

Shakespeare's Plays Show Peace and Prosperity Spring from Preparedness, Defeat and Disaster from Lack of It

Many of His Tragedies Based on Unreadiness --- Men Who Snatch Success from Life Are Those Who Are Ready.

"Peace itself should not so dull a kingdom
Though war nor no known quarrel were in
question
But that defences, musters, preparations,
Should be maintained, assembled and collected,
As were a war in expectation."—Henry V.

SHAKESPEARE lived in a time of glorious enterprise and conquest. He was so thoroughly of his time that he could not but give expression to its trend and to the development of the empire.

His thought was not narrowed to his own land, but was affected by it, and, as he took material of all times and all places and moulded it into drama, comedy or tragedy, he brought out the fundamental and universal truth that the nations as well as the individuals who were ready for emergencies were the ones who were able to defend their rights and to win victories.

It is not always material readiness that counts the most, although Shakespeare, a man of practical wisdom as well as a poet, by no means despises that, but pre-eminently the readiness of spirit and resource that can use equipment or do without it if need be. It is the ready man that carries the day; it is the vacillating, unprepared man who inevitably suffers defeat, and while one weeps for his self-invited disaster he may at the same time draw his lesson therefrom.

In the drama of "King John" word reaches the King of France and others that the English are at hand.

"How much unlook'd for is this expedition!" cries King Philip, and Austria replies with the encouragement:

"By how much unexpected, by so much
We must awake endeavor for defence;
For courage moutheth with occasion,
Let them be welcome then; we are prepar'd."

Later, when Prince Arthur of Bretagne, rightful heir to the throne of England, has been made prisoner and carried to England by King John, this monarch receives word that:

"Never such a power
For any foreign preparation
Was levied in the land or body of a land.
The copy of your speed is learned by them;
For when you should be told they do prepare,
The tidings come that they are all arriv'd."
This was the unwelcome news from France, to which King John replied:

"Oh, where hath our intelligence been drunk?
Where hath it slept? Where is my mother's care,
That such an army could be drawn in France,
And she not hear of it?"

After the Dauphin has made great headway, the Bastard, nephew of King John, is sent with this message:

"He is prepar'd, and reason too he should;
This speech and unmannerly approach,
This harness'd masque and unadvised revel,
This unheard sanctness and boyish troops,
The king doth smile at; and is well prepar'd
To whip this durtish war, these pigmy arms,
From out the circle of his territories."

In the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster King Henry IV., who faces a rebellion headed by Hotspur, thus speaks:

"Now, lords, if God doth give successful end
To this debate that bleedeth at our doors
(We will our youth lead on to higher fields,
And draw no swords but what are sanctified,
Our navy is address'd, our people collected,
Our substitutes in absence well invested,
Our substitutes in absence well invested,
Our substitutes in absence well invested,
Only we want a little personal strength,
And pause us till these rebels, now afoot,
Come underneath the yoke of government."

When the King went forth against the opposing factions he led his army in person, "with strong and mighty preparation, accompanied by his son, the humble-footed madcap Prince of Wales."

"All furnish'd, all in arms;
All plumed like estridges that with the wind
Bate it; like eagles having lately bathed;
Glittering in golden coats like images;
As full of spirit as the month of May
And gorgeous as the sun at midsummer;
Wanton as youthful goats, wild as young bulls."
On the opposing side Hotspur equipped his forces to meet this onslaught:

"I profess not talking; only this,
Let each man do his best, and here draw I
A sword whose temper I intend to stain
With the best blood that I can meet withal
In the adventure of this perilous day.
Now for our consciences; the arms are fair.
When the intent of bearing them is just."

Henry IV., having fallen, his son, the wild and pranksome Prince of Wales, asserted that he "would mock the expectation of the world" and "choose such limbs of noble counsel":

"That the great body of our State may sit
In equal rank with the best govern'd nation;
That war or peace, or both at once, may be
As things acquainted and familiar to us."
In the first Parliament of King Henry V. the question of war with France was mooted. The young King, he was only twenty-six years old, had asked his councillors about his right to the crown of France. All urge him to support his rights with armed forces.

