AN EPIC OF QUEEN BESS.*

Ruskin in his old age seriously complained that if he had not wasted his time on art he might have been the first geologist of Europe. Probably he was right. Geikie in his great work on Geology quotes passage after passage from the "Modern Painters." The part of that work which is the surest to live is the part devoted to the laws of growth and structure in earth and its belongings. The art critic is at his best when he recognizes and reveals nature's artistry in her foreground pictures of grass and flower and tree, in her architectures of mountain, in her floating poems of cloud. Yet Ruskin's very great and minute knowledge of what would ordinarily be classed as scientific facts did not impede or imperil his poetic sense. Rather it was fuel that fed his fire of creative criticism.

One of the first of American geologists has now come forward with a theory and a proof that the scientific instinct and training are not opposed to poetic feeling and power — that they are rather allied and spring from one root. In a modest and ingenuous preface to his immense dramatic romance, "Elizabeth of England," Mr. N. S. Shaler states that he began the work as an experiment to see how far he had retained his early feeling for literature after many years of absorption in science. He regrets that science should make its votaries indifferent to the higher forms of literature, and denies the necessity for it. He goes further, and claims that the scientific and the poetic mind work with the same materials and largely with the same methods. And in testimony thereof he lays before us his five-volumed poem.

This is well! This is very well! The loss which poetry has sustained in modern times has not been the loss of the world — its hold upon that was always precarious; it has been the loss of the great minds of the age, so many of whom have withdrawn into science and have treated the claims of literature with bitter skepticism. If poetry can win them back it will win the world readily enough. Poets have always been willing to claim all knowledge for their share. Plato, the most poetical of philosophers, placed over his school the inscription that only through mathematics could anyone enter there. Dante knew the whole science of his age as did Goethe of his. The antagonism has been on the side of the men of science. Their supposed facts, their supposed laws, their supposed exact knowledge have made them deaf and blind to the music and the picture which body forth the real meanings of the world. Just at present, when many of their suppositions are beginning to crumble beneath them, literature, which builds more truthfully and permanently than science, may have a chance to come into its own.

So much for the thesis of faith which Mr. Shaler has nailed to the door of his huge cathedral of verse. Important as this declaration is, it must not detain us, for we have the poem

* ELIZABETH OF ENGLAND. A Dramatic Romance. By N. S. Shaler. In five volumes. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

itself to deal with, and that can hardly be done in a brief critical article. We may say at once that it seems to us one of the largest and noblest works in pure literature which has appeared in many a day.

Throwing historic accuracy aside, Mr. Shaler has recreated and interpreted a great historic epoch. He treats history as the best of the romance writers, Scott and Dumas, have done. But as far as his main figure and motive are concerned he is more delicate in insight, more profound in conception than they, — and his instrument of expression, his ringing, manly verse, yields him effects which stir the blood and rouse the emotions of the reader beyond anything that prose can do.

The central idea of Mr. Shaler's whole work is Elizabeth's devotion to England. In the first play she betroths herself to her people, takes as a lover and a spouse the realm she is to rule. In the latter plays she is shown brooding like a mother over her subjects — nobles, knights, and common men. Nothing is allowed to interfere with her task in shaping their destinies. Courtiers, counsellors, lovers come to her and she tests them all, and rewards or sends them to the Tower or the block, — solely as they show their ability and willingness to aid her in making England great. Elizabeth and England — these are the two personages of this epic drama. The many figures who fill in the scenes and who are drawn in many differing planes of reality and unreality, are merely the go-betweens, abettors or opponents of that mighty passion.

