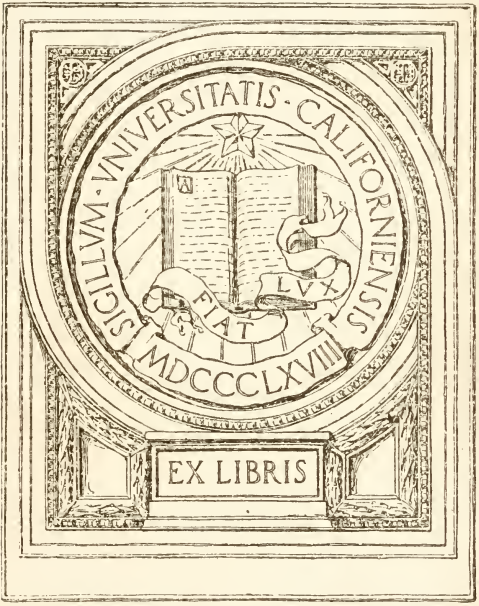

SOPHOCLES

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Of the translations, those marked (A.) are by the late Professor Anstice; those marked (D.) are by Dale; and those distinguished by (P.) are from Professor Plumptre's translation, to which reference has been made above.

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SOPHOCLES.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

The materials for our poet's life are few and untrustworthy. The real biographies have perished; and all that we have in their place is a brief anonymous memoir, some notices in Suidas, and a few anecdotes retailed to us from different sources by Athenæus, the great collector of the scandal and gossip of his day—and these last probably belong to the mock pearls of history. The mere attempt, then, to compile a detailed life of Sophocles out of this "rubbish heap of tradition," is (to use Professor Plumptre's illustration) like "making bricks without straw." As in the case of Shakspeare, we know little of the man except what we can glean from his writings. Some few facts, however, rest on higher testimony; and these may be shortly noticed.

Colonus, a small village about a mile to the north of Athens, was the birthplace of Sophocles; and every feature of its scenery has been vividly described by him in a famous choral ode, to be hereafter noticed.

The landscape must have been strikingly picturesque, with its white limestone cliffs, its dark grove sacred to "the gentle goddesses," and echoing with "all throats that gurgle sweet," with the pure clear stream of the Cephisus, never failing in the hottest summer, and watering this garden of Attica.

Whatever may have been his father's calling, Sophocles was himself a gentleman. "His natural gifts," says Lord Lytton, "were the rarest that nature bestows on man, genius and beauty." Body and mind were carefully trained under the best masters; and he received the complete liberal education of his age. We can imagine how the boy grew up to manhood, feeding his poetic fancy with those ancient founts of inspiration,—the adventures of the Argonauts or the "tale of Troy divine;" just as the genius of Spenser and Milton was nourished on the old romances of our country. We can imagine, too, how he must have been inspired with the eternal ideas of truth and beauty—wafted, as in Plato's State, "like gales of health blowing fresh from salubrious lands," *—by the constant sight and presence of that noble city, robed in her "imperial mantle of architecture," adorned by the paintings of Panænus and by the sculpture of Phidias,—her streets crowded with strangers from all lands, and her harbours filled with the masts of a thousand triremes.

Sophocles made an early entrance on public life. At the age of sixteen his grace and beauty were such that he was selected from the youth of Attica to lead the

* Republ. iii. 401.

choral dance around the altar which had been raised in honour of the victory of Salamis. Ten years later, we find him coming forward as the rival of Æschylus at the great festival of Bacchus, at which the prizes for tragedy were awarded. Cimon and his nine colleagues had just returned from Samos, bringing with them the bones of Theseus, which were to serve as a talisman against plague and pestilence. The generals entered the theatre just before the commencement of the performances, and the Archon, estimating rightly the greatness of the occasion, swore them in to judge the case between the rival dramatists. They unanimously awarded the first prize to Sophocles; and Æschylus, it is said, in deep resentment of their verdict, left Athens, and retired to the court of Hiero at Syracuse.

A first success is everything in literature; and Sophocles, like others, found himself famous in a day. For more than forty years he continued to exhibit plays—sometimes winning the first prize, sometimes defeated in his turn by some younger candidate for fame, but never once degraded to the third place. So prolific was his genius, that he is said to have composed upwards of a hundred tragedies. Of these but seven are extant.

He had inherited a moderate income, and it is said this independence was necessary to the poet, for custom and etiquette prevented him from making money by his plays. "The crown of wild olive" was the only stimulus to genius; for the "two obols" paid by each citizen for admission went to the lessees of the theatre, and served to defray the necessary expense of scenery

and decorations, as well as to pay the actors. The Greek would have regarded with the same disfavour the tragedian who made a profit on his plays, as the Sophist who might (as many of them in fact did) take money for his lectures, or the statesman who should accept salary or pension for what should have been a labour of love.* All such sordid gains, they held, should be left to the base-born mechanic; no gentleman should degrade his profession to the level of a trade. In the case of the poet, who was supposed to receive his inspiration direct from heaven, it would have been simple profanation to sell, as it were, the very bread of life. It was sufficient glory and recompense for him if the State—or some rich citizen representing the State—should defray the expenses of a Chorus, that he might "see his poetry put into action—assisted with all the pomp of spectacle and music, hallowed by the solemnity of a religious festival, and breathed, by artists elaborately trained to heighten the eloquence of words, into the ear of assembled Greece."†

Like every other Athenian, Sophocles was a politician, and he took his part in the stirring scenes of

* We may judge how mercenary, in a Greek point of view, would have seemed such an exhibition as that of the Royal Academy, from the analogous case of Zeuxis, the Millais of his day, who exhibited his picture of Helen, and took money at the doors. Crowds flocked to see the painting, and the painter cleared a large sum—but the name of 'Helen' was changed by a satirical public to 'The Courtesan.' (See St John, Manners and Customs of Ancient Greece, i. 303.)

† Lord Lytton's Athens, ii. 516.

public life, personally serving in more than one campaign. But public life palled upon him, as it palls on every ardent and enthusiastic character. His temper was too gentle and his principles too chivalrous for him to grapple with the unscrupulous party spirit of the times. Not even the charm of a friendship with Pericles, or the honour of a statesman's position, could console him for the loss of literary ease; and we can understand how gladly he must have left the restless and busy Athens for the peaceful and lovely scenery of Colonus. There, like Pope on his lawn at Twickenham, like Wordsworth in the solitude of Grasmere,—or, to use a more classical illustration, like Horace at his Sabine farm,—he was free to follow the bent of his genius, and to draw from nature his purest and most perfect picture of a Greek landscape.

Yet the scenes which he had left might well have attracted a more ambitious spirit

"To scorn delights, and live laborious days."

Athens was then teeming with all the exuberant life which marked the renaissance in modern times. Thought found its utterance in action, in the passion for war and in the restless spirit of enterprise, in all that many-sided energy which marked the Athenians —a people of whom their own historian speaks as "never quiet themselves, and never allowing others to be so." * Assuredly Sophocles was born under a lucky star; for his life was coeval with the greatness of his country, and he did not live to see the Long

* Thucydides, i. 70.

Walls—the symbol of that greatness—levelled in the dust to the sound of Spartan music. He lived in an age of heroes. All round him were the very men who had made his country what it was, and with most of these men he was on terms of the most familiar intercourse. Doors were not then, as now, "barred with gold;" and Athenian society opened its arms to the graceful and engaging poet, so genial in his temper, so lively in conversation, so true a friend, so pleasant a guest. We can imagine Sophocles in his old age recalling the memories of his youth; recounting to his children, with pardonable pride, the historic names and scenes with which he had been so familiar: he would tell them how he had listened to the thunder of "Olympian Pericles;" how he had been startled by the chorus of Furies in the play of Æschylus; how he had talked with the garrulous and open-hearted Herodotus; how he had followed Anaxagoras, the great Sceptic, in the cool of the day among a throng of his disciples; how he had walked with Phidias, and supped with Aspasia.

Sophocles enjoyed a rare popularity in Athens. Even that prince of satirists, Aristophanes, can find neither flaw nor blemish in his moral armour against which to launch an arrow. He directs unsparing raillery against the bombast of Æschylus and the sophistry of Euripides; but he has nothing to say against this "good easy man"—"as gentle below the earth as he was gentle in his lifetime."* The scandalous anecdotes of Athenæus may be taken for what

* Aristoph. Ranæ, 82.

they are worth; and it is difficult for any one who has read his plays, with all their purity of passion, their delicacy of feeling, their chivalrous principles of honour, to believe them, with Lord Lytton, to have been written by a "profligate" or a "renegade." *

He died full of years and honour, loved (as his biographer tells us) in every way by all men; and his fellow-citizens paid due reverence to the tomb of him who was truly "the prince of poets in his time." The god Bacchus, himself, the divine patron of the tragic drama, was said to have appeared to Lysander, whose armies were then beleaguering Athens, and to have demanded that a safe-conduct should be given to the poet's friends to bear his body beyond the city walls to Decelea, and there bury it in the sepulchre of his fathers.

Sacrifices were offered to his Manes, and a statue of bronze was erected to his memory; but "more enduring than brass or marble" has been the epitaph composed in his honour by Simmias of Thebes, thus gracefully translated by Professor Plumptre:—

"Creep gently, ivy, ever gently creep,
Where Sophocles sleeps on in calm repose;
Thy pale green tresses o'er the marble sweep,
While all around shall bloom the purpling rose.
There let the vine with rich full clusters hang,
Its fair young tendrils fling around the stone;
Due meed for that sweet wisdom which he sang,
By Muses and by Graces called their own."

We now pass to the inner life of Sophocles—to his

* Athens, ii. 520, note.

character and work. It is but a step from Æschylus to him, yet the step involves an immensity of change, not only in the man, but in the age. Instead of the rough son of Mars—the hero of Marathon—who (as Sophocles himself said) "did what was right without knowing it," we have the graceful and artistic poet, skilled in weaving plots and in delineating characters. The change is like passing from storm to sunshine. The wild imagery, the unearthly conceptions, the heroes and the heroines, human indeed, but with the human image dilated to colossal proportions, like the spectre of the Brocken, and with the passions of the Titans who scaled Olympus—the "ox-horned Io," the blood-stained Furies, and the "wild Cassandra,"—all these have disappeared. In their stead the scene is occupied by creations of flesh and blood, with human sympathies and affections, true and real in character, because their types were taken from the gallery of life. The serenity which marked the poet seems to influence his readers and spectators. So true is he to nature, so gradual is his development of each legend, however wonderful or monstrous it may be, that we have no alternative but to believe and sympathise. It is with Sophocles as with Spenser. "Au plus fort de l'invention il reste serein. Sa bonne foi nous gagne ; sa sérénité devient la nôtre. Nous devenons crédules et heureux par contagion. . . . 'C'est une fantasmagorie,' dira-t-on ? Qu'importe ? si nous la voyons, et nous la voyons, car 'Sophocle' la voit." *

* Taine (Hist. de la Littérature Anglaise, i. 334), who thus speaks of Spenser.

The poet fell in with the change that had come over the spirit of his time. The generation of Æschylus—stout warriors who had fought at Marathon, and sturdy seamen who "knew nothing" (as Aristophanes said) "except to call for barley-cake, and shout 'yo-heave-ho'"—had been content to believe implicitly all that Homer and their poets had taught them; and seeing around them traces of some mysterious force whose agency and purpose they were powerless to explain, they made a god of this Necessity or Destiny, and called it Nemesis. She was, in truth, a jealous deity, causing the rich and prosperous to founder like a vessel on a sunken reef,* and in one short day changing their joy to sorrow,—striking them pitilessly down in the plenitude of their grandeur, as a child in mere wantonness strikes down the tallest poppies in the corn-field. It was in vain to attempt to coax or cajole this capricious power by tears or offerings. History had taught men the futility of such bribes. Polycrates had thrown his precious ring into the sea; Crœsus had filled the treasury of Delphi with his gold; but "no sacrifice or libation could save a man's soul from Death," and "on Death alone, of all divinities, Persuasion had no power."† And Herodotus, the most pious of historians, draws the obvious moral from the downfall of kings and the collapse of empires. "Envy," he says, "clings to all that mortal is. . . . Even a god cannot escape from Destiny."‡

* Æsch., Eumen. 565. † Æsch., Fragm. of Niobe.
‡ Hist. i. 35, 91; vii. 46.

Such was the "tremendous creed" of which Æschylus was a fitting exponent; with him the Furies are the satellites of Fate, and it is their eternal duty to pursue the murderer till death and after death. The complaint which Corneille puts into the mouth of Theseus, in his 'Œdipe,' might have been more truly uttered by Eteocles in the 'Seven against Thebes,' as he feels the blast of his father's curse which is wafting him to Hades:—

"Quoi! la nécessité des vertus et des vices
D'un astre imperieux doit suivre les caprices,
Et Delphes malgrè nous conduit nos actions
Au plus bizarre effet de ses predictions?
E'âme est donc toute esclave; une loi souveraine
Vers le bien ou le mal incessament l'entraine;
Et nous ne recevons ni crainte, ni désir,
De cette liberté qui n'a rien à choisir;
Attachés sans relâche à cet ordre sublime,
Vertueux sans mérite, et vicieux sans crime." *

—'Œdipe,' Act iii. sc. 5.

It is true that in the 'Prometheus' we have the spectacle of an indomitable will, proof against all suffering; yet it is in this very play that Æschylus most insists on the "invincible might of Necessity,"

* Readers of Shakspeare may remember Edmund's description of the "excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune (often the surfeit of our own behaviour), we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves and thieves by spherical predominance, . . . and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting on."—King Lear, act i. sc. 2.

to which wise men pay homage, and which is "a higher power than Jove." Prometheus defies the lightning, but he bows to Destiny, as the gladiators bowed to the autocrat in the imperial box, with their chant of *morituri te salutant*, knowing themselves to be doomed men, but dying with a good grace, and scorning to ask for quarter.