Says Exeter:

"Your brother kings and monarchs of the Earth
Do all expect that you should rouse yourself,
As did the former lions of your blood;

They know your Grace hath cause and means and might."
To which the King replied:

"We must not only arm 'tinvade the French,
But lay down our proportions to defend
Against the Scot, who will make road upon us
With all advantages."

The Archbishop of Canterbury concluded his speech with the spirited admonition:

"Divide your happy 'ngland into four;
Whereof take you one-quarter into France,
And you withal shall make all Gallia shake.
If we, with thrice such powers left at home,
Cannot defend our own doors from the dog,
Let us be worried, and our nation lose
The name of hardiness and policy."

Thus advised, Henry, who as Prince of Wales had been noted for his frivolity and indifference to public affairs, asserted that he would "bend France to his awe or break it all to pieces," and called in the French ambassadors, who brought him this message from their Dauphin:

"Your Highness, lately sending into France,
Did claim some certain dukedoms in the right
Of your great predecessor, Edward III.
In answer of which claim the prince, our master,
Says that you savour too much of your youth,
And bids you be advised there's naught in France
That can be with a nimble gaffard won;
You cannot revel into dukedoms there.
He therefore sends you, meeter for your spirit,
This tun of treasure, and in lieu of this
Desires you let the dukedoms that you claim
Hear no more of you."

"What treasure, uncle?" inquires the English King.
"Tennis balls, my liege," the Duke of Exeter informs him.

"We are glad the Dauphin is so pleasant with us," replies the King.
"His present and your pains we thank you for.
When we have matched our rackets to these balls
We will, in France, by God's grace, play a set
Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard.
Till him he hath made match with such a wrangler
That all the courts of France will be disturbed
With chaces. And we understand him well,
How he comes o'er us with our wilder days,
Not measuring what use we made of them.
But tell the Dauphin I will keep my state,
Be like a king and show my soul of greatness.
When I do rouse me in my throne of France;
For here I have laid by my majesty,
And plodded like a man for working days;
But I will rise these with so full a glory
That I will dazzle all the eyes of France."

And tell the pleasant Prince this mock of his
Hath turn'd his balls to gun-stones."
The King made good his words and the French, who had thought to take him in his "naked unreadiness," felt the full force of his threat. The King admonished his lords to:

"Omit no happy hour
That may give furtherance to our expedition.
Therefore let our proportions for these wars
Be soon collected and all things thought upon
That may with reasonable swiftness add
More feathers to our wings."

In the second act of this play Chorus chants the martial spirit of England.

"Now all the youth of England are on fire,
And stiken dalliance in the wardrobe lies.
Now thrive the armourers, and honour's thought
Reigns solely in the breast of every man.
They sell the pasture now to buy the horse;
For now sits Expectation in the air
And hides a sword from hilts unto the point
With crowns imperial, crowns and coronets,
Promised to Harry and his followers.
The French, advised by good intelligence
Of this most dreadful preparation,
Shake in their fear, and with pale policy
Seek to divert the English purpose.
O England, model to thy inward greatness,
Like little body with a mighty heart,
What mightiest thou do that honor would thee do
Were all thy children kind and natural!"

Hearing that the English are coming with full power against the French, the Dauphin, discussing the matter with his father, says:

"It is most meet we arm us 'gainst the foe;
For peace itself should not so dull a kingdom,
Though war nor no known quarrel were in question,
But that defences, musters, preparations
Should be maintained, assembled and collected
As were a war in expectation.
Therefore I say 'tis meet we all go forth
To view the sick and feeble parts of France,
And let us with no show of fear—
No; no more than if we heard that England
Were busied with a Whitsun morris dance."

The Constable of France urges that the English are not to be taken so lightly. The Dauphin refuses to agree with him, but admits that:

"In cases of defence 'tis best to weigh
The enemy more mighty than he seems."
The English appear before Harfleur.

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility,
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger—
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
—

In the splendid days of Henry V. preparedness had borne its fruit, but slackness flourished during the infancy of the weak son, Henry VI., and his feeble reign.

"Sleeping neglect doth betray to loss
The conquest of our scarce-cold conqueror."
as stanch Sir William Lucy put it.

