

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NIETZSCHE.

It might almost be laid down as a dictum that great men, and particularly very serious great men, ought never to be taken too seriously. For the greatness of a man is no proof of the truth of his opinions. That is proved by the fact that the earth does not hold an error which some great man has not sanctioned. Great men are valuable for their heat rather than for their light, for the stimulus they give rather than for the pure and unadulterated wisdom they impart. And this is specially true of Nietzsche, that sombre and arresting figure who, in recent years, has aroused the ever-growing interest of the intellectual world. By many this remarkable man is regarded as the very incarnation of anarchy. He is the arch-destroyer. He respects nothing. Other iconoclasts before him had their limitations. They sought to destroy religion, and even to destroy law and government. But, at any rate, they recognised some moral law, in whose name they professed to speak and act. But Nietzsche had no more respect for morality than he had for religion. He affirmed that both Christianity and humanitarianism were sentimental cant, and that if they were persisted in the end must be decadence and death. He detected, or imagined he detected, in modern life evidence of effeminacy, and he protested against it in the name of the future of the race—in the name of the super man. Being a great scholar—he was a very learned philologist—he had a tendency to talk of modern life in terms of ancient Grecian history. He held that the great tragedies of Greece had their origin in the virile, masculine spirit of the Dionysiac festivals. And he opposed this spirit to that of modern Christianity and modern ethics which in his view favoured leniency, pity, sentimentalism, cant, and convention. Men must cast this all aside, he practically said, and get back to the manly, dare-devil, defiant spirit of the Dionysiac days. In a word, Nietzsche held that we should be strong, even at the risk of being cruel, rather than be sentimental and altruistic, at the risk of dying out. In one sense, Tolstoi and Nietzsche, in spite of their fundamental antagonism, were at one. They both agreed that unqualified altruism must end in death. Tolstoi was willing to sacrifice life to

Tolstoi was willing to sacrifice life to altruism, but Nietzsche preferred to sacrifice altruism to life.

How, then, must Nietzsche be received? Must he be regarded as a great thinker pointing the true pathway for mankind? Or is he to be viewed as a visionary and dreamer of dreams? Or must we regard him as a man of brilliant but diseased intellect, to be studied, if studied at all, in the light of mental pathology? A great systematic thinker he certainly was not. He lacked the calm of the great philosophers—of men like Descartes, Hume, Kant, or Spencer. He was a man of volcanic nature. Besides, he was a strange blending of the philosopher, the poet, the visionary, and the moralist. For even Nietzsche had his ethical system. His creed was that there was no creed, and he preached it with a singleness of purpose and a fervour of enthusiasm strongly suggestive of religious devotion and ethical ecstasy. By the force of his criticisms he has compelled men to examine the foundations of their creeds, conventions, and ethical systems. It is good that even truth itself should be assailed, provided it is assailed by a sincere man who believes he is fired by a noble purpose. As Diderot said long ago, "An opinion that has never been disputed has never been proved." Even the profoundest truths and the wisest rules of conduct become empty husks unless they are filled by the human spirit, which alone can give them life. John Milton knew that well. In his immortal "Areopagitica" he says: "A man

may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believes things only because his pastor says so, or the assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though the belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy." In the light of the great truth enshrined in those words, even Nietzsche may be regarded as a benefactor to the world. He has compelled men to think; he has forced upon them the obligation of giving a reason for the faith that is in them. Those who fear that he will overwhelm the foundations of morality and usher in the reign of moral anarchy are guilty of unpardonable timidity. Goodness, purity, honesty, and kindness rest on too broad a foundation to be swept away by the brilliant aphorisms

swept away by the brilliant aphorisms of even a thousand Nietzches. Morality rests on the secure foundation of generations of human experience; it has indeed entered into the fibre and texture of the human soul. None the less truth, when unchallenged, is apt to become mere truism, and morality, when uncriticised, to degenerate into mere convention. And so the Nietzches of the world have their uses, for they render this great and imperishable service to mankind—they compel us to abandon the errors with which the truth tends to be mixed up and obscured, and, above all, they rouse us to a keener recognition and a deeper consciousness of the great central certainties of morality and religion.