Gradually the Greek mind expanded. The seas were opened, commerce increased, men travelled far and saw much; and thus the same stimulus was given to national thought and feeling by maritime enterprise as to the Jews under Solomon, and to the English under Elizabeth.* And as the Athenians grew adventurous, so they grew self-reliant. They doubted and questioned where they had before been content to shudder and believe. They attributed more to themselves and less to the blind agency of Destiny; and thus, in this progress of rationalism, there ensued that momentous change in thought represented by the transition in history from Herodotus to Thucydides, and in poetry from Æschylus to Sophocles.

With this new generation, man is no longer bound hand and foot, powerless to move against his inevitable doom. He has liberty of choice in action, and by his knowledge or his ignorance, by his virtues or his vices, has made himself what he is. It is not so much a malignant power tormenting men in sheer envy at their wealth or happiness; but it is men themselves, who "play the fool with the times, while the spirits of

* See Stanley's Lectures on the Jewish Church, ii. 185; Froude's History of England, viii. 426.

the wise sit in the clouds and mock them." A long train of disastrous consequences often follows from a single impious speech or guilty deed—nay, even from a hot word or a hasty blow. Thus the idea of Destiny passes into that of retribution. Punishment surely follows sin, if not in a man's own day, yet descending, like an heirloom of misery, upon his children.

> "In life there is a seesaw; if we shape
> Our actions to our humours, other hands
> May shape their consequences to our pain."*

In fact, Sophocles seems to have asked himself the question put by Nisus to Euryalus in the Æneid, and to have answered it in his treatment of men in their relations to God:—

> "Dîne hunc ardorem mentibus addunt,
> Euryale? an sua cuique deus fit dira cupido?"†

In each of his plays he shows how passion works out its own end—whether it be the pride of Œdipus, the stubbornness of Creon, the insane fury of Ajax, or the

* So says Sophocles, Ajax, 1085 (translated in Mr D'Arcy Thompson's 'Sales Attici'), anticipating the well-known words of Shakspeare:—

> "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to scourge us."
> —King Lear, Act v. sc. 3.

† Virgil, Æn. ix. 184. Professor Conington translates the passage thus:—

> 'Can it be Heaven,' said Nisus then,
> 'That lends such warmth to hearts of men?
> 'Or passion surging past control
> 'That plays the god to each man's soul?'

jealousy of Dejanira. All these passions are simple and natural; there are no eccentricities of genius, no abnormal mental states, such as furnish the material of the modern drama. The Greek would not have understood the melancholy of Hamlet or the madness of Lear; still less would he have entered into the spirit of Timon's declaration,—

"I am misanthropos, and hate mankind."

The Athenian audience, with the joyous instincts of children—ever ready to "make believe"—gave themselves up to all the illusions of the scene and story, delighting, and freely expressing their delight, in the picturesque and ever-shifting series of graceful tableaux, so different from the still life of a statue or a painting. They were "as gods," knowing all the good and evil in the future of the play—such knowledge only increasing the expectancy with which they looked forward to Œdipus blinding himself, or Ajax falling on his sword. The manner in which the poet treated each old familiar tale was the test of his art, just as a modern preacher might discuss and illustrate, after his own proper taste and fashion, some well-known text. If we want a modern example of the keen interest and sympathy which may be excited in a large and intelligent audience by the lifelike representation of a history familiar to them from their childhood, we have not to go far to seek. The Passion-Play now acted at Ober-Ammergau has many points of resemblance to the Greek drama. In both there is the same reality and majestic slowness in the acting, the same rhythmical dialogue,

the same melodious choral songs, the same large stage, with architectural scenery half-open to the sky, and, above all, the same intensity of religious feeling, which thrills the actor, and passes from him, like an electric current, to an enthusiastic audience. And if this resemblance is apparent now, how much stronger must it have been in the middle ages, when the Bible was a sealed book to the poorer classes, while the Passion-Play embodied for them to the life the personages and scenes of Scripture—when, as a German critic describes it, "cloister and church were the first theatres, priests the first actors, the first dramatic matter was the Passion, and the first dramas the Mysteries."*

Sophocles developed this religious aspect of the drama; and no Athenian citizen could have seen his 'Ajax' or 'Antigone' without feeling their hearts burn within them, or without being touched and elevated by the mingled sweetness and purity and pathos which earned for the poet the title of the "Attic Bee." From his pages can be gleaned sentences which read like fragments from the inspired writings, and which might have furnished texts for a hundred sermons. With him the Deity is a personal and omnipresent being, far removed from that sombre and vindictive Nemesis which haunted Æschylus,—"neither sleeping nor waxing faint in the lapse of years, but reigning for ever in the splendour of Olympus,"—"speaking in riddles to the wise, but leaving the foolish in their own conceits." "Nothing is impossible with *Him*." "His works may perish, but *He* lives for all eter-

* Gervinus, Comment. on Shakspeare, i. 66.

nity." "Happiness is a fruit that grows in *His* garden only." "To honour *Him* is the first and greatest of commandments." * Here are lines which might have been written by a Christian divine :—

> "Speak thou no word of pride, nor raise
> A swelling thought against the gods on high ;
> For Time uplifteth and Time layeth low
> All human things ; and the great gods above
> Abhor the wicked as the good they love.
> . . . . . .
> Be blameless in all duties towards the gods ;
> For God the Father in compare with this
> Lightly esteemeth all things else ; and so
> Thy righteousness shall with thee to the end
> Endure, and follow thee beyond the grave." †

These sentiments pervade every play. It is only when unmanned by despair that his heroes are tempted, like Job, in the anguish of their hearts, to "curse God and die." Even then such impiety meets with its own reward. Well, therefore, might his unknown biographer declare Sophocles to have been "dear to the gods as no other man was ;" and with equal truth may Professor Plumptre hail him as one of those who were, in their degree, "schoolmasters unto Christ."

Mingled with this strong religious feeling in Sophocles was that melancholy supposed to be engendered only in the poets of the north. He is oppressed by

* Fragments of lost plays of Sophocles.

† Philoctetes, 1441. This and the preceding translations are mainly taken from 'Sales Attici.'

his sense of the feebleness of human intellect and the impotence of human foresight, as compared with the omnipotent wisdom of an eternal being. Like some master-spirit, he views the actions and passions of the characters which he has created with a half-contemptuous pity. He heaps upon mankind every epithet of scorn—"phantoms," "shadows," "creatures of a day," "born to misery as the sparks fly upwards." Hence springs what has been called his "Irony," so admirably illustrated in Bishop Thirlwall's well-known essay. "Men promise much and perform little. They think they are marching onward to fame and greatness, when the ground is opening beneath their feet, and they are sinking to destruction. They boast of their strength when they are really displaying their weakness. Like Œdipus, they solve the riddle of the Sphinx, and are blind to the riddle of their own lives." * And there had been sufficient historical examples, even within his own experience, to point the moral of this Irony. Scarcely one of those great statesmen whom he had personally known, commanding the armies or guiding the councils of his country, had either lived long or had seen good days. Defeat, disaster, or dishonour, had been the lot of all. Themistocles had died in a strange land, a pensioner on the Great King's bounty; Pericles had fallen a victim to the plague which was decimating his besieged countrymen; his nephew, the gay and gallant Alcibiades, was a traitor in the Spartan camp; while Nicias had perished

* Plumptre's Introd. to Sophocles, lxxxviii.

miserably, with the flower of his army, after the fatal night-march from Syracuse.

Many improvements are said to have been introduced by Sophocles on the Athenian stage. We are told that he raised the number of actors present at once upon the scene from two to three; that he attired them in splendid dresses—robes of saffron and purple, falling in long and graceful folds,—jewelled chaplets, and broad embroidered girdles. But above all, he increased the number of the Chorus, and gave a new form and spirit to the music which accompanied their odes. We, in our cold climate, can hardly appreciate the effect which music produced on the enthusiastic Greek temperament. The French are more susceptible to such influence; and few who have ever heard it can forget the sublime effect of the Marseillaise thundered out by a vast revolutionary throng. To the Greek, music was a passion and a necessity. Even now, a modern traveller compares their life to an opera, where men sing from birth to death; and perhaps the case was even stronger in the days of Sophocles, when "song rose from an Hellenic village as naturally as from a brake in spring." Whether the peasant might be watching by the cradle, working in the vineyard, or toiling at the oar, the labour was in each case lightened by some appropriate song. Their bards told how Arion charmed the dolphin, how the walls of Troy rose to the sound of Apollo's flute, as those of Jericho fell before the trumpets of the priests, and

how trees and rocks followed Orpheus as he sang. Even philosophers recognised this all-pervading influence. Aristotle has devoted a long and learned chapter of his Politics to the "moral influence of music;" and it was in music also (as most likely to be corrupted by innovation) that Plato, in his ideal State, places the watch-tower of his "guardians." The marriage hymn, the funeral dirge, the incantation of the witch, the chant of the physician, the solemn and melodious invocation of the priest, merely illustrate this universal passion. Ion, the rhapsodist, describes the strong emotion produced in himself and in his hearers by the recitation of Homer. "When that which I recite is pathetic," he says, "my eyes are filled with tears; when it is awful or terrible, my hair stands on end and my heart leaps. Moreover, I see the spectators also weeping in sympathy with my emotion, and looking aghast with terror."* If the mere recitation of hexameter verse could produce this effect, far more powerfully must the simple but passionate music of the Tragic Chorus, sung in unison by well-trained singers, have impressed the audience in the theatre, where the masks of perfect beauty, the graceful robes, and the majestic stature of the actors gave a solemn and almost unearthly character to the scene. Though Sophocles had a weak voice, he was himself a skilled musician; and in his choral odes (purposely shortened by him that they might not interrupt the current of the story) we can faintly trace the echo of that sweet and majestic melody which must once have

* Grote's Plato (Ion).

entranced all hearers—we can almost hear the harmony of voices, now rising loud and clear as they hail a prince or victor, and then dying away with a solemn Memnonian cadence as

> "They mourn the bridegroom early torn
> From his young bride, and set on high—
> Strength, courage, virtue's golden morn,
> Too good to die." *

* Horace, Od. iv. 2 (Conington's Transl.)

CHAPTER II.

ŒDIPUS THE KING.

No tragedy in history or in fiction can equal the horror of the tale of Œdipus. The plot is so simple as to be told in a sentence. An oracle foretells that Œdipus shall slay his father and be married to his mother; and, against his own will and knowledge, he fulfils his destiny. By a sudden revolution of fortune we see a man, to all appearance as wise as Solomon and as blameless as Job, hurled into an abyss of misery and despair; and this by a chain of circumstances of whose real import he is himself unconscious until the final catastrophe. It is a case where the punishment seems out of all proportion to the crime. Even when we take into account the passion, the pride, and the curiosity of Œdipus, we still feel that the criminal has been in a measure "the victim of a mistake"—that he is a mere puppet in the hands of some superior and relentless power. And yet this Fatality, to which Œdipus is subject, is not so great or capricious as at first sight it seems to be. It is true that chance and misfortune are the means which it makes use of for

the accomplishment of its purpose, but it uses them for the ends of Justice. "The real instruments," says M. Girardin, "by which Fate works, are men's unbridled passions; it strikes down the murderer by the murderer, and punishes the crime by the crime. But Justice appears beyond and above these furious impulses, and directs them, in spite of themselves, to that mysterious goal towards which it tends." * To the audience, who knew the story well, no suspense could have been so agonising as to watch the misguided king rushing headlong to his doom—to see him weaving himself the fatal chain of evidence which was to convict him of murder and incest,—and this without their being able to raise a voice to warn, or to stretch out a hand to save. And mingled with this feeling was that indefinable sympathetic fear—always strongly excited by the sight of sufferings to which we may be ourselves exposed — the dread which haunted each man among the audience lest he might himself some day prove an Œdipus. No one would have disclaimed the idea of his committing such monstrous sins with a more fervent sincerity than the criminal in this tragedy. "Is thy servant a dog, that he should do these things?" he would have asked; and yet, influenced by some mysterious impulse, he had done them all. And, lastly, the spectators must have felt that natural but selfish pleasure of looking down, like the gods of Epicurus, from the vantage-ground of their tiers of seats, on the storm of conflicting passions, the love and the rage, the hatred and the despair, which convulsed the

* Cours de Lit. Dramat., i. 189.

actors on the stage. Lucretius describes this commonest of all feelings in well-known lines: "Sweet it is," says he, "when on the great sea winds are troubling the waters, to behold from land another's deep distress. . . . 'Tis sweet again to look upon armies battling on the plains without sharing in the danger." *

It was the skilful manner in which all these emotions are worked up by Sophocles in this play that caused Aristotle, the great critic, to select 'Œdipus the King' as the model and masterpiece of Tragedy.

We are carried back by the poet to the same mythic period, with no pretence to historical date, to which Shakspeare carries us back in his kindred play of 'King Lear' †—an age of giants, when men's passions were at blood-heat, when atrocious crimes were followed by atrocious vengeance, and when the general violence and brutality of manners is only relieved by brighter touches in such characters as Theseus and Kent, Cordelia and Antigone. Œdipus himself might well say with Lear, that "the best and soundest of his time had been but rashness."

Laius, king of Thebes, took for his wife Jocasta, "daughter of the wise Menœceus," but she bore him no children. Then in his distress he asked help of the god of Delphi; and the god declared that a son should be born to him, but by the hands of this son he should surely die. As soon as the child, the hero of this tragedy, is born, his mother intrusts him to a servant, with strict charge that he should be left to

* Lucretius, ii. 1 (Munro's Transl.)

† Gervinus, Comment. on Shakspeare, ii. 204.

die in the wilderness. This cruel command is obeyed. The child's feet are pierced, cords are passed through them, and it is left hanging from a tree in the wildest pass of Mount Cithæron. There a shepherd finds it, and, moved with pity, carries it to his master Polybus, king of Corinth. The wife of Polybus, being childless, resolves to adopt the foundling as her own son, and thus the stranger is received into the palace, and is given the name of Œdipus—"Swell-foot." He grows up to manhood, never doubting that he is the son and heir of Polybus.