Fearful, faint hearted Henry, desiring peace at any price, made a bargain with Edward of York to leave the kingdom to him if only he might be permitted to spend the rest of his life untroubled.

"And yet shall thou be safe?" demands his angry Queen when she learns he has bartered away the birthright of his son.

"Such safety finds the trembling lamb environed with wolves.
Had I been there, which am a silly woman,
The soldiers should have tossed me on their pikes
Before I would have granted to that act.
But thou prefer'st thy life before thine honour."
Edward was of different mettle:

"Yet am I arm'd against the worst can happen,
And hate is needful in this desperate case.
Go levy men and make prepare for war."
The unprepared Henry easily fell a victim to this man, despite the energies of his wife.

Ambitious Richard III's brief reign fell before—

care-of-itself life was over. Timon, noble Timon, became an outcast through unpreparedness.

Admonitions to preparedness in Shakespeare are nearly always based on the demands of poetry.

"Set honour in one eye and death in the other,
And I will look on both indifferently:
For, let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honour more than I fear death."
So speaks Brutus in "Julius Caesar." And Cassius replies:

"Well, honour is the subject of my story—
I cannot think what you and other men
Think of this life; but for my single self,
I had as lief not be as live to be
In awe of such a thing as I myself."

"Brutus had rather be a villager
Than to repute himself a son of Rome
Under these hard conditions as this time
Is like to lay upon us."

So speaks Brutus on this occasion, and later Cassius, still stirring the feeling against Caesar, bursts out:

We at the height are ready to decline,
There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of our life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures."

Octavius speaks:

"Now, Antony, our hopes are envenom'd;
You said the enemy would not come down;
But keep the hills and upper regions;
It proves not so; their battles are at hand.
They mean to warn us at Philippi here,
Answering before we do demand of them."

Antony:

"They come down
With fearful bravery, thinking by this face
To fasten in our thoughts that they have courage,
But 'tis not so."

A messenger enters, crying:

"Prepare you, generals!
The enemy comes on impetuous show;
Their bloody sign of battle is hung out,
And something to be done immediately."
Octavius:—"Stir not until the signal."

Brutus:—"Words before blows; is it so, countrymen?"

Octavius:—"Not that we love words better, as you do."

Brutus:—"Good words are better than bad strokes,
Octavius."

Cassius:

"Antony,
The posture of your blows is yet unknown;
But for your words they rob the Hybla bees,
And leave them honeyless."

Antony:—"Not stingsless, too."

Brutus:

"O, yes, and soundless, too;
For you have stolen their buzzing, Antony,
And very wisely threat before you sting."

Hurling defiance, Octavius says:

"If you dare fight to-day come to the field;
If not, when you have stomachs."

The forces of Brutus and Cassius make their stand
Cassius:

"Now, most noble Brutus,
The gods to-day stand friendly, that we may,
Lovers in peace, lead on our days to age.
But since the affairs of men rest still uncertain,
Let's reason with the worst that may befall."
The terrible tragedy of Macbeth opens with the report of the happenings of war in the field. King Duncan, eager to know how fares his side, receives this news from the thane of Ross:

"From Fife, where the Norwegian banners flout
The sky and fan our people cold." Norway assisted by Malcolme's bridegroom, lapped in proof,
Confronted with self-comparisons,
Point against point, rebellious arm against arm,
Climbing his lurching spirit; and to conclude,
The victory fell on us."

Victory that fell as the result of preparation; "point against point."

Lady Macbeth appreciated the value of preparedness, of backing up one's desire with material support. She asks her halting husband:

"Art thou afraid
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteemest the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'
Like the poor cat that lades?"

When Macbeth retorts that he dares do all that may become a man and that he who dares do more is none, she demands:

"What beast'st thou then?
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it then you were a man;
And to be more than what you were you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time, nor place,
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both;
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you."

Macbeth himself later says to Banquo:

"Being unprepared,
Our will became the servant to defect,
Which else should free have wrought."
"The attempt and not the deed" is the great tragedy of failure.

Macduff goes to pray the King of England to wake Northumberland and warlike Siward;
"That by the help of these, with him above
To ratify the work, we may again
Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
Do faithful homage and receive free honours,
All of which we pine for now."

