confined and its style unfinished and unfixed ; the classical writers of antiquity, then but recently revived, and having the fresh charm of novelty added to their simple unapproachable excellence, were seized upon with avidity and eager enthusiasm. They furnished a range of ideas which mingled with the Gothic associations of ancient English literature, and gave rise to those strange and monstrous mixtures of Christian and mythological personages so frequently to be met in the *Fairy Queen*, as well as other poems of the age. [8] An amusing example of this may be found, Book I. Cant. IV., where Pluto’s daughter is described on a party of pleasure :—

“ And after all upon the wagon beam
Rode Satan with a smarting whip in hand.”

Still more deeply infused into the spirit of the age, were the superstitions of every various kind, whether from the corruptions of religion, or the popular notions of magic, witchcraft, judicial astrology, and alchemy. These absurdities were beginning to be displaced by the growing philosophy of a period of transition, and as they were less entertained as realities, they became more the elementary spirit of the poet. They had not yet evaporated into mere inanity before the full daylight of reason and religious truth, and had just enough of superstitious charm to give them form to the imagination.

The same might be repeated of the magnificent and gorgeous “pomp and circumstance” of chivalry : its feelings and aspirations yet mingled in the upper air of social life. It gave the law to pride and sentiment—it yet continued to elevate and inspire the hero’s and the lover’s breast ; and could not fail to be vitally blended with poetry.

Not to exhaust a topic which would carry us too far for our immediate purpose, such are the characteristic elements of Spenser’s great poem. For something he was indebted, (if it can

be so termed,) to the poetry of his great patron Sydney, whose strange intermixture of Italian pastoral and Gothic romance, produced a powerful impression on the age. From these materials, was combined the lengthened tissue of romantic tales of adventure, in which religion and superstition—romance and pastoral—knights, witches, sorcerers, tourneys and enchantments, mingle in pretty equal proportions—all blended together into that medium of allegory which was the palpable poetry of the age. While we may look for the high and solemn strain of moral sentiment which is diffused throughout, to the character of the poet's own mind, and the general colouring of the descriptions to the scenery of Irish woods ; the wild wood path of adventure—which leads or misleads the errant knight or the forlorn lady, till they light on the shepherd's hut, the robber's castle, or the wizard's cell—could nowhere else be found in such living representation.

We shall conclude these remarks with some description of the poem, the materials of which we have endeavoured to enumerate. This portion of our undertaking is done to our hand by the author himself, in a letter to Raleigh :—

To the right noble and valourous, Sir Walter Raleigh, knight. Lord Warden of the Stannaries, and her Majesty's lieutenant of the county of Cornwall.

“ Sir,—Knowing how doubtfully all allegories may be construed, and this book of mine, which I have entitled the *Fairy Queen*, being a continued allegory, or dark conceit ; I have thought good, as well for avoiding of zealous opinions and misconstructions, as also for your better light in reading thereof, (being so by you commanded,) to discover unto you the general intencion and meaning, which in the whole course thereof I have fashioned, without expressing of any particular purposes or by-accidents therein occasioned. The general end therefore of all the book, is to fashion a gentleman or noble person, in vertuous and gentle discipline ;—which for that I conceived should be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historical fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, than for profit of the ensample : I chose the history of king Arthur as most fit for the excellency of his person ; being made famous by many men's former works, and also furthest from the danger of envy and suspicion of present time : and in which I have followed all the antique poets historical. First, Homer, who in the persons of Agamemnon and Ulysses hath ensampled a good governor and a vertuous man the one in his Iliad the other in his Odysseis ; then Virgil, whose like intencion was to do in the person of Æneas ; after him, Ariosto comprised them both in his Orlando ; and lately Tasso dissevered them again, and formed both parts in two persons ; namely, that part which they, in philosophy call ethice, or vertues of a private man, coloured in his Rinaldo ; the other named politice, in his Godfredo. By ensample of which excellent poets they labour to pourtraict in Arthur, before he was king, the image of a brave knight perfected in the twelve private moral vertues, as Aristotle hath devised ; the which is the purpose of these twelve books : which if I find to be well excepted, I may be, perhaps encouraged to frame the other part of politick vertues in his person, after that he came to be king.

“ To some, I know this method will seem to be displeasent ; which had rather have good discipline plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they use, than thus cloudly enwrapped in allegorical devices. But such me seem, should be satisfied with the use of these days, seeing all things accounted by their shows, and nothing esteemed of, that is not delightful and pleasing to common sense, for this cause is Xenophon preferred before Plato ; for that the one, in the exquisite depth of his judgment formed a commonwealth, such as it should be ; but the other in the person of Syrus and the Persians fashioned a government, such as might best be ; so have I laboured to do in the person of Arthur ; whom I conceive, after his long education by Timon (to whom he was by Merlin, delivered to be brought up, so soon as he was born of the lady Igrane,) to have seen in a dream or vision, the fairy queen with whose excellent beauty ravished, he awaking, resolved to seek her out ; and so being by