In the mean time King Laius had grown old, and thirty years after his child had been thus exposed, he made a second pilgrimage to consult the god of Delphi. From this pilgrimage he never returned, for on his way home he was attacked and slain by some unknown hand, at the spot where the road from Delphi branches off to Phocis and Bœotia. Creon succeeds him; but his reign is brief, for a monster, with the face of a woman, the wings of a bird, and the tail and claws of a lion, was bringing desolation on the city of Thebes. The Sphinx (as this monster was called) proposed a riddle which no Theban could solve; and the life of a citizen was the penalty for every failure. So terrible was the visitation, that Creon, in despair, offered the crown of Thebes and the hand of his sister Jocasta to any who could unravel the enigma and save the state.

At this crisis Œdipus, like the "fated fairy prince," comes to the rescue. He had left the court of Polybus, indignant at an insult offered him on the

score of his unknown birth, and chance or destiny had brought him to Thebes. Corneille makes him tell his own story—how on his arrival at the foot of the fatal rock he sees the ground covered with the mangled limbs of former unlucky interpreters—how, in their despair, the perishing citizens make large proffers to the man who shall deliver them :—

"Le peuple offre le sceptre, et la reine son lit;
De cent cruelles morts cette offre est tôt suivie;
J'arrive, je l'apprens, j'y hazarde ma vie.
Au pied du roc affreux semé d'os blanchissants,
Je demande l'énigme, et j'en cherche la sens;
Et ce qu'aucun mortel n'avait encore pu faire,
J'en devoile l'image, et perce le mystère.
Le monstre, furieux de se voir entendu,
Venge aussitôt sur lui tout de sang répandu,
Du roc se lance en bas, et s'écrase lui-même,
La reine tint parole, et j'eus le diadême."
—Œdipe, Act i. sc. 4.

Both the riddle and the answer given have become matter of popular and well-known story; and it is difficult to understand the perplexity of the Thebans, for the enigma was of the simplest kind: "A being with four feet has two feet and three feet and only one voice; but its feet vary, and, when it has most, it is weakest." Professor Plumptre has thus translated the answer of Œdipus :—

"Hear thou against thy will, thou dark-winged Muse of the slaughtered;
Hear from my lips the end bringing a close to thy crime:
Man is it thou hast described, who, when on earth he appeareth,

First as a babe from the womb, four-footed creeps on his way,
Then when old age cometh on, and the burden of years weighs full heavy,
Bending his shoulders and neck, as a third foot useth his staff." *—(P.)

And so the successful adventurer is made king, and takes for his wife Jocasta, who had been the wife of Laius, and by her he has both sons and daughters. For some years all went well with Œdipus. He had children, and lands, and wealth, and honour, and all that helps to make life precious. He was happy in the affections of his family and in the loyalty of his subjects. "Heaven and earth are silent for a generation; one might fancy that they are *treacherously* silent, in order that Œdipus may have time for building up to the clouds the pyramid of his mysterious offences. His four children incestuously born—sons that are his brothers, daughters that are his sisters—have grown up to be men and women before the first mutterings are becoming audible of that great tide slowly coming up from the sea, which is to sweep away himself and the foundations of his house. Hea-

* De Quincey ingeniously suggests that, after all, the truer answer to the riddle lay in the word *Œdipus*, since he more than any other fulfilled the conditions of these three ages of man, — first crawling helplessly on his swollen feet; then "walking upright at noonday" in the vigour of manhood, vanquishing the Sphinx, and winning crown and bride by his own unaided natural powers; then, in the closing scene, thrust forth from home and country, guided by his devoted daughter, "the third foot that should support his steps when the deep shadows of his sunset were gathering and settling about his grave."

ven and earth must now bear joint witness against him. Heaven spoke first." * For some cause unknown to the inhabitants, the wrath of the gods fell upon the state, and every source of life was blasted with that curse which was believed to follow upon crime. Thebes groaned under the worst plagues which smote the land of Egypt. Pestilence came upon the cattle; mildew blighted the fruits of the earth; the first-born of women were swept away by some fatal and mysterious malady. The whole city—and those among the poet's audience who had been in Athens during the Great Plague could realise the description—was "full of the dead and dying." It was to no purpose that unceasing prayers were offered, and that incense steamed upon the altars. The gods remained deaf and dumb to all entreaties. The citizens in the first chorus tell the tale of their sufferings thus :—

"The nurslings of the genial earth
Wane fast away;
The children, blighted ere the birth,
See not the day,
And the sad mother bows her head,
And, with her treasure lost, sleeps 'mid the crowded dead.

One upon another driven,
Fleeter than the birds of heaven,
Fleeter than the fire-flood's might,
Rush they to the realms of night,
Where, beyond the western sea,
Broods the infernal Deity,
While our city makes her moan
O'er her countless children gone."—(A.)

* De Quincey, The Theban Sphinx (Works, ix. 249).

Then at last the people, in their sorrow and despair, turn—as the plague-stricken Athenians turned to Pericles—to him who seemed to be the favourite of fortune, to the prince whose sagacity had once rescued them from the talons of the Sphinx; and in the opening scene of the play, a throng of citizens—young men and elders, priests and boys—are seated before the palace-doors of Œdipus, with boughs of laurel and olive, the emblems of supplication, in their hands. When the prince asks them the reason of their coming, they tell him of the plague and pestilence which "desolate the house of Cadmus," and implore him to lend his aid in this hour of their dire distress. Whether he be inspired by heaven, or trust to the "might of unassisted genius," let him repeat his former good work, and earn a second time the title of "Saviour of the State."

The answer of Œdipus is generous and dignified, and has all the complacency of gratified patriotism. Upon none (he says) have these evil days weighed more heavily than on himself: they have caused him many tearful and restless hours. He has long pondered over all possible modes of deliverance; and he has done what piety suggested—has laid his case before the gods, and is hourly expecting an answer from Delphi, whither Creon had been sent. Even as he speaks, Creon is seen approaching, with joy beaming from his eyes, and with his brows bound with a wreath of "Apollo's bays"—a badge which then bore the same sacred import as the palm-branch in the middle ages, for it marked the happy return of the pilgrim

from the shrine of Delphi, believed by the Greek to be the centre of the earth, just as Jerusalem was by medieval Christendom.

For once (Creon avers) Apollo has spoken plainly. It is the guilt of innocent blood which troubles the land. Laius had been foully murdered by unknown hands; and until the murderer was banished, or blood was repaid by blood, there should be neither peace nor rest for the people of Cadmus. Œdipus then asks a train of questions, which (as critics remark) show a strange ignorance of circumstances which must have been well known to every Theban. Creon tells him how, when, and where the murder had taken place, as far as rumour went. *One* eyewitness had escaped, who talked of a "band of robbers" falling on the king; but these, like Falstaff's "men in buckram," were afterwards shown to have been invented to screen his own cowardice. Œdipus then reproaches the Thebans for their previous neglect, and announces that he will take upon himself the office of discovering and punishing the unknown criminal:—

> "Right well hath Thebes, and right well hast thou
> Shown for the dead your care, and ye shall find,
> As is most meet, in me a helper true,
> Aiding at once my country and my God."—(P.)

Then the deputation of citizens, having secured a champion, withdraws in procession from the stage, and Œdipus is left alone. "During this pause," says one of the most acute of modern critics, "the spectator has leisure to reflect how different all is from what it

seems. The wrath of heaven has been pointed against the devoted city only that it might fall with concentrated force on the head of a single man; and he, who is its object, stands alone calm and serene. Unconscious of his own misery, he can afford pity for the unfortunate; and, as if in the plenitude of wisdom and power, he undertakes to trace the evil, of which he is himself the sole author, to its secret source." *

The Chorus of Theban citizens now enters, and, as in every chorus in Sophocles, their first ode is a solemn prayer. They draw a piteous picture of the miseries of Thebes, and they invoke its guardian gods to stay the plague which is wasting the inhabitants. Let them rise in defence of the city which has honoured them so well, and drive far away to the gloomy shores of Thrace the destroying angel who rides on the wings of pestilence.

"Lord of the starry heaven,
Grasping the terrors of the burning levin!
Let thy fierce bolt descend,
Scathe the Destroyer's might, and suffering Thebes befriend.
Speed thou here, Lycæan king,—
Archer, from whose golden string
Light the unerring arrows spring—
Apollo, lend thine aid!
And come, ye beams of wreathèd light,
Glancing on the silent night,
In mazy dance, on Lycia's height,
When roves the huntress maid.

* Bishop Thirlwall, "On the Irony of Sophocles," Philol. Museum, ii. 496.

Thou, the golden chaplet fair
Braiding 'mid thy clustering hair,
To thy native haunts repair,
  Thy name that gave;
Thou, whose brow the vine-lees stain,
Thou, to whom on star-lit plain
'Evoe!' sing the frenzied train,—
  Bacchus the brave!
With thy torch of pine defy
(Hated by the powers on high)
War's unhallowed deity:
  Haste thee to save!"—(A.)

Then Œdipus addresses the Chorus, as representing the people of Thebes; and to the audience, who knew the story well, every word in his speech must have sounded like the bitterest irony, as they listened to the speaker unconsciously invoking upon his own head a curse as solemn and emphatic as that of Kehama.

He speaks as one of themselves—a citizen to citizens —"a stranger to the tale, a stranger to the deed." Should the murderer confess at once, banishment shall be his only punishment. Should any give a clue to his discovery, the informant shall have a reward and thanks. But if, after this gracious offer, the criminal or accomplice hold their peace—

"That man I banish, whosoe'er he be,
From out the land whose power and throne are mine;
And none may give him shelter, none speak to him,
Nor join with him in prayers and sacrifice,
Nor give him share in holy lustral stream;
But all shall thrust him from their homes, declared
Our curse and our pollution."—(P.)

All things conspire, continues Œdipus, to make

him stand forth as the champion of the state, and "a helper to the god and to the dead." An illustrious prince has fallen, the land is smitten by the wrath of heaven; "and therefore," says the king—and his words carry with them a terrible significance—

> "And therefore will I strive my best for him,
> As for my father, and will go all lengths
> To seek and find the murderer; and for me,
> If in my house, I knowing it, he dwells,
> May every curse I spake on my head fall!"

The Chorus at once protest their innocence and ignorance. They "neither slew, nor knew who slew."

Besides sending Creon to Delphi, Œdipus had also summoned Teiresias, the great Theban seer, who, like Calchas in the 'Iliad,'

> "Knew all that is, and was, and is to be."

He had been deprived of his eyesight by Minerva for some offence, but the goddess, by way of atonement, had gifted him with such acute powers of hearing that he understood the language of all the birds of heaven. Even after death he retained his prophetic powers, and Ulysses himself sought the lower world to learn from his lips the secrets of the future, being, as the Chorus describe him here,

> "The seer inspired of God,
> With whom alone of all men truth abides."

Teiresias is led in by a boy, bearing the golden staff which was the badge of his augurial office. Œdipus addresses him with dignified courtesy, speak-

ing "as a king to a king." The Theban seer (he declares) is the only saviour to whom they can look in their hour of need. Let him therefore use all his powers of prophecy, and rescue the city from the curse which troubles it, by pointing out the murderer of Laius. But Teiresias, who knows but too well the horror of the actual truth, refuses to answer. Œdipus vainly protests and implores; and at last, imputing his silence to conscious guilt, angrily charges him with having himself instigated or actually committed the crime. Then the prophet is in his turn roused to anger; the fire kindles, and he speaks with his tongue. It is Nathan's denunciation of David: "*Thou* art the man." Œdipus is not only incredulous, but furious, to think that an augur can be at once so old and so vile a slanderer, since he can neither see the brightness of earthly sunshine nor the pure light of inward truth, and is blind at once in mind and body. And then he moralises on the envy that haunts greatness. It must be Creon, his own familiar friend, who has conspired with this "juggling mountebank," and has hired him thus to prophesy deceit.* His very art of

* Seneca, in his tragedy of 'Œdipus,' introduces a wild scene of incantation, in which both Creon and Teiresias take part. They repair at midnight to a valley outside the walls of Thebes, where a grove of oak and cypress overhangs a stagnant pool of water. There the prince and the prophet dig a trench, light a fire, and offer a libation of wine and blood, accompanied by a solemn prayer, to Hecate and the Queen of Night. Then, amid the howling of dogs and the rolling of thunder, the earth heaves and is rent asunder, and the spirits of the legendary heroes of the house of Labdacus (father of Laius) rise from the

augury is a lie; for it was Œdipus, and not Teiresias, who had expounded the fatal riddle of the Sphinx. If it were not for his hoary hairs (such is the king's last threat), he should have had such a bitter lesson as would have taught him the peril of falsehood.

Then Teiresias, "strong in the might of truth," denounces that infatuation and blindness of heart which is far worse than the loss of eyesight. His own mind and reason are clairvoyant, while Œdipus is ignorant of his own birth, ignorant of the sin in which he is living. Fatal—continues the prophet, using a bold metaphor—is the harbour in which the king has moored his barque, lulled by a vain security, and terrible is the storm which shall soon break upon himself and on his children. A light shall be thrown on this mysterious murder; but

> "No delight to him
> Shall that discovery bring. Blind, having seen—
> Poor, having rolled in wealth,—he, with a staff
> Feeling his way, to a strange land shall go."—(P.)

And with this terrible prediction of the truth echoing in the ears of his audience, the prophet is led from the stage. Even Œdipus, scoffer and sceptic though he be, is struck by the reality of the augur's manner, and remains silent and perplexed, pondering over the last

lower world. Among this shadowy throng is the ghost of Laius, his grey hair still dabbled with blood; and, being conjured by Teiresias to declare the truth, he denounces Œdipus as his murderer.

mysterious words relating to his birth, which Voltaire has well rendered

"Ce jour va vous donner la naissance et la mort"—

while the Chorus cannot restrain their terrible anxiety.