Macbeth is a prey to unpreparedness. He trusts to the prophecies of the witches, to supernatural forces, to protect him in his kingdom. Occasionally he has glimpses of the need for something more, a realization of the fact that "the flighty purpose never is o'ertook unless the deed go with it. From this moment the very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand. And even now, to crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done—"

"The castle of Macduff I will surprise;
Selse upon Fife . . . No boasting like a fool;
This deed I'll do before my purpose cool."
Macbeth had trusted to the prophecy that he should not be in danger until the "woods of Birnam came to Dunsinane." When the soldiers seize the boughs of Birnam wood and advance his courage fails, yet tardily he takes what measure of preparation he may:

"Hang-out our banners on the outward walls;
The cry is still 'They come!' Our castle's strength
Will laugh a siege to scorn!"
And when he faces wronged Macduff:

"I will not yield,
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet,
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.
Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou oppose'st being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last before my body
I throw my warlike shield: lay on, Macduff;
And damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'"



Mr. George Rignold as Henry V., Shakespeare's typical man of action.
From the collection of Everett Jensen Wendell.

the vigorous onslaught of the Earl of Richmond, later Henry VII.

When the Earl led his forces against those of Richard he exhorted them:

"In God's name, cheerly on, courageous friend,
To reap the fortune of perpetual peace
By this one bloody trial of sharp war."

Richard, too, hard pressed and suffering from many deserters, made such preparations as were possible.

"Up with the tent. Come, noble gentlemen.
Let us survey the vantage of the ground:
Let's want no discipline, make no delay;
For, lords, to-morrow is a busy day."

On the other side of the field Richmond carefully made his arrangements.

"Sir William Brandon, you shall bear my standard.
Give me some ink and paper in my tent—
I'll draw the model and the form of battle,
Limit each leader to his several charge
And part in just proportion our small power."

Whereupon Richmond skillfully assigned the commands to his various nobles for the morrow's battle.

Timon of Athens is held up by Shakespeare as an example of the man who, easy going, amiable and popular, neglects to prepare himself against emergencies.

His faithful steward begs his attention to his affairs. As many times as he brings in his accounts, Titus dismisses the matter with a wave of his hand and, an easy tribute to his steward's honesty and a profession of belief that all is going well, "in some sort, these wants of mine are crowned," protests Timon to the upbraidings of Flavius.

"That I account them blessings; for by these
Shall I try friends. You shall perceive how you
Mistake my fortunes; I am wealthy in my friends."

How poorly this confidence serves is shown when his servant, having made the rounds of those whom Timon had befriended, returns empty handed save for poor excuses. "This is no time to lend money, especially upon bare friendship," one put it.

The easy, slipshod, generous, let-to-morrow-take

"And why should Caesar be a tyrant then?
Poor man! I know he would not be a wolf,
But that he sees the Romans are but sheep;
He were not lion were not Romans hinds.
Those that with haste will make a mighty fire
Begin it with weak straws; what trash is Rome,
What rubbish and what offal when it serves
For the base matter to illuminate
So vile a thing as Caesar!"

Weakness in Shakespeare's presentation invites attack and disaster. The spirit that moves, that accomplishes, is the one which bids men strive with things impossible and get the better of them. Antony, alert to new dangers after the death of Caesar, called Octavius' attention to essentials.

"And now Octavius, Brutus and Cassius
Are levying powers; we must straight make head.
Therefore let our alliance be combin'd,
Our best friends made and our best means stretch'd
out."

And let us presently go sit in council,
How covert matters may be best disclosed,
And open perils straight answered."

"Let us do so, for we are at the stake
And pass'd about with many enemies;
And some that shall have in their hearts, I fear,
Millions of mischief."

So Octavius answers Antony.
Brutus discerns the man who merely talks for show from him who makes ready with his heart for the deed before him.

"There are no tricks in plain and simple faith;
But hollow men, like horses hot at hand,
Make gallant show and promise of their mettle;
But when they should endure the bloody spur
They fall their crests, and like deceitful jades
Sink in the trial."

Urging the forward march to Philippi, Brutus says:

"Our legions are brim full, our cause is ripe;
The enemy increaseth every day,