Merlin armed, and by Timon thoroughly instructed he went to seek her forth in fairy. In that fairy queen, I mean glory in my general intention ; but in my particular, I conceive, the most excellent and glorious person of our sovereign, the queen and her kingdom in fairy-land. And yet in some places else I do otherwise shadow her. For considering she beareth two persons, the one of a most royal queen or empress, the other of a most virtuous and beautiful lady ; this latter part, in some places, I do express in Belphebe : fashioning her name according to your own excellent conceit of Cynthia ; Phœbe and Cynthia being both names of Diana. So in the person of prince Arthur, I set forth *magnificence* in particular : which vertue, for that (according to Aristotle and the rest) it is the perfection of all the rest, and containeth in it them all ; therefore in the whole course, I mention the deeds of Arthur applicable to that vertue, which I write of in that book. But of the twelve other vertues, I make twelve other knights the patrons, for the more variety of the history : of which these three books contain three. The first, of the knights of the red cross, in whom I express holiness ; the second, of Sir Gugon, in whom I set forth temperance ; the third of Britomantis, a lady knight, in whom I picture chastity. But because the beginning of the whole work seemeth abrupt, and as depending upon other antecedents, it needs that ye know the occasion of these three knights' several adventures. For the method of a poet historical, is not such of an historiographer ; for an historiographer discourseth of affairs orderly as they are done, accounting as well the times as the actions : but a poet thrusteth into the midst, even where it most concerneth him ; and there recouring to the things forepast, and devining of things to come, maketh a pleasing analysis of all. The beginning therefore of my history, if it were to be told by an historiographer, should be the twelfth book, which is the last ; where I devise, that the *Fairy Queen* kept her annual feast twelve days ; upon which twelve several days the occasions of the twelve several adventurers happened, which being undertaken by twelve several knights, are in these twelve books severally handled and discoursed.

“ The first was this. In the beginning of the feast there presented himself a tall clownish young man ; who falling before the queen of the fairies, desired a boon (as the manner then was) which during the feast, she might not refuse : which was, that he might have the atchievement of any adventure which, during that feast should happen. That being granted, he rested himself on the floor, unfit, through his rusticity, for a better place. Soon after entred a fair lady in mourning weeds, riding on a white ass with a dwarf behind her leading a war-like steed, that bore the armour of a knight, and his spear in the dwarfs hand, she falling before the queen of the fairies, complained that her father and mother, an ancient king and queen, had been by an huge dragon, many years shut up in a brazen castle ; who thence suffred them not to issue ; and therefore besought the fairy queen to assign her some one of her knights to take on him the exploit. Presently that clownish person upstarting, desired that adventure : whereat the queen much wondering, and the lady much gainsaying, yet he earnestly importuned his desire. In the end, the lady told him, unless that armour which she brought, would serve him, (that is the armour of a Christian man specified by St Paul, Ephes. v.) that he could not succeed in that enterprize ; which being forthwith put upon him, with due furnitures thereunto, he seemed the goodliest man in all that company, and was well liked of the lady. And eftsoons taking on him knighthood, and mounting on that strange courser, he went forth with her on that adventure ; where beginneth the first book, viz :—

“ A gentle knight was pricking on the plain,” &c.

“ The second day there came in a palmer, bearing an infant, with bloody hands ; whose parents he complained to have been slain by an enchantress, called Acrasia ; and therefore craved of the fairy queen to appoint him some knight to perform that adventure : which being assigned to Sir Guyon, he presently went forth with that same palmer, which is the beginning of the second book, and the whole subject thereof. The third day there came in a groom, who complained before the fairy queen that a vile enchanter, called Busirane, had in hand a most fair lady, called Amoretta ; whom he kept in most grievous torment, because she would not

yield him the pleasure of her body. Whereupon Sir Scudamour, the lover of that lady, presently took on him that adventure. But being unable to perform it by reason of the hard enchantments, after long sorrow, in the end met with Britomantis, who succoured him, and rescued his love.

“ But by occasion hereof, many other adventures are intermeddled, but rather as accidents, than intendments : as the love of Britomart, the overthrow of Marinell, the misery of Florimell, the virtuousness of Belphœbe, the lasciviousness of Hellenora, and many the like.

“ This much, sir, I have briefly over-run, to direct your understanding to the well-head of the history ; that from thence gathering the whole intention of the conceit, ye may as in a handful gripe all the discourse : which otherwise may haply seem tedious and confused. So humbly craving the continuance of your favour towards me, and the eternal establishment of your happiness, I humbly take leave,

“ Your most humbly affectionate,

“ EDMUND SPENSER.

“ 23d January, 1589”

[1] The only successful attempt we can recollect at this species of composition, is the Supplic Ode which commences a book of the “ Curse of Kehama.”

[2] Brewer.

[3] The lines are quoted by Brewer.

[4] Mother Hubbard’s Tale.

[5] Sonnets.

[6] Life of Sheridan.—Dublin University Magazine, June, 1837.

[7] We have borrowed the phrase from the same writer, to whom we are indebted for the quotation above.

[8] It is curious to notice the misapplication of general facts, as well as rules, by those whose minds range within a narrow scope. The fault here noticed is little known to the generality of readers, because the writers who have committed them are not generally read. But the impression that some such thing has been found fault with, has given rise to a common charge against Milton, who has combined with singular effect and propriety the heathen and scriptural mythologies, by seizing on the real principle of relation between them.

“ History !
Facts dramatised say rather—action—plot
Sentiment, every thing the writer’s own,
As it best fits the webwork of his story.”—*Faustus*, p. 39.

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