"Who," they ask, "can this unknown criminal be, that has dared deeds of such unutterable horror? It is high time for him to fly, swifter than the swiftest steed; for the god of prophecy is already on his track with the tardy but resistless power of doom. Though he lurks in some lonely cave or mountain glen, the living curse will haunt him."

It is hard (they conclude) to disbelieve the prophet of truth—harder still to believe that their king, the wise and good, is a guilty and polluted wretch; and so, until he be convicted by the clearest proofs, they will remember only the good deeds of Œdipus.

Creon now enters, and protests his innocence of the charge of conspiracy which Œdipus had brought against him; but hardly has he made his protest to the Chorus, when Œdipus appears, and angrily upbraids him with treasonable schemes. Creon rests his defence on grounds of common-sense—much in the style of Henry IV.'s famous speech to his son. Who could be so foolish (Creon asks) as to prefer

"To reign with fears than sleep untroubled sleep"?

As things are, he shares with Jocasta the counsels of

the king. All men court and flatter him; why should he barter his ease and pleasure for

> "The polished perturbation, golden care,
> That keeps the ports of slumber open wide
> To many a sleepless night"?*

He has no motive for acting a traitor's part, or for conspiring with Teiresias—

> "Then charge me not with crime on shadowy proof;
> For to thrust out a friend of noble heart
> Is like the parting with the life we love."—(P.)

But, as Voltaire† observes with regard to this passage, if a courtier accused of conspiracy should defend himself by such a commonplace, he would stand in great need of the clemency of his master. Certainly Œdipus is neither convinced nor reassured. Creon's skilful pleading only seems to him to prove that he can show equal skill in weaving plots; and he is proceeding to further accusations, when Jocasta herself enters, and strives to act the peacemaker between her husband and her brother. The Chorus join with her in urging Œdipus to forego his unjust suspicions. This is not the first time, says the queen, wishing to reassure her husband, that oracles have played men false. Laius had been warned that he should perish by the hands of his son—

> "And yet, as rumour tells, where three ways meet,
> By foreign ruffians was the monarch slain;"—(D.)

* King Henry IV., P. I. Act iv. sc. 4.

† Lettres sur Œdipe, quoted by M. Patin, Etudes sur Sophocle.

while the son who was to have killed his father was left to die in the wilderness.

Up to this moment we may suppose Œdipus to have been fully assured of his own innocence, and to have regarded the denunciation of Teiresias as the words of a madman or a traitor; but suddenly a chance expression of Jocasta causes a gleam of the real truth to flash across his mind. Where (he asks hurriedly and anxiously) was this spot "where three ways meet"? And the fatal answer comes—

> "They call the country Phocis, and the roads
> From Delphi and from Daulia there converge."

Then Œdipus, his suspicions being thus confirmed, in an agony of doubt asks question after question of the queen. Time, place, circumstances, all agree. Link after link in the fatal chain of evidence is closed about him, and each answer only makes it clearer that the words of Teiresias have been all too true. The king in his turn recounts his flight from Corinth, in dismay at the hideous destiny foretold to him by the Delphic god. He tells how on his journey he came to a place where three roads met; how he had been pushed from the road by an old grey-haired man, riding in a chariot, attended by a herald and servants; how blows had followed the insult; and how he had "slain them all." And, oh! the mockery of fate—the fearful "irony" of his threatened vengeance! It is on his own head that he has invoked that binding and irrevocable curse, which would be executed to the full by

the relentless powers of destiny. What man upon earth can be more utterly miserable?

"Am I not born to evil, all unclean?
If I must flee, yet still in flight my doom
Is never more to see the friends I love,
Nor tread my country's soil; or else to bear
The guilt of incest, and my father slay;
Yea, Polybus, who brought me up.
. . . May I ne'er look
On such a day as that, but far away
Depart unseen from all the haunts of men."—(P.)

There is still a faint chance that, after all, Œdipus may be innocent; but it rests upon the chance expression of the slave, who had talked of "a band of robbers." Jocasta, indeed, is still incredulous, and is confident that this oracle will be proved as idle as the others; but, at any rate, the slave shall be summoned and examined.

In the pause of the action of the drama, the Chorus, left alone in possession of the stage, draw the same moral from the tale of Œdipus which the Chorus in 'Samson Agonistes' draws from him who had been

"The glory late of Israel, now the grief."

Woe to the man who walks proudly, fearing neither justice nor the eternal laws of a God who grows not old—who neither keeps his life from impious speech, nor his hands from profaning holy things. His downfall must be speedy and inevitable—

"Climbing oft, Pride seeks to dwell
Throned on Fortune's pinnacle;
Hurried from the summit straight
Down the vast abrupt of Fate;
Hurled from realms of highest bliss,
Sinks she in the dark abyss.

. . . . .

God, in whom for aye I'll trust,
Holds His shield before the just!
But for the man whose heart is known
By haughty deed and lofty tone,
Spurning Heaven, and wrapt in self,
Led by sordid lust of pelf,—
Unto them may Fate dispense
Pride's unfailing recompense.
Conscience! thou to such canst deal
Heavier stroke than blade of steel;
Else, if man may Heaven defy,
If sleeps the vengeance of the sky—
Why this idle chant prolong?
Still be the dance, and hushed the song!"—(A.)

At this point begins the *dénouement* or disentanglement of the plot, in which Sophocles was thought especially to excel.

A messenger arrives from Corinth, bringing what he conceives to be good news. Polybus is dead, and Œdipus has been elected by acclamation king of "the city on two seas." Jocasta—who, with a woman's fickleness, is on her way bearing flowers and incense to the altars of the god whom she had just insulted—meets the messenger, and is wild with joy when she hears her own opinion of the falsity of oracles, as she believes, thus undoubtedly confirmed; and she sum-

mons her husband, who, like her, exults at the tidings. Who need now believe that there is any truth in the Delphic god? Chance rules all; human foresight avails nothing; and oracles do but oppress the mind like a hideous dream.

But it is a false joy and a short-lived triumph. Œdipus himself is still haunted by a misgiving that the latter part of the prophecy may yet prove true; for Meropa, his reputed mother, is yet alive. Then the messenger, wishing to relieve him from this remaining dread, tells him the whole story of his birth—how he was in reality no son of Polybus, but a foundling exposed on Mount Cithæron; how he had been delivered by a shepherd of Laius to the very witness who now tells the tale; and how he in his turn had carried the child to Polybus.

There is one question still to be answered—one link still requisite to complete the chain of circumstantial evidence: "Who was the mother, and from whom had the shepherd received the child?"

Jocasta, who had at once realised the truth from the story of the Corinthian messenger, and who knows but too well what the answer of the shepherd must be, vainly tries to dissuade her husband from inquiring farther; and then, finding him obstinately bent on discovering the fatal secret of his birth, she can endure her grief no longer, but rushes from the stage in a silent agony of despair.

After a short interval of what must have been torturing suspense to Œdipus—an interval occupied by the Chorus in idle guesses as to what nymph or god-

dess could have nursed this "child of fortune"—the last fatal witness, the aged shepherd who, half a century before, had received the child of Laius from its mother, is led before the king. Forced to give his evidence on pain of death and torture, slowly and reluctantly—for he realises the horrible import of his words—he reveals all that he knows. And then Œdipus utters a wail of agony (and even across the lapse of years that loud and bitter cry pierces us with terrible reality)—

"Woe! woe! woe! woe! all cometh clear at last."—(P.)

Then he too flies in horror from the stage.

Again the Chorus mourn over the vanity of life, and again their lament is like that of the sons of Dan in 'Samson Agonistes'—

"O mirror of our fickle state,
Since man on earth unparalleled!
The rarer thy example stands,
By how much from the top of wondrous glory,
To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art fallen."

Their king, who had once proved a tower of defence to his country in her hour of need, is now beset himself by countless sorrows. Would that the sin and death could be forgotten, and those guilty nuptials!

True to the principle of the Greek tragic drama, that horrors should not be acted in the presence of the audience, the rest of this miserable story is narrated by messengers. Jocasta, as we have seen, had left the scene suddenly and in ominous silence: she had

dashed open the doors of the fatal bridal chamber; and when Œdipus had followed her, raging for a sword to slay her who had been the innocent cause of his misfortunes, he finds her, his wife and mother, hanging by a noose from the ceiling, already dead. Then he tears the body down with a wild cry, and wrenching the golden buckle from her dress, he dashes the point into the pupils of his eyes—thus condemning himself to that perpetual darkness with which he had taunted Teiresias. "His feeling," says Bishop Thirlwall, "is not horror of the light and of all the objects it can present to him, but indignation at his own previous blindness. The eyes which have served him so ill, which have seen without discerning what it was most important for him to know, shall be extinguished for ever."

Well might the messenger say, at the close of his speech, that in the tragedy which he had just recounted,

> "Wailing and woe, and death and shame, all forms
> That man can name of evil, none have failed."—(P.)

All the rivers of the earth could not wash away the pollution which clings to the house and family.

The palace-doors are now rolled back, and Œdipus comes forward with wild gestures, the gore still streaming from eyes that are "irrecoverably dark amid the blaze of noon." The Chorus, horror-stricken, cannot endure the sight, and hide their faces in their robes. Pity and consolation are out of place in the presence of such misery as his. They can only utter

broken exclamations of sorrow and dismay. "What," they ask, "has prompted such an outrage? Why has he thus doomed himself to blindness"—

> "As in the land of darkness, yet in light,
> To live a life half-dead, a living death"?*

No man's hand has smitten him, replies Œdipus, save his own; but he has been fast bound to the wheels of a cruel necessity, and it is Apollo who has prompted such grim handiwork. Corneille gives the spirit of his justification:—

> "Aux crimes malgrè moi l'ordre du ciel m'attache,
> Pour m'y faire tomber a moi-même il me cache;
> Il offre, en m'aveuglant sur ce qu'il a prédit,
> Mon père à mon épée et ma mère à mon lit.
> Hélas! qu'il est bien vrai qu'en vain on s'imagine
> Derober notre vie à ce qu'il nous destine!"
>
> —Œdipe, Act v. sc. 7.

Then he breaks out into passionate self-reproach, as he recalls with remorseful tenderness those old familiar scenes of his youth—

> "All fair outside, all rotten at the core;"

the woodlands of Cithæron, the court of Polybus, and that "narrow pass where three ways met." No guilt or misery, he declares, can be like his. Let them then drive him forth from the city of his fathers, and let them hide him for ever from the sight of men, and from the light of day.

Creon now enters, and, with a nobility alien to his

* Samson Agon., l. 99.

character in the succeeding play, refrains from casting either scorn or reproach on the fallen greatness of the king; and Œdipus, grateful for this kindness, makes his last request. Let them bury her who lies dead within the palace as becomes a king's daughter; for himself—he prays he may be allowed a "lodge in some vast wilderness," far removed from the scenes of his misery: his sons can take good care of themselves; but let pity be shown to his two daughters, who are left desolate, and to whom he wishes to bid farewell.

Creon had anticipated this wish, and Antigone and Ismene now enter. Œdipus is touched by this fresh kindness, and shows it:—

"A blessing on thee! May the Powers on high
Guard thy path better than they guarded mine!"—(P.)

Then, embracing his children, he mournfully dwells upon the dreary life that must await them, uncheered either by a parent's love or by a husband's affection; for the shame of their birth must mar all possible happiness. It lies in Creon's power to act a noble part, and prove himself a father to these fatherless children.

Then the Chorus, turning to the spectators, bid them learn a lesson from the tale of Œdipus, who more than any other prince had

"Trod the paths of greatness,
And sounded all the depths and shoals of honour."

Let them mark how the favourite of fortune, the spoiled child of destiny, had fallen miserably from his high estate:—

"Mark him now dismayed, degraded, tossed on seas of
wildest woes;
Think on this, short-sighted mortal, and, till life's decid-
ing close,
Dare not to pronounce thy fellow truly happy, truly blest,
Till, the bounds of life passed over, still unharmed he
sinks to rest."—(D.)

Here ends 'Œdipus the King,' as Sophocles has presented it to us. Its "sensational" character caused it to be frequently imitated. Julius Cæsar, Lucullus, and Seneca all wrote plays bearing the same name. Corneille adapted it to suit a French audience, introducing a host of minor characters, and improving the plot, according to his own ideas, by "the pleasing episode of the loves of Theseus and of Dirce"—the latter of whom he supposes to be the daughter and heiress of Laius. Dryden and Lee again adapted it for the English stage, with the inevitable ghost and "confidant;" and it was so performed at Drury Lane, when Mr Kemble took the part of Œdipus. But of all these translations and adaptations, none comes near the majestic simplicity of the story as told by Sophocles.

CHAPTER III.

ŒDIPUS AT COLONUS.

Years are supposed to have passed away since the curtain fell on the horrors of the preceding tragedy. In the first burst of his despair, the one wish of Œdipus had been to leave Thebes with all its associations of guilt and misery, and to bury himself far from the haunts of men in the solitude of the desert. But an oracle forced him to remain on the scene of his crimes. Time gradually cooled his passion, and taught him resignation. Life once more gave him a taste of pleasure in the tender affection of his daughters; and it seemed as if the gods themselves had relented, and would allow him to die in peace. But Creon (his successor on the throne), with the consent, if not at the suggestion, of his own sons, Eteocles and Polynices, drove the aged king forth from Thebes, to be a wanderer on the face of the earth. Their excuse for this unnatural cruelty was, that they feared lest he should bring pollution on the land; but why (as Œdipus himself asks) had they waited these many years before they discovered the danger?

And so it came to pass that Œdipus left Thebes, bitterly denouncing the ingratitude of his sons, and praying that sooner or later they might feel the weight of a father's curse. (In the "Seven against Thebes" of Æschylus, it has already been told how terribly this curse was fulfilled.*) The daughters proved kinder than the sons. Ismene indeed stayed at Thebes, but her heart was with her father in his exile; while Antigone, with unflinching affection, had guided his steps in his wanderings from city to city. Œdipus himself, in this play, describes how her tender affection for him knew no rest, and how she,

"Still wandering sadly with me evermore,
Leads the old man through many a wild wood's paths,
Hungry and footsore, threading on her way.
And many a storm, and many a scorching sun,
Bravely she bears, and little recks of home,
So that her father find his daily bread."—(P.)