It is obvious that Mr. Shaler is one of those poets who work from within outwards, whose poems are moulded by the idea — not allowed to spring up from the life of the world. He is a Schiller rather than a Goethe. A slight comparison of his Elizabeth with the Queen Bess of Sir Walter Scott will suffice to show this. Scott's Elizabeth is a daylight Elizabeth, the stout-hearted but very worldly-minded daughter of Bluff King Hal. Mr. Shaler's Queen is an Elizabeth of the dark and the depths. She is always keyed to tragic intensity of purpose, or hovering on the verge of hysterical breakdown. She is never vulgar and never scandalous. The crimes she commits are for the good of England, and she pays for them with an agony of remorse which the real Queen would have scoffed at. She is a morbid Elizabeth, an Elizabeth with nerves, who ought to go under treatment to a modern specialist. Mr. Shaler represents her always at concert pitch of emotion, always as planning by herself or with Cecil to save or shape England. May we be forgiven the comparison, but as scene after scene, play after play unfolds the same situation, England in danger and Elizabeth to the rescue, we are a little reminded of Mr. Micawber and his wife rushing into each other's arms and swearing eternal fidelity. The masters are not thus monotonous. Achilles is not always shouting in the trench. He takes his ease in his tent with his friends and his female captives, and consumes huge shins of beef at banquet with the other chiefs. Hamlet is not always brooding on the infinite. He talks to the players, chaffs Polonius, and wooes Ophelia. Mr. Shaler seems to have been conscious of the want of relief, which, in his first four plays makes for us such a gloomy picture of Merry England, and in the final drama of the series he tries to set this to rights by bringing before us a long succession of pastoral pictures of the realm that Elizabeth has saved. The intention at least is admirable, but the tragic note returns and the scene closes with Elizabeth the Woman going down in utter wreck, destroyed by Elizabeth the Queen.

Granting Mr. Shaler's right to use his materials as he pleases, there can be no questioning the artistic effect of his picture of the epoch or the power in his presentation of its central figure. On the first reading, his book is compelling, almost overwhelming. He sweeps us along much as he wills. His own sympathy with nobleness is so great that again and again he brings us to tears by his presentation of utter loftiness of purpose or utter heroism of act. It is only when we begin to reflect and criticize that we feel the lack of flesh and blood in his creations.

The form in which Mr. Shaler has cast his work raises the old question of the legitimacy of the epic drama as a form of art. As Matthew Arnold pointed out, the categories of art forms which the Greeks left us — epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric, and the like — cannot easily be bettered. To mix two of them is to produce a bastard form which will probably be weaker than either of the originals. Mr. Shaler's dramas are hardly plays, the whole work is hardly an epic, and the mixture results in weakness in the scenic arrangement and the characters themselves. Take the figure of Essex in the fourth play of the series. It is splendidly conceived, but it is not realized in either an epic or dramatic way. He is described infinitely, everybody talks about him,

he talks about himself, but he is not set on his legs to do anything, at least until the very last. Or take the scenes where the Queen views from the ramparts of Dover Castle the destruction of the Armada. It is a fine epic situation, finer than Helen's view of the hosts from the walls of Troy. But Homer soon sends his heroine away and plunges into the real business of the poem, the hand-to-hand fighting. There is nothing but reflex action in Mr. Shaler's piece. The light of the burning Spanish ships is reflected on Elizabeth's face, and the heroism of her fleets and of Galt, in whom is, for the moment, embodied the might of England, are merely described to her by messengers. However, the question whether all this is not right enough and good enough, whether the epic drama has not won its place as a new art *genre*, is still open. Mr. Shaler has plenty of modern precedents — the works of Charles Wells, Sir Henry Taylor, Mr. Swinburne, and others.

Mr. Shaler's first piece, "The Coronation," comes nearer to being a true play than any of the others. It has a central motive, fantastic indeed, but beautiful, to which everything else is related, and it has a scenic arrangement which is in some measure theatrical. The early scene where Elizabeth, bidden to Mary's festivity, appears before her robed in black and uttering Cassandra cries of woe, shows the touch of the born dramatist. The scene with Wyatt and his followers is powerfully dramatic, as are the scenes in the Tower, though these last are too scattered. Elizabeth's flight or passage to Woodstock with Beddingfield and his knights, while Robin of the wildwood with his yeoman march unseen around her to ward off hostile strokes, is vividly portrayed. The shadowy creation of Robin, who is simply England's love incarnate, is Mr. Shaler's triumph as an allegorizing poet.

