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SHAKESPEARE AS A MOUNTAINEER.

By the PRESIDENT.

III.

A LEARNED gentleman has been writing to the newspapers lately to announce his discovery that Shakespeare made puns, and that no less than thirty-nine of these can be counted in his works. He would have been nearer the mark had he said thirty-nine in every play, for the plays simply swarm with puns, and not only with puns upon words, but also with what may be termed puns of a higher power, for puns upon sentences are freely scattered through his works. No other writer has, to such an extent, delighted to embalm, as it were, in the pellucid amber of his sentences, foreign matters entirely unconnected with the apparent subject in hand. This is the true cryptogram which runs through all his plays. Much of it, no doubt, was due to a deliberate playfulness, more of it was casually and almost unconsciously inserted. Some of the biographical matter which we are able to glean, would, if carelessly perused as it stands in its context, appear to an uncritical eye at first sight to refer to some entirely different subject. This is the writer's art. A person without experience of shot silks would not believe that a material, which, from his point of view, is indisputably brown, can possibly appear green to another person. In the same way, while the exoteric sense is to the uninitiated satisfying and beautiful, the esoteric lies concealed in it all the while, and when found, proves to be of priceless value.

Let us resume now our search for traces of our poet's Alpine experiences since we left him half-way up his great climb among the Chamouni *aiguilles*, in the neighbourhood of

the *Mer de Glace*, that

Sea,

Whose icy current and compulsive course

Ne'er keeps retiring ebb, but keeps due on. (*Othello.*)

Seated astride of the *arête* as he looked along it and beheld it decked with

Stately and air-braving towers (*Hen. VI., Pt. I.*)

he began to wonder how any further advance could possibly be made. Evidently this part of the climb made a deep impression on his mind, as again and again he mentions—

Steeple and moss-grown towers. (*Hen. IV., Pt. I.*)

Towers whose wanton tops do buss the clouds. (*Tro. & Cr.*)

It is of course difficult to identify the climb with absolute certainty, but perhaps the *traverse* of the Charmoz ridge comes as near as anything to the description, especially as the Bard seems to have been rendered somewhat nervous by a sense of nearness to a precipice similar to that which drops from that ridge on the side of the *Mer de Glace*. A man so placed he says—

Lives like a drunken sailor on a mast,

Ready with every nod to tumble down

Into the fatal bowels of the deep. (*Rich. III.*)

His dislike of the precipice on his left hand was intensified a little later when a formidable *gendarme* came into view, and we have the poet's naive admission—

I do not like the tower of any place. (*Rich. III.*)

For a time they seem to have been nonplussed. In the end an expedient was suggested, which can hardly fail to lower the poet in our esteem—

Aloft far from the ground,

And built so shelving that one cannot climb it

Without apparent danger of his life.

V.—Why then a ladder quaintly made of cords

To cast up with a pair of anchoring hooks

Would serve to scale another hero's tower. (*Two Gent.*)

Leaving on one side the question whether it is legitimate to use a rope-ladder at all, we may unhesitatingly condemn the unholy desire to outdo a rival climber by means of such an artificial contrivance. In those "spacious times," virgin summits "were as plenty as blackberries," and no climber had the smallest excuse for encroachment on another's field of work. That he should speak of his own competitor as "another hero," sounds at first like an unconscious betrayal of a ludicrous self-conceit, though it may well be urged, on the other hand, that all great men have had a high, that is to say, a true opinion of their own powers. Some years ago, a brilliant mountaineer, well known to all of us, was invited by his comrades to lead up a very difficult piece of rock. After a preliminary inspection of the place, while the rope was being arranged, he turned round and cried out, "Look here, you fellows, for this I must have another first-rate man next to me." He could not understand why roars of laughter greeted this very reasonable request. In the case, however, of the former of these great men, the phrase will bear a more charitable interpretation. We may imagine that, as they passed one obstacle after another, along this formidable ridge, each may have seemed more difficult than the last. The first may have seemed no stiffer than a "beginner's tower," the second, perhaps, worthy to be called an "expert's tower," and the third nothing short of a "hero's tower." If, then, a fourth of equal difficulty succeeded, it may well have been described as "another hero's tower."

The final pinnacle was of discouraging appearance, and the less ambitious members of the party raised the question whether it was worth while to go further, but the Bard would not hear of turning back. Possibly, he was determined not to give the "other hero" an opening for revenge, and insisted that they should—

Climb the highest promontory top. (*Tit. Andr.*)

It proved less tremendous than they had expected, and, no higher peak appearing beyond, the joyous shout went up—

This is the very top

The height, the crest or crest unto the crest. (*King John.*)

It was now necessary to hurry down with all speed, a movement which to Shakespeare was, as we have seen before, peculiarly embarrassing. Whether, like one of Dickens' characters, he was not accustomed, owing to his figure, to get much view of his own feet, we do not know, but he hated descent. In his own words—

Down! Thou climbing sorrow. (*Lear.*)

Naturally, therefore, he had to depend a good deal on the rope, and a sidelight is cast upon the portliness of his form by his unconscious ejaculation—

Hold hook and line, say I. (*Hen. IV., Pt. II.*)

To make matters worse, after a considerable descent, they found themselves off the true line, and were compelled to—

Cease, or else climb upward to that they were before.

(*Macbeth.*)

Eventually they got down the snow *couloir*, but saw no way of crossing the *bergschrund* except by the bold expedient of jumping it. The Warwickshire man was horrified, but the other two insisted that it was necessary—

Our fortune lies upon this jump. (*Ant. & Cleop.*)

and within their powers—

Not the worst of the three but jumps twelve foot and a half by the squire. (*Wint. Tale.*)

By the way, the mention of "the squire" must not be taken as a reference to the time when the actor-manager had made his fortune and become a landed proprietor in his native Stratford. No! by that time his jumping days were long past. In his Alpine period, if he was a squire at all, he was more likely "a squire of dames." A painstaking German commentator, misled by a modern analogy, maintains that "Squire" or "Sir Squire" is an English nickname for one in the knightly occupation of an actor-manager, but the expression "Sir

Squire Shakespeare" is unknown among Elizabethan writers, and sounds incongruous even to modern ears.

Be this as it may, the party had to do this jump, and they did it without mischance, but the poet as he shot across the yawning abyss, glanced down into its icy depths and exclaimed, half in horror and half in exultation—

We'd jump the life to come. (*Macbeth.*)

The brink of destruction is still commonly expressed by the vulgar as "Kingdom come," and Stevenson has an analogous phrase when he describes a coach driven furiously round a sharp corner on the edge of a precipice as "coasting eternity at every stride."

Though the *bergschrund* was now behind them, the party were not yet out of their troubles, for a wide *crevasse* presented itself, passable only by a very narrow bridge of snow. Shakespeare was told to cross it, and thought it as bad as—

To ride on a bay trotting-horse over four-inch bridges. (*Lear.*)

Being further assured of its safety, he tried it, and, of course, tumbled in. Judge of his annoyance when he afterwards overheard his friends say calmly—

You know he walked o'er perils on an edge
More likely to fall in than to get o'er. (*Hen. IV., Pt. II.*)

The worst had happened. Down he went, disappearing from sight of his friends like magic, till suddenly the rope tightened, stopped with a quivering jerk, and a strangled voice floated up from below—

O give me ribs of steel. (*Troilus & Cr.*)

The Editor tells me he can see that getting the man out of that *crevasse* will be a long job, so that he must remain in suspense until our next number.

(*To be continued.*)