The reader of Dickens—and the modern novelist is not unworthy, perhaps, of comparison with the Athenian poet—will remember the picture of "little Nell."

But, in spite of all these hardships, we can well imagine the delight it must have been to escape from the polluted city to the fresh pure breezes of Cithæron or Hymettus, and how

"The pair
Wholly forgot their first sad life, and home,
And all that Theban woe, and ever stray
Through sunny glens, or on the warm sea-shore,

* See vol. vii. of this Series, 'Æschylus,' p. 104.

In breathless quiet after all their ills ;
Nor do they see their country, nor the place
Where the Sphinx lived among the frowning hills,
Nor the unhappy palace of their race,
Nor Thebes, nor the Ismenus, any more." *

For many months the father, led by the child, had roamed, dependent on the chance liberality of strangers, until they reach the spot where the play opens, the village of Colonus, a mile to the north of Athens, the birthplace of the poet.

And here let us notice the contrast, shown even in the first few lines of the play, between Œdipus the king and Œdipus the exile. It is as great as that between Lear in his palace and Lear in the hovel on the heath. The hot and furious temper has been chastened ; the proud heart has been humbled in the dust ; the spirit which had been so impatient of the advice of Creon and of the warnings of Teiresias—which had thrown impious doubt on the truth of heaven—has been taught a lesson of patience and contentment, as Œdipus says himself, "by his afflictions, by the hand of time, by the force of a noble nature." "Œdipus the Great," as he had proudly termed himself to the admiring Thebans, is no more ; and we see instead an aged and sightless exile, clothed in rags, leaning on the arm of his helpless daughter. But he has gained more than he has lost. Those powers of destiny which had tried him, as he thought, with such wanton and relentless cruelty in former days, are changed to benefi-

* Matthew Arnold's 'Empedocles on Etna.' The liberty has been taken of slightly altering the first few lines.

cent spirits who guide him by the hand to the bourne of his earthly pilgrimage. Though stripped of his kingdom, he has acquired peace and serenity of mind. "The storm of passion has subsided, and left him calm and firm. He is conscious of a charmed life, safe from the malice of men and the accidents of nature, and reserved by the gods for the accomplishment of high purposes." * Ducis, in his play of 'Œdipe,' makes the king himself describe the change which had come over his troubled spirit in some eloquent lines :—

"Sur mon front, cependant, dis-moi, reconnais-tu
L'inaltérable paix qui reste à la vertu ?
Je marche sans remords vers mon dernier asile :
Œdipe est malheureux, mais Œdipe est tranquille."
—Acte iii., sc. 5.

The scenery of Colonus has scarcely changed since the days when Sophocles described his birthplace. The landscape has that enduring beauty which Byron noticed as characteristic of Greece in a well-known passage—

"Yet are thy skies as blue, thy crags as wild,
Sweet are thy groves, and verdant are thy fields,
Thine olive ripe, as when Minerva smiled,
And still his honied wealth Hymettus yields." †

A modern traveller ‡ has in the same way described the rich contrast of colours which pervades this spot—the sombre green of the bay and myrtle relieved by the golden orange-bloom, the red pomegranate, and

* Bishop Thirlwall. † Childe Harold, ii. 87.
‡ Hughes's Travels in Greece.

the purple clusters of the vine. Colonus was, besides, rich in sacred associations; all around it lay "holy ground." Not only had Poseidon, the god of horses, and the Titan Prometheus, made the place their own, but there was here also a grove dedicated to the "Gentle Goddesses" (as those whom we otherwise know as the Furies were called, by one of those pious euphemisms common in Greek speech), within whose precincts no profane foot might tread, whose awful name no mortal might presume to utter, and by whose shrine their very worshippers pass "in silence and with averted eyes."

But Œdipus and his daughter know nothing of the sacred character of the spot to which they have wandered; and Antigone cannot even tell her father the name of the stately city, whose "diadem of towers" is seen in the distance. The aged king, wearied by his journey, sits down to rest his limbs on a rough unhewn stone within the sacred precinct of the goddesses. Then there enters a wayfarer from Athens, who, horror-struck at the apparent profanation, bids him leave a spot where "man neither comes nor dwells." But Œdipus, who has caught the name of the dread goddesses, recognises the "sign of his fate," and will not move; and at length the Athenian, impressed by the dignified earnestness of his tone and manner, leaves the stage to summon his townsmen of Colonus.

Then Œdipus, left alone with his daughter, addresses a solemn prayer to the dread powers at whose shrine he is a suppliant:—

"O dread and awful beings, since to halt
On *your* ground first I bent my wearied limbs,
Be ye not harsh to Phœbus and to me!
For he, when he proclaimed my many woes,
Told of this respite after many years,
That I should claim a stranger's place, and sit
A suppliant at the shrine of dreaded gods,
And then should near the goal of woe-worn life,—
To those who should receive me bringing gain;
To those who sent me—yea, who drove me—evil;
And that sure signs should give me pledge of this,
Earthquake, or thunder, or the flash of Zeus.

. . . . . .

Come, ye sweet daughters of the Darkness old!
Come, O thou city bearing Pallas' name,
O Athens, of all cities most renowned!
Have pity on this wasted spectral form
That once was Œdipus."—(P.)

The aged citizens of Colonus, who form the Chorus, now enter, in a fever of indignation that any stranger should have ventured to set foot within the holy grove of the "Virgin Goddesses;" and at last Œdipus, taught by his adversity not to "war with fate" or to offend pious scruples, allows Antigone to lead him from the precinct. The Chorus, with an undignified curiosity which contrasts with the simple yet refined courtesy of the Homeric times, ask a string of questions as to the stranger's name and birth. When Œdipus reluctantly confesses that he is "the son of Laius," they bid him instantly depart from their coasts, lest he bring the same pollution upon Attica which he had brought on Thebes; and not even the piteous entreaties of Antigone can prevail on them to change this decision.

Œdipus indignantly protests against such churlish denial of hospitality. What will become, he says, of the "fame and fair report" which Athens has earned as the chivalrous protector of the helpless and oppressed, if they refuse shelter to a poor outcast like himself, who, after all, has been "more sinned against than sinning"? Let them not bring shame upon a city which boasts itself to be especially favoured by the gods, by dishonouring a suppliant whom these very gods protect, and who brings with him blessing and profit to the land. And then Œdipus wisely "appeals to Cæsar." Theseus, their king, shall hear his story, and his subjects must bow to his decision.

At this point a fresh channel is given to the current of the action by the sudden advent of a woman, who is seen riding towards Colonus mounted on a horse of Sicilian breed; and almost before Antigone has recognised her for certain, she is in the arms of her "own dear sister Ismene." She brings news from Thebes. The curse of the father is already being fulfilled to the destruction of his sons. An "evil spirit from the gods," working upon their own vile passions, has driven them into open war for the crown of Thebes. Polynices, exiled by his younger brother, has

> "Fled to the vales of Argos, and contracts
> A new alliance, arms his martial friends,
> And vaunts that Argos shall requite his wrongs
> On guilty Thebes, and raise his name to heaven."—(D.)

Moreover, continues Ismene, an oracle has declared that the issue of the struggle depends on Œdipus.

"Dead or living," his body will decide the fortunes of the war; and Creon is even now on his way to take possession of his person, and to bring him near the borders of the Theban land, intending to keep him a prisoner there until his death, when his tomb would serve as a fortress against the enemies of Thebes.

Œdipus is more bitterly incensed than ever at the heartless and selfish conduct of his sons. They had acquiesced in the sentence which had doomed him to poverty and exile; they had suffered him to be cast forth from his home and country, when "one small word," spoken by them in his defence, would have saved him from such dishonour; they had rioted in luxury while he wandered a miserable outcast, dependent on his daughter's aid;—and now, to suit their own ambitious purposes, they would force him to return to Thebes. Never will he so return, he emphatically declares—so help him those dread powers who are now his guardians. He will remain on the spot to which his destinies have brought him, and prove himself in very truth the "great deliverer" of Athens, the city which has given him refuge.

The Chorus now instruct him that, if he really wishes to befriend their city, he must first make his peace with the Avengers of the dead, and offer libations in their honour according to a solemn and mysterious ritual. From a vase crowned with "a wreath of snow-white lamb's-wool" he must pour streams of pure water mingled with honey, turning to the east, and strew on either side of him "thrice nine olive-branches." Then he may utter a whispered prayer

to the goddesses, and so obtain at their hands rest and pardon.

But Œdipus has not the strength for this ceremonial, and he deputes his daughters to pour the libations in his stead—giving as his reason what seems an unconscious prophecy of One whose life was offered as "a ransom for many" —

> "For one soul working in the strength of love
> Is mightier than ten thousand to atone." *

Perhaps, too, there was mingled with this reluctance the same feeling which made David shrink from consecrating the Temple. The offering to the Virgin Goddesses would surely be more acceptable from the pure hands of his daughters than from his, who had been "a man of war from his youth." So Horace afterwards declared that the flowers and meal-cakes of his village maiden had a sweeter savour than all the burnt-offerings of the rich.

> "The costliest sacrifice that wealth can make,
> From the incensed Penates less commands
> A soft response, than doth the poorest cake,
> If on the altar laid with spotless hands." †

Scarcely have Antigone and Ismene left the scene to make the offering in their father's stead, when Theseus, the king of Athens, enters, and his chivalrous demeanour strikingly contrasts with the garrulous importunities of the Chorus.

He will not cause fresh pain to Œdipus, he says, by recalling his sorrows. This "abject garb and aspect of

* Plumptre's Introd., lxxxv.

† Ode iii. 23 (Martin's Transl.)

despair" tell their own tale. An exile's misfortunes touch him keenly, for he has himself been schooled in adversity—

"I know that I am man, and I can count
No more than thou on what to-morrow brings."—(P.)

Œdipus, grateful for this generous forbearance, tells the king that, though outwardly it is but "a sorry gift" that he brings—namely, his own feeble body, in bitter truth a "heritage of woe" to its master—yet its possession should bring no small gain to the land of his refuge; and not small either (he adds, with a touch of his ancient pride) will be the conflict waged for it between his own sons and the citizens of Athens.

Truly, as Ismene says,

"The gods now raise the head they once laid low."

It was with his body as with the bones of Orestes—another so-called victim of Fate—which an oracle had declared would bring success to the arms of Sparta.* "Such is the force attached to expiation and the expiatory victim. In his lifetime men pitilessly strike him in the name of God, as the scapegoat of the evil which his death is destined to abolish; and in his death all men revere him as the symbol of re-established justice."†

Theseus doubts if any strife can spring up between himself and his trusty allies of Thebes; but Œdipus knows better, from sad experience, the uncertainty of earthly friendship, and how soon there arise "un-

* Herod., i. 67.

† Girardin, Cours de Littérature Dramat., i. 189.

naturalness between the child and the parent; death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities."*

"O son of Ægeus, unto Gods alone
Nor age can come, nor destined hour of death;
All else the almighty ruler Time sweeps on.
Earth's strength shall wither, wither strength of limb,
And trust decays, and mistrust grows apace;
And the same spirit lasts not among them
That once were friends, nor joineth state with state.
To these at once, to those in after-years
Sweet things grow bitter, then turn sweet again.
And what, if now at Thebes all things run smooth,
And well towards thee, Time, in myriad change,
A myriad nights and days brings forth; and thus
In these, for some slight cause, they yet may spurn
In battle all their pledge of faithfulness.
And then this body, sleeping in the grave,
All cold and stiff shall drink warm blood of men,
If Zeus be Zeus, and his son Phœbus true."—(P.)

Theseus is convinced by the sincerity of Œdipus, and declares that he will never give up a suppliant guest, bound to him by ancient friendship—so rich in the present favour of the gods, and in the future blessings which will flow from his presence in the land. He will not give him up, despite of the threats of Creon and all his host; "for," he adds, with all the pride of a Bayard, "my heart knows no fear"—

"My very name will guard thee from all harm."

The famous chorus which follows is associated with a personal anecdote of the old age of Sophocles. It is

* King Lear, Act i. sc. 2.

said that Ariston, his eldest son, had in a fit of jealous suspicion brought an action against his father, as being imbecile and incapable of managing his own affairs. The poet, then, as tradition tells us, in his hundredth year, entered the court, leaning on his favourite grandchild (who probably suggested the filial devotion of Antigone's character), and, scorning to otherwise defend himself against the insult offered to his mental powers, recited the passage from his then unfinished play which describes the glories of Colonus. And the story goes on to say that, before Sophocles had finished reciting these noble lines, the Athenian jury, always susceptible to an "appeal to their feelings," broke into irrepressible applause. "A dotard cannot have written this," was their verdict; and the case was dismissed—we will hope "with costs."

Anstice gives—as far as can be given in English—the spirit of the original; and we make no excuse for borrowing largely from his version (too little known) of this ode:—

"Stranger, thou art standing now
On Colonus' sparry brow;
All the haunts of Attic ground,
Where the matchless coursers bound,
Boast not, through their realms of bliss,
Other spot as fair as this.

Frequent down this greenwood dale
Mourns the warbling nightingale,
Nestling 'mid the thickest screen
Of the ivy's darksome green.

. . . . .

Here Narcissus, day by day,
Buds in clustering beauty gay:
. . . . .
Here the golden Crocus gleams,
Murmur here unfailing streams,
Sleep the bubbling fountains never,
Feeding pure Cephiseus' river,
Whose prolific waters daily
Bid the pastures blossom gaily,
With the showers of spring-tide blending,
On the lap of earth descending."

Then, after paying a tribute to the olive, a tree peculiarly sacred in Attica, and the especial care of "Morian Jove" and "blue-eyed Pallas," the chorus concludes:—

"Swell the song of praise again;
Other boons demand my strain,
Other blessings we inherit,
Granted by the mighty Spirit;
On the sea and on the shore,
Ours the bridle and the oar.

Son of Saturn old, whose sway
Stormy winds and waves obey,
Thine be honour's well-earned meed,
Tamer of the champing steed;
First he wore on Attic plain
Bit of steel and curbing rein.
Oft too, o'er the waters blue,
Athens, strain thy labouring crew;
Practised hands the bark are plying,
Oars are bending, spray is flying,
Sunny waves beneath them glancing,
Sportive Nereids round them dancing,
With their hundred feet in motion,
Twinkling 'mid the foam of ocean."

The praises lavished on Athenian chivalry are now

put to the proof; for Creon, whom Ismene had described as already on his way to seize and carry off Œdipus to Thebes, enters in person at the head of an armed force. As the Chorus shrink back from him in alarmed surprise, he deprecates their fears in a speech—masterly, whether we regard the purpose of the orator or the policy of the statesman. He compliments the citizens on their noble city; he condoles with the sightless king on his many sorrows; he commiserates the forlorn condition of the maidens. All may yet be well, he argues, if Œdipus will take heart of grace, and accept the proffered invitation of the Thebans to return. But Œdipus is not to be easily convinced. He sees through the polished insincerity of Creon's speech, and denounces those specious promises made with "feigned lips"—

"Goodly in show, but mischievous in act."

As to his returning to Thebes, merely that he may bring profit to his ungrateful country and his unnatural kindred—

"*That* shall not be; but this shall be thy lot,
My stern Avenger dwelling with thee still;
And these my sons shall gain of that my land
Enough to die in; that—and—nothing more."—(P.)

Then Creon throws off the mask: since fair words have failed him, he will use force; and in spite of the indignation of the Chorus, the outcry of the maidens, and the feeble resistance of Œdipus, the Theban guards drag off Antigone and Ismene as hostages for their father; and Creon even threatens that

he will lay hands on Œdipus himself. The aged king's wrath boils over at this last outrage, and he reiterates his curse upon the robber of his children :—

"May these Goddess Powers
Not smite me speechless till I speak my curse
On thee, thou vile one, robbing me by force
Of that last light when other lights were quenched.
For this may yon bright Sun-god, scanning all,
Grant thee thyself, and all thy race with thee,
To wear thy life in dreary age like mine."

Just as Creon is actually about to force Œdipus along with him, Theseus enters. On hearing what has passed, he at once gives orders to summon horse and foot, who may rescue the maidens from the Theban guards before they cross the borders. He then addresses Creon with a dignified rebuke for his violence and lawless conduct, outraging the sacred character of suppliants, and wronging a state which "without laws does nothing :"—

"Thou must have deemed my city void of men,
Slave-like, submissive, and myself as nought.
. . . . . .
Thou tramplest on my rights, defiest Gods,
And rudely seizest these poor suppliants."

Creon, by way of justification, insults Theseus and Œdipus in the same sentence. He had never supposed that the holy city, with its supreme tribunal on the Hill of Mars, would give shelter to a parricide, "whose marriage had been incest." The curse of Œdipus had provoked his anger—

"For headstrong wrath knows no old age but death."

Œdipus in his turn recriminates the foul reproaches which the brother had uttered against the sister. The shame in such a case rested more on the reviler than on the unwilling victim of an evil destiny. Even his father's spirit, if it could return from Hades, would hardly upbraid him for crimes which had been wrought so unwittingly.

But Theseus breaks off this angry dialogue. They are standing idle, he says, while the captive maidens are being hurried across the Athenian borders; and then, with a parting promise to Œdipus that he will restore his children or die in the attempt, the chivalrous king starts in pursuit, taking with him his Athenian attendants, and Creon to serve as an unwilling guide.

The Chorus fill up the interval by a bold flight of song, in which they picture to themselves the pursuit, the battle, and the recovery of the maidens. The following again is Anstice's spirited translation of the ode:—

"Waft me hence, and set me down
Where the lines of battle frown;
Waft me, where the brazen shout
Of the Lord of War rings out
On the Pythian coast, or where
Flickering torches wildly glare,
Where on mystic rites have smiled
Ceres and her honoured child.
Many a priest attends their shrine,
Sprung of old Eumolpus' line,
While discretion's golden key
Locks their lips in secrecy.

Round the virgin sisters twain
Soon shall fall the crowded slain,
Theseus soon in mailèd might
Wake the terrors of the fight.

Now I ween in haste they glide
Œa's snowy rocks beside ;
There beneath the western sky,
Swift their straining coursers fly ;
Rapid roll their whirling cars ;
Fleeter speeds pursuing Mars ;
Theseus' train is on its way,
Keen to grasp the destined prey ;
Every bit like lightning glancing,
Every mailèd knight advancing,
Every charger's arching neck
Princely spoils and trappings deck,
Yours the vow for victory won,
Hippian Pallas ! Rhea's son !
Thou who, throned in coral caves,
Claspest earth, and rulest waves !

Is the awful stillness past ?
Have they closed in fight at last ?
Answer, my prophetic soul !
Thou canst secret fate unroll.
Soon I ween shall warrior sword,
Wielded by Athena's lord,
Free the maid by sorrow bowed,
Mocked and scorned by brethren proud :

So across my spirit's dreams
Joy anticipated gleams.
Might I, like the soaring dove,
Roam the aerial fields above,
Her who borne on tempest wings
Forth with nestling pinion springs.

Sweet it were from clouds on high
Battle's changeful tide to spy.
Jove ! whose everlasting sway
Heaven's unchanging gods obey,
Grant to Athens' champions brave
Might to vanquish, strength to save.
Pallas ! Jove's majestic child ;
Phœbus ! hunter of the wild ;
Dian ! still the woodland wooing,
Still the dappled stag pursuing,—
Archer lord, and mountain maid,
Haste ye, haste ye to our aid !"

These triumphal strains are not premature, for Theseus is now seen returning, having, like a true knight-errant, rescued the maidens by his feats of arms. Great is the father's joy at the restoration of his daughters, and fervent are his expressions of gratitude to their deliverer. But Theseus modestly cuts short his thanks, being, as he says, "given more to deeds than words ;" and then he tells Œdipus that there is a suppliant sitting at the altar of Poseidon craving an audience with him. Œdipus knows too well that this nameless suppliant must be Polynices, the elder of his sons, and is unwilling even to listen to his voice. But Antigone joins her gentle pleading to the request of Theseus, and Œdipus can gainsay nothing to his daughter's arguments—

"He is thy child ;
And therefore, O my father, 'tis not right,
Although his deeds to thee be basest, vilest,
To render ill for ill. But let him come."—(P.)

While Polynices is being summoned, the Chorus

again moralise on the vanity of life; and, like the preacher, they "praise the dead, which are already dead, more than the living, which are yet alive." Who would pray for length of days, which can bring nothing but sorrow? Death, after all, is man's last and best friend:—

> "Of all the dreams of bliss that are,
> Not to be born is best by far;
> Next best, by far the next, for man
> To speed as fast as speed he can,
> Soon as his eyes have glanced on earth,
> To where he was before his birth."

And then they point their moral by the fate of Œdipus, thus stricken with age and misery; and possibly, in writing the last lines of the chorus, the poet may have been thinking of his own approaching end:—

> "As billows, by the tempest tossed,
> Burst on some wintry northern coast,
> So toppling o'er his aged form,
> Descends the fury of the storm;
> The troublous breakers never rest;
> Some from the chambers of the west,
> Some from the orient sun, or where
> At noon he sheds his angry glare,
> Or where the stars, faint twinkling, light
> The gloomy length of Arctic night."—(A.)

Then, with faltering steps and shrinking gesture, Polynices enters; and if eloquent self-reproach and protestations of sorrow could have atoned for years of unfilial insult and neglect, he might have gained his end. He throws himself at his father's feet, and appeals

to him, in the name of that divine mercy which "is the attribute of God Himself," to forego his just resentment:—

> "But since there,
> Sharing the throne of Zeus, compassion dwells,
> Regarding all our deeds; so let it come
> And dwell with thee, my father; more we cannot add.
> Why art thou silent? Speak, my father, speak!
> Turn not away."—(P.)

But Œdipus answers him not a word. Then Polynices tells the story of the wrong done him by his brother, of his flight to Argos, of his fresh alliance, and, trembling with martial ardour, he describes

> "The seven great armies, by seven captains led,
> That gird the plain of Thebes;"

and he implores his father, in the name of these chieftains, to forget his ancient wrongs, and to join his strength with theirs, that so they may break the might of "the despot lord at home."

Œdipus has listened with brows bent and lips close set to this passionate appeal, and at last he breaks his silence. The repentance of Polynices has come too late. He has sown the wind, and must reap the whirlwind. Then the sightless king, with all the passion of Lear, reiterates those awful curses which he had before pronounced. Ruin and disaster await the host that is marshalled against Thebes. Polynices shall never return again to "Argos in the vale," but shall slay his brother, and be slain by his brother's sword, and no man shall bury him:—

"Yea, curses shall possess thy seat and throne,
If ancient justice o'er the laws of earth
Reign with the Thunder-god. March on to ruin!
Spurned and disowned, the basest of the base,
And with thee bear this burden; o'er thine head
I pour a prophet's doom; nor throne nor home
Waits on the sharpness of thy levelled spear:
Thy very land of refuge hath no welcome;
Thine eyes have looked their last on hollow Argos." *

Heartless renegade though he is, Polynices is not without some touch of a nobler spirit. He has learned his fate, and must return; but he will not discourage his friends by imparting to them the old man's words of doom. And so he tears himself from the embraces of his sisters, rejecting almost angrily the advice of Antigone, that he should lead his army back to Argos. "How," he asks, "can he

"Lead back an army that could deem I trembled?"

He makes a last request of his sisters—that they will give his body seemly burial; the next play will show how faithfully this charge was kept by one of them. And then, with a blessing on his lips, and a prayer that the gods will keep them at least from all harm, he goes forth as Saul went forth to Gilboa, as Otho headed his legions at Bedriacum—knowing himself to be a doomed man. So touching is the heroism, that (as a French critic observes) we know not whether we ought to condemn Polynices with Œdipus, to pity him with Theseus, or to love him with Antigone. †

* Lord Lytton's Athens, ii. 542.

† Patin, Etudes sur Sophocle, p. 243.

The father, in the modern drama, however justly incensed he might have been, would have relented at the sight of so much real sorrow. Accordingly, in the play of Ducis, Œdipus and Polynices mutually embrace in the French fashion. With us, Christianity transfers the penalty for sin to a future life. But if Œdipus had pardoned Polynices, he would in a Greek point of view have destroyed the very principle of filial piety. With them, the expiation for impious wrongs must be made by the actual criminal in his own person, and in this world.*

Suddenly the sky grows black with storm-clouds, the lightning flashes, and peals of thunder, in quicker and louder succession, denote that the end which Œdipus had prayed for at last draws nigh. The Chorus, terrified by "the fire from heaven" and the incessant roll of thunder, call loudly upon Theseus; and the Athenian king, amazed at the tumult, enters hurriedly, in obedience to the summons. Œdipus bids him follow where he leads; for to his eyes alone shall be revealed that secret grave which should prove a bulwark against his foes—"stronger than many shields"—and to his ears alone shall those mystic words be uttered, which shall be transmitted at the hour of death to his son, and to his son's sons after him. "Follow me," he cries to his daughters; "follow me, who have so often followed you—but touch me not. Let me find for myself the sepulchre, where the gods have willed that I shall rest in peace. Fol-

* Girardin, Lit. Dramat., i. 195.

low me, my children, whither Mercury and the Queen of Night are leading me." Then, directed by some mysterious agency, Œdipus moves slowly onwards and upwards along the sloping ridge, towards the "steps of brass," followed at a little distance by Theseus and by his daughters, and at last he disappears from view.

Then the Chorus utter a solemn requiem for his soul, addressed to the Dark King and his bride, who rule the lower world :—

> "If to thee, eternal queen,
> Empress of the worlds unseen;
> Mighty Pluto, if to thee,
> Hell's terrific deity,
> Lips of mortal mould may dare
> Breathe the solemn suppliant prayer,—
> Grant the stranger swift release,
> Bid the mourner part in peace;
> Guide him, where in silence deep
> All that once were mortal sleep.
> Since relentless Fate hath shed
> Sorrows o'er thy guiltless head,
> In thy pangs let mercy stay thee,
> In the grave let rest repay thee!"—(D.)

A messenger, who had followed as near as he might the small company that had attended Œdipus, tells the sequel of this mysterious drama. They had reached the brazen steps, and there, near "the Thorician rock and the hollow pear-tree" (both probably consecrated by tradition), Œdipus had sat down; and after bathing his limbs in pure water from the stream, had doffed the mean rags of his exile, and clothed himself in a clean white robe, "meet for the

sepulchre." Then came the sound of subterranean thunder; and the wanderer, recognising the sign, had clasped his daughters in a last passionate embrace, as they clung to him, wailing in grief and terror:—

"But when their piercing cries an instant ceased,
And the first thrill was hushed, silence ensued—
A silence, oh, how awful! From beneath,
With deep mysterious voice, called one unseen.
Again and yet again the god exclaimed:
'Come, Œdipus, why pause we to depart?
Come, Œdipus, for thou hast tarried long.'"—(D.)