The second play, "The Rival Queens," has also a motive highly poetic if not theatrically effective. The gloomy, silent tower in the North where Mary of Scotland is imprisoned stands out threateningly against Elizabeth's busy, bustling court. But the contrast is hardly carried out dramatically, there is no collision of the Queens as in Schiller's great piece for the theatre, and the play falls apart at the close. There is one figure in this play, Petrie, the odd, loyal traitor, who is the most human and the best dramatically realized character in the whole work. He is new in kind and he does something.

In "Armada Days" all pretense indeed of a drama is cast aside. It is a great sweeping ode of England's might. As far as we know, the passion, the exaltation, the greatness of those days has nowhere else found such utterance. England owes Mr. Shaler a debt for summing up the splendor of that, its greatest day, as no historian or poet has done before.

In "The Death of Essex," Mr. Shaler has a really dramatic theme, but his curious fault of painting mainly by reflex action, of keeping his principals apart and letting intermediaries do the work they should be at themselves, destroys it as a play. It is a noble poem, however, and the conflicting emotions of Elizabeth as woman and Queen are depicted with consummate skill.

The last play, "The Passing of the Queen," is little more than a series of pictures of England in its glory and of Elizabeth in her discontented old age. Like Shakespeare in the final scenes of "The Merchant of Venice" and "The Tempest," Mr. Shaler has tried to present us with a vision of peace and beauty to calm our spirits after the storm and stress of the previous action. We wish we could say that he succeeds; but his pastoral scenes are far less effective than his heroic ones. Never for a moment, with all his elaborated pictures of manor house and cottage, of wood and meadow and hill, does he recall the charm that resides in the moon-glimpsed gardens of Belmont or Prospero's airy pageant in the enchanted isle.

There must be fifteen thousand lines of blank verse in Mr. Shaler's work, certainly a gigantic experiment. It is more than that, — it is an achievement. The blank verse is really individual. It does not recall any modern master at all. Mr. Shaler, in his preface, says he has been told that it is in the manner of the Elizabethans, but he does not know why. It is easy to tell him. It is so crowded with metaphors, so compact of similes, that it can recall nothing else but the rank growths of Elizabethan dramatic verse. Open at random and the style stares us in the face.

> "And now they tramp
> Over this realm they hold with sheathèd blades
> And make our fields to wonder how they lack
> Our bones within their earth."

That is concentrated. In many of the quieter scenes the actors seem to be handing each other bouquets of posies of speech, tied up with pink ribbons. Yet Mr. Shaler's verse is hardly the verse of the great artificers. It lacks their

sonority, their variety of cadence, most of all it lacks their sensuousness. It is not sensuous at all. We cannot indeed think of a single page in the five volumes which has the carven form, the blazing or sober color, habitual with the great users of English blank verse. Mr. Shaler's instrument is at its best in passages of emotion, good in a lower way in passages of thought, and not good at all in passages of description. As he lacks, in the main, the faculty of scenic composition, so he lacks the gift of felicitous sensuous phrase. He strikes out fine lines again and again. "How hard to rule," says Elizabeth,

"Men who are born with scepters in their hearts."

But that is intellectualized. In his last play Mr. Shaler brings Shakespeare into the business, and for scene after scene he walks beside Elizabeth and discourses with her on the large subjects of life and death. We cannot say that Shakespeare's moralities and philosophy, which the Queen accepts as oracles, strike us as being very profound; and there are few passages which would seem fitting utterances of Shakespeare's golden mouth. Here is perhaps the speech that comes nearest to it. Elizabeth has practically asked Shakespeare to record her life, and he answers:

"My Queen, were you our hearer, that we 'd do,
And count all time and men our audience
For perfect understanding of the part.
But they who wait us cannot see the play
That lives in splendor by them, for they feel
The soul that is beside them like their own,—
Fouled with the fellow earth they know too well;
So we must seek the shadow land to find
Brave empured names of other time and realm
To bear the garb we fashion from the web
Our common lives here weave. *Ay, the far orbs*
Are as the earth, mere clods; yet they are stars
For they are far: but had we dwelt on them,
Trod in their mire and bitten of their dust
We should not see their glory."

Mr. Shaler has indeed made good the argument of his preface. The scientist who can do such work as "Elizabeth of England" may confidently claim his place among the first poetic artists of his clime and time.

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