Then Œdipus bids all leave the spot, save Theseus only; and when, after a short interval, they return, the Athenian king is found alone, shading his eyes as if dazzled by some unearthly vision, and then prostrating himself in fervent prayer to the gods of light and day. He alone has seen and knows the manner of the death of Œdipus—

"For neither was it thunderbolt from God,
With flashing fire that slew him, nor the blast
Of whirlwind sweeping o'er the sea's dark waves;
But either some one whom the gods had sent
To guide his steps, or gentleness of mood
Had moved the Powers beneath to ope the way
To earth's deep centre painlessly. He died
No death to mourn for—did not leave the world
Worn out with pain and sickness; but his end,
If any ever was, was wonderful."—(P.)*

* The following is De Quincey's eloquent description of this "call," like nothing else in history or fiction. "What language of earth or trumpet of heaven could decipher the woe of that unfathomable call, when from the depth of the ancient

woods a voice, that drew like gravitation, that sucked in like a vortex, far off, yet near—in some distant world, yet close at hand—cried, 'Hark, Œdipus! King Œdipus! come hither; thou art wanted!' *Wanted!* for what? Was it for death? was it for judgment? was it for some wilderness of pariah eternities? No man ever knew. Chasms opened in the earth; dark gigantic arms stretched out to receive the king; clouds and vapour settled over the penal abyss; and of him only, though the neighbourhood of his disappearance was known, no trace or visible record survived—neither bones, nor grave, nor dust, nor epitaph."—The Theban Sphinx (Works, ix. 250).

CHAPTER IV.

ANTIGONE.

Of all the plays of Sophocles, this has had the most long-lived popularity. Not only was it frequently acted on the Athenian stage, but it has been translated, imitated, and "adapted" by successive generations of dramatists, from Seneca to Racine. The plot has been illustrated by Alfieri, and the choruses have been set to music by Mendelssohn; and only so recently as 1845, the play was actually represented on the boards of Covent Garden Theatre, with all the accessories of classical costume and scenery, and with Helen Faucit as the heroine.

It is not hard to discover the secret of the enduring favour with which the 'Antigone' has been regarded. The heroine, who absorbs the interest of the piece, is the purest and noblest idea of womanhood that ever inspired a poet. In reading the play we have something of the same feeling as when we look at Delaroche's famous picture of Marie Antoinette. All else in the painting—whether judges, guards, or spectators—sinks into shade and insignificance before the one

grand central figure, standing out in bold relief against the darkness of the canvas—

"Death's purpose flashing in her face."*

'Antigone' has been said to be the poetry of what Socrates is the prose; that is, she is in fiction what he is in history—a martyr in the cause of truth. The death of both was as truly a martyrdom as that of any Christian who suffered for his faith in the persecutions of Nero or Diocletian. Both chose to obey God rather than man. Both appealed from the law of the land, and from the sentence of an earthly judge, to those laws which are "neither written on tablets nor proclaimed by heralds," but engraven in the heart of man. More than two thousand five hundred years have passed since the day when Antigone made her noble protest; but time has only justified her cause, and her voice still speaks to us across the lapse of years:—

"No ordinance of Man shall override
The settled laws of Nature and of God;
Not written these in pages of a book,
Nor were they framed to-day, nor yesterday;
We know not whence they are; but this we know,
That they from all eternity have been,
And shall to all eternity endure."†

It was outraged nature which made this appeal through the mouth of Antigone. Creon had, by his

* Conington's translation of Horace's "*deliberata morte ferocior*," applied to Cleopatra.

† Thompson's Sales Attici, 65.

exposure of the body of Polynices, violated the first great law of humanity, and had committed an act which was at once impious and barbarous, detestable alike in the eyes of gods and men. To the Greek, reverence for the dead was the most sacred of all duties. In his national creed, the ghosts of Hades seem more than disembodied spirits;—they retain their bodily senses; they remember the joys and brood over the sorrows of their former life; they carry traces of the mortal wounds or mutilation which caused their death; and so, in the Odyssey, we find them crowding to drink the blood which, like an elixir of life, seems to reanimate their veins, and give them speech and utterance. To the Greek the grave was not a barrier across which there was no return. Hercules had wrestled bodily with Death for the possession of Alcestis; Orpheus had almost regained his Eurydice; and Hesiod tells us how the spirits of the just revisit the loved scenes of their lifetime, like guardian angels—

"Earth haunting, beneficent, holy." *

But nothing could compensate to the dead for their cruel deprivation of a tomb. Not only was the spirit in such a case condemned to wander restlessly for a hundred years on the banks of Styx—a belief of which Lord Lytton has made such skilful use in his tale of 'Sisyphus'—but the laws of the gods in the lower world were violated, and the majesty of Proserpine, the queen of Hades, was set at nought. Few would

* Op. et D., 122, 252.

take the common-sense view of Socrates in Plato's Dialogue, who told his friends that, do what they would, they could not bury *him;* or of Anchises in the Æneid, that

"He lacks not much who lacks a grave." *

Tradition unanimously consecrated the importance of sepulture. The fiercest battles in Homer are those waged for the possession of the dead bodies of heroes like Sarpedon or Patroclus. The most cruel insult to the conquered is that of Achilles, when he lashes the corpse of Hector to his chariot, and drags it round the walls of Troy. The most touching scene in all the Iliad is where Priam humbles himself in the dust before the victor to obtain the body of his son for burial. So strong was the feeling even in actual history, that after the battle of Arginusæ (fought in the same year that Sophocles died) we find the Athenian people condemning ten victorious generals to death for having allowed the seamen of sinking vessels to be drowned unrescued, and so be deprived of a grave. Hence, without question, the tragedies which must have excited the keenest sympathy in a Greek audience were those in which the interest turned on the violation of funeral rites—as in the 'Ajax' and 'Antigone' of Sophocles, and in the 'Suppliants' of Euripides.

The sisters Antigone and Ismene had returned to

* "Facilis jactura sepulchri."—Virg. Æn., ii. 646. Compare Lucan (Phars. vi. 809), "cœlo tegitur qui non habet urnam."

Thebes after the death of Œdipus, and there they lived, under the guardianship of Creon, with their brother Eteocles. Then came the famous siege, of which an account has been given in a preceding volume of this series. For three days the Seven Chieftains had assaulted the seven gates, with varying success, and on the third day the single combat took place which resulted in the death by each other's hands of the two brothers. After their fall, the battle still raged on, until at last Menœceus, son of Creon, devoted himself as a sacrifice for his country, and then the Argive host were seized with a sudden panic, and fled in headlong rout.

It is on the morning after their flight that the play opens. All that scenery can do to heighten the effect has been employed by the poet. In the background rises the palace of the kings of Thebes, and on the walls are hung six suits of armour, taken from the Argive chieftains. One side-scene represents the distant hills of Cithæron; on the other is depicted the city itself, with its houses and temples, the sacred streams of Dirce and Ismenus, and the "Scæan gates," still bearing traces of the late assault.

The audience, who have murmured their applause at the fidelity with which the artist has brought before them a well-known locality, are hushed into silence as the two sisters enter. They have come forth from the palace to discuss the new decree which Creon the king has just proclaimed. By his orders, Eteocles has been already buried with all the honours of a soldier's grave; but the corpse of Polynices is to lie "unwept,

unburied," a prey for the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field. Whoever disobeys this mandate is to be stoned to death. "Now is the time," says Antigone to her sister, "to show

> "Whether thou hast an innate nobleness,
> Or art the base-born child of noble sires."—(P.)

And here we find at once the same strong contrast between the characters of the two sisters, which in a subsequent tragedy is seen between Electra and Chrysothemis. Antigone, like Joan of Arc and other enthusiasts, is so absorbed in her own self-sacrifice, inspired with such a lofty sense of what her duty towards her brother demands, that she spurns all other considerations. Death and life, honour and dishonour, happiness and misery, are as nothing compared with the work she has in hand. Ismene, though not less affectionate, is of a softer temper. She has less heroism, but more common-sense. Her advice is that which prudence naturally suggests—"Why add another to the countless sorrows of the family? Why offend the powers that be, or offer unavailing resistance to the majesty of law?"

But these prudent counsels only incense Antigone, and she breaks into a tone of lofty scorn :—

> "No more will I exhort thee—no! and if
> Thou wouldst it now, it would not pleasure me
> To have thee as a partner in the deed.
> Be what it liketh *thee* to be, but *I*
> Will bury him; and shall esteem it honour
> To die in the attempt; dying for him,
> Loving with one who loves me I shall lie

After a holy deed of sin ; the time
Of the world's claims upon me may not mate
With what the grave demands ; for there my rest
Will be for everlasting.
. . . . . .
Come what will,
It cannot take from me a noble death."
—(Donaldson.)

In her "fiery mood," Antigone disdainfully rejects Ismene's offer to keep her counsel, and so the sisters part,—Antigone going to prepare the body for burial, and Ismene, broken-hearted at the thought of the coming evil, retreating within the palace.

The Chorus of "grave and reverend" Theban elders now enter to the sound of music, and burst into a triumphal hymn in honour of the late victory, as they hail the bright sunlight which streams above the eastern gates. For it is the Sun-god himself that has driven in headlong flight

"The Argive hero of the argent shield."

Then, in the figurative style of lyric verse, which recalls to the reader the songs of Miriam and Deborah, they tell how Polynices had swooped down upon his native land, like an eagle thirsting for slaughter :—

"White as the snow were the pinions that clothed him,
Many his bucklers,
And his helmets crested with horse-hair."

But ere he could lay the city low in blood and fire, "the dragon" (of Thebes) "had proved his match in war."

Then they sing of the fall of Capaneus, that impious blasphemer of the gods, who had been dashed from the scaling-ladder, torch in hand, by a thunderbolt from heaven. The gods had fought for the city they loved so well, and the seven chieftains had left their panoplies as trophies for the Theban temples. And now that victory has come with the bright daylight (conclude the Chorus)—

> "Forget the wars that now no longer rage,
> And seek we all the temples of the gods
> With choirs that last the livelong night."

Creon now sweeps upon the stage with a long retinue of attendants, splendid in royal apparel, and carrying the sceptre which is the symbol of his dignity. He delivers a "speech from the throne," in which he vindicates his past and present policy, and explains the reasons for his different treatment of the bodies of the two brothers in the decree which had roused the indignation of Antigone. But in this elaborate address we are at once reminded of the proverb, "*Qui s'excuse s'accuse.*" There is a ring of insincerity in his studious defence of the prerogative which has put in force the late decree. There is a covert dread of opposition in the tone in which he deprecates the forbearance of his "good friends" and "trusty citizens"—the Chorus. There is ostentation in his assertion of the great principle of patriotism, which he assumes to be the mainspring of his conduct, and which he is resolved to carry out, whatever may be the sacrifice of private affections involved:—

"There is no man whose soul and will and meaning
Stand forth as outward things for all to see,
Till he has shown himself by practice versed
In ruling under law and making laws.
As to myself, it is, and was of old,
My fixed belief that he is vile indeed
Who, when the general State his guidance claims,
Dares not adhere to wisest policy,
But keeps his tongue locked up for fear of somewhat.
Him too I reckon nowhere, who esteems
A private friend more than his fatherland.
. . . . . .
Nor would I ever count among my friends
My country's enemy; for well I know
She is the barque that brings us safe to port:
Sailing in her, unswayed by sidelong gales,
We make the only friends we ought to make."
—(Donaldson.)

And then he recites the words of the decree,—all the honours of the tomb to the brave champion who had fallen in defence of hearth and home; but as to the body of the outcast and renegade, who had brought fire and sword against the city of his fathers, it shall lie unburied and dishonoured, to be mangled by dogs and vultures. "Such is my will," concludes the king (and we can fancy the majestic wave of the hand with which a great actor would have accompanied the words); and then he announces that, in order to secure obedience to his mandate, a watch had been already set to guard the body.

He has scarcely spoken before one of the watchmen enters—a personage alien from the general lofty vein of tragedy. He is emphatically "vulgar"—a true son

of democracy; low-bred, half-educated, insolent where he dare be so, but cringing before a superior will, with something of the coarse and garrulous wit of the "Sausage-seller" in the comedy of Aristophanes. His opening speech (which has been well translated by Dr Donaldson) will remind the reader of Lancelot Gobbo's dilemma between the suggestions of "the fiend" and his "conscience," in the 'Merchant of Venice.' The watchman has been divided within himself—starting, and returning, and halting by the road. "In fact," he says, "my soul often addressed me with some such tale as this: 'Why goest, simpleton, where to be come is to be punished?' Then again, 'What! wilt not away, poor wretch? and if Creon shall learn these tidings from some one else, how then wilt thou escape the penalty?'"

There is some excuse for his unwillingness to come, for he has been charged with unwelcome tidings. Early though it is in the day, the recent decree has been already broken. "Some one has entombed the body, and is gone." At daybreak the watchmen had discovered the corpse covered with a light coating of dust—sufficient to meet the religious idea of burial *—and untouched by bird or beast. Each had accused

* The casting of three handfuls of dust upon the corpse was enough to avoid the pollution of leaving it unburied. So in Horace we find the ghost of a shipwrecked and unburied man threatening a passing sailor—

> "My prayers shall reach the avengers of all wrong;
> No expiations shall the curse unbind.
> Great though your haste, I would not task you long;
> Thrice sprinkle dust—then scud before the wind."
> —Ode I. xxviii. (Conington's Transl.)

his fellow, and each had disclaimed all knowledge of the deed—

> "And we were ready in our hands to take
> Bars of hot iron, and to walk through fire,
> And call the gods to witness, none of us
> Were privy to his schemes who planned the deed,
> Nor his who wrought it."—(P.)

Then they had cast lots to decide who should bear the news to Creon; and the lot had fallen on this unlucky member of the force, who has now actually brought it—no pleasant office, he says; for

> "Though it be honest, it is never good
> To bring bad news."

The Chorus suggest that this "unseen worker" may possibly have been a god; but the suggestion only increases Creon's resentment. "Not so," he angrily replies; "the gods would scarcely have favoured the man who in his life had threatened their altars with the flames." It is an act of rebellion against his own authority. Some evil-disposed townsmen have tampered with the sentinels; and it is "money" which is at the root of this as of all other evils. If the Chorus cannot or will not discover the traitor—so help him Zeus!—they shall be hung themselves; and then, with a fierce parting threat to the watchman, Creon departs in a rage. The watchman also goes his way, naïvely confessing his relief at his escape:—

> "God send we find him! If we find him not,
> As well may be (for this must chance decide),
> You will not see *me* coming here again."—(P.)

In the choral ode which follows, a noble tribute is paid to the versatility of human genius, and to the dominion of man over the powers of nature,—true even then, and far truer now, in these fairy times of modern science, which have eclipsed all the wonders of the "New Atlantis."

"Many the things that strange and wondrous are,
None stranger and more wonderful than Man;
He dares to wander far,
With stormy blast across the hoary sea,
Where nought his eye can scan
But waves still surging round unceasingly;
And Earth, of all the gods
Mightiest, unwearied, indestructible,
He weareth year by year, and breaks her clods,
While the keen ploughshare marks her furrows well,
Still turning to and fro;
And still he bids his steeds
Through daily task-work go."—(P.)

Man extends his dominion over the fish of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts of the field. He has resources against all dangers, plans by which he overcomes all obstacles, inventions which can solve all difficulties—

"Armed at all points, unarmed he nought shall meet
That coming time reveals;
Only from Hades finds he no retreat,
Though many a hopeless sore disease he heals."—(P.)

Pride is the besetting sin of so gifted a being, and it is pride in the statesman which brings about his speedy

fall; and then comes the warning, like Wolsey's to Cromwell, to "guard against ambition"—

> "By that sin fell the angels,—how can man, then,
> The image of his Maker, hope to profit by it?"

Suddenly the Chorus break off in wonder and dismay. They can scarcely believe their eyes; for, bound between two of the watch, Antigone walks in with a stately and defiant bearing. At the same moment Creon comes from the palace-gates, and meets the prisoner. The same watchman who had enraged Creon by his vulgar insolence before, becomes the spokesman now; and this time his tale is to the point. The guard had returned to their post, and, after clearing the corpse from the dust which had been sprinkled on it by the unknown visitor on the previous night, they had sat down on the hillside, at a little distance from the body, to watch for what might happen. The morning had passed without a sign, and the sun had reached mid-heavens, and still they waited, "scorched by the sultry heat." Then came a whirlwind, "raising the dust in clouds, stripping the foliage off the trees, and choking the atmosphere;" and still they watched, with closed eyes and mouths. Then at last the maiden was seen, and she uttered a bitter cry to see her work undone, and the corpse again exposed. And as she was in the act of again sprinkling the dust and pouring a libation, the guards had rushed in and seized her.

Creon, who has listened intently to the watchman's story, now turns to Antigone, and asks whether she

has dared thus to disobey the laws. "Yes," she proudly replies,—

"Yes, for it was not Zeus who gave them forth,
Nor Justice, dwelling with the gods below,
Who traced these laws for all the sons of men;
Nor did I deem thy edicts strong enough,
That thou, a mortal man, shouldst overpass
The unwritten laws of God that know no change.
They are not of to-day nor yesterday,
But live for ever, nor can man assign
When first they sprang to being. Not through fear
Of any man's resolve was I prepared
Before the gods to bear the penalty
Of sinning against these. That I should die
I knew (how should I not?) though thy decree
Had never spoken. And before my time
If I shall die, I reckon this a gain;
For whoso lives, as I, in many woes,
How can it be but he shall gain by death?"—(P.)

This noble appeal of Antigone to a higher law only incenses Creon. This stubbornness of temper, which glories in crime, shall break and shiver like brittle steel. Were she his own sister's child, or more near "than all the kith and kin of household Zeus," she shall not escape her doom. But to his angry denunciations Antigone answers shortly and simply, "Does he wish for anything beyond her death?" To his question why she had insulted the dead patriot by honouring the godless renegade, she replies—and how faintly can the famous line be reproduced in English—

"My love shall go with thine, but not my hate."*

* So the line is rendered by Franklin; but the German of

Ismene now enters, in obedience to a summons from Creon. She does not defend herself against his charge of having been an accomplice in the deed, but only piteously entreats that she may be allowed to share her sister's fate. But Antigone at once rejects her offer. "*You* have chosen life," she says (almost in the last words of Socrates to his judges), "but *I* have chosen death,"—

> "Thou dost live. My soul long since
> Hath died to render service to the dead."

Creon cuts short their dialogue by bidding his guards lead them both within the palace.

The Chorus mourn, in the strain which follows, over the doom of ancestral guilt—the sorrows upon sorrows which have extinguished the last faint gleam of light which had shone upon the house of Labdacus. Bright delusive hopes, high aspirations, mortal day-dreams, the glory of man and the pride of life—what are they, compared with the resistless decree of Zeus?

> "A potentate through time, which grows not old."

> "Shall judgment be less strong than sin?
> Shall man o'er Jove dominion win?
> No! Sleep beneath his leaden sway
> May hold but things that know decay;
> The unwearied months with godlike vigour move,
> Yet cannot change the might of Jove.

Schlegel gives more thoroughly the force of the two Greek verbs:—

> "Nicht mitzuhassan, mitzulieben bin ich da."

Compassed with dazzling light,
Throned on Olympus' height,
His front the eternal god uprears,
By toils unwearied, and unaged by years!
Far back through seasons past,
Far on through times to come,
Has been, and still must last,
Sin's never-failing doom:
Doom, whence with countless sorrows rife
Is erring man's tumultuous life.
Some, heeding hope's beguiling voice,
From virtue's pathway rove;
And some, deluded, make their choice
The levities of love.

For well and wisely was it said,
That all, by Heaven to sorrows led,
Perverted by delirious mood,
Deem evil wears the shape of good;
Chase the fair phantom, free from fears,
And waken to a life of tears."—(A.)

Hæmon, Creon's son, betrothed to Antigone—and who is perhaps the only "lover" in all ancient tragedy, so widely different is the Greek drama from our own—comes now to plead for the life of his affianced bride. Then ensues a scene familiar in life and fiction, where two strong wills inevitably clash—the son eager and impassioned, the father hardened by that sense of duty never so keenly felt as when stimulated by a private pique. The first and foremost of all duties in the home and in the state, argues Creon, is obedience. The family must be *one*—united under the *patria potestas.* The object of men's prayer for children is, according to Creon, much like that of the Hebrew Psalmist,—that

they may "not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate." Sons are born that

> "They may requite with ill their father's foe,
> And honour whom their father loves to honour.
> But when a man's own children help him not,
> What shall we say he has begotten, but
> Clogs for himself and laughter for his foes?"

Love for a woman—already doomed to death—should not make shipwreck of a man's understanding. Disobedience produces anarchy, and anarchy destroys the state.

Hæmon eloquently entreats his father to listen to the voice of reason, and not to disregard the public opinion, which had already pronounced in favour of Antigone. Creon, as a sovereign, cannot himself hear the secret whispers of the people, or know

> "How the whole city mourns this maiden's fate
> As one 'who of all women most unjustly
> For noblest deed must die the foulest death.'"—(P.)

King though he is, let him beware of straining the reins of government too tightly. He should not act the tyrant by ruling only for himself.

> "That is no city which belongs to one."

But all Hæmon's arguments and remonstrances are unavailing. Creon's heart is hardened, and he will not let the maiden go.

> "Lead her out
> Whom my soul hates, that she may die forthwith
> Before mine eyes, and near her bridegroom here."—(P.)

This cruel speech exhausts Hæmon's patience, and he

hurries from the scene with a parting threat to his father that, come what will, "he shall see his face no more."

Hæmon and Antigone, as we have seen, are lovers, and, even in introducing them at all, Sophocles had gone a step beyond Æschylus, with whom Love is simply the divine and eternal principle of fecundity—a law, and not a passion.* But there is little romance or sentiment about these Greek lovers; and modern criticism at once decides that Sophocles has lost his opportunity, for he does not even once bring them on the stage together. Had it been Romeo and Juliet thus torn asunder—what tender farewells, what passionate embraces, there would have been at the last! what sombre and funereal joy in the contemplated suicide!† In his dialogue with his father, Hæmon scarcely names his love—his appeal is to justice and to public opinion; while his father simply replies that he is not bound to alter the course of law, to suit either a woman's caprice or "a people's veering will."

The Chorus, half in awe and half in wonder, celebrate the power of Love—that irresistible and all-per-

* The only passage in which Æschylus dwells upon the influence of love is in a fragment of the Danaidæ, where Venus says, "The pure Heavens are enamoured of the Earth; and Love impels Earth to embrace the Heavens; and Rain falling from the Heavens kisses Earth; and she brings forth corn and sheep for the sustenance of man; and from these rainy nuptials the fruits of autumn come to their perfection; and it is I, Love, who am the cause of all these things."

† Girardin, ii. 326.

vading passion, mightier than kings, and, strong as death, levelling all distinctions :—

> " Unconquered Love ! whose mystic sway
> Creation's varied forms obey ;
> Who watchest long at midnight hour
> On the soft cheek of beauty's flower :
> Now inmate of the sylvan cot,
> Now flitting o'er the waves,
> Immortal gods escape thee not,
> Thou rulest man's ephemeral lot,
> And he who hath thee raves.*
>
> Thy magic warps the right to wrong,
> And troubles now the kindred throng ;
> The look of love yon destined bride
> Darts from her pleading eye,
> A subtle counsellor, hath vied
> With mighty laws and princedom's pride,
> And won the victory."—(A.)

Well might the Chorus now weep, as they express it, " fountains of tears," for they see Antigone led by Creon's guards to be entombed alive in a cavern among the rocks. The horror of no death can equal that of a living grave, the fearful penalty which has been annexed in all ages for certain crimes—to the vestal virgin at Rome and to the nun in the middle ages for broken vows of chastity. But Antigone was pure from sin. She had not stained her hands with blood ; much less

* Scott's imitation—conscious or unconscious—does not come up to the fire of the Greek original :—

> " Love rules the court, the camp, the grove,
> And men below, and saints above."
> —Lay, iii. 1.

had she been guilty of frailty, like Scott's 'Constance of Beverley.' The act for which she suffers was prompted by the holiest affection. Hitherto she has been buoyed up by the sublime enthusiasm which inspires the martyr; but now that the sacrifice has been consummated, what wonder if the nerves so tightly strung give way, if for a moment nature reasserts herself, and the heroine becomes the woman? Like Jephtha's daughter, she breaks out into a passionate lament — mourning for her bright young life so cruelly cut short, for those fair promises of marriage never to be realised. The cold comfort of the Chorus and the consciousness of her own innocence can, after all, but slightly lighten the dread of approaching death to her who goes down, "living among the dead, to the strong dungeon of the tomb." Then she tries to steel her fortitude by remembering how others had suffered before her; and she recalls the fate of Niobe (one of her own race), whose children had been slain by Apollo and Diana, while she herself was changed into stone:—

"And there, hard by the crag of Siphylos,
As creeping ivy grows,
So crept the shoots of rock o'er life and breath;
And, as the rumour goes,
The showers ne'er leave her wasting in her death,
Nor yet the drifting snows;
From weeping brows they drip on rocks beneath—
Thus God my life o'erthrows."—(P.)*

* "As a documentary reminiscence of the myths proper to these regions (Lydia), there gleams, even at the present day, at two hours' distance from the ancient Magnesia, in the sunken

"Yes," say the Chorus, "and she was immortal, while thou art mortal; yet for a mortal to obtain the lot of immortality is great glory."

But this glory is too vague to console Antigone, and her mind reverts to the actual horror of the present. She must tread this last sad journey alone, "unwept, and unwedded." She must look on the bright sunlight, on the streams of Dirce, on the familiar streets of Thebes,—

> "This once, but never more; for Hades vast,
> Drear home of all the dead,
> Leads me, in life, where Acheron flows fast,
> Sparing no marriage-bed;
> No marriage-hymn was mine in all the past,
> But Acheron I wed."—(P.)

Creon roughly breaks in upon the lament of Antigone; and at sight of him the maiden recovers something of her haughty spirit, and proclaims aloud the justice of her cause and her own innocence, deserted though she seems to be by men and gods. Looking with steady gaze towards the tomb whither she is being led, she utters her last farewell to light and life:—

> "O tomb, my bridal chamber, vaulted home,
> Guarded right well for ever, where I go

depths of the rock, the sitting form of a woman, bending forward in her grief, over whom the water drips and flows ceaselessly. This is Niobe, the mother of the Phrygian mountains, who saw her happy offspring, the rivulets, playing round her, till they were all carried away by the day-heat of the sun."—Curtius's Hist. of Greece, i. 81.

To join mine own, of whom the greater part
Among the dead doth Persephassa* hold ;
And I, of all the last and saddest, wend
My way below, life's little span unfilled."—(P.)

And then, as Socrates, her antitype, tries to console himself and his friends with the thought that if death be not annihilation or a dreamless sleep, he may pace Elysian fields, and converse with the spirits of the good and wise ; so the maiden dwells upon the hope that in death she too may not be divided from those who were nearest and dearest to her on earth—that she may meet her father and her mother, and the brother for whom she has sacrificed everything. But then again there swells up in her heart the remembrance of the pleasant life she is about to leave :—

" Cut off from marriage-bed and marriage-song,
Untasting wife's true joy or mother's bliss,
Bereaved of friends, in utter misery,
Alive I tread the chambers of the dead.
What law of heaven have I transgressed against ?
What use for me, ill-starred one, still to look
To any god for succour, or to call
On any friend for aid ? For holiest deed
I bear the charge of rank unholiness.
If acts like these the gods on high approve,
We, taught by pain, shall see that we have sinned ;
But if these sin [*looking at Creon*], I pray they suffer not
Worse evils than the wrongs they do to me."—(P.)

And then she passes from the scene. We may pity her—indeed who could not?—but we can hardly realise the extent of her self-sacrifice. Like the Decii or

* The Greek form of " Proserpine."

others who devoted themselves for a noble cause, she "surrendered *all*, and looked forward to nothing but the joyless asphodel meadow, and 'drear Cocytus, with its languid stream.'" * There was not even the expectancy of a material happiness, such as consoles the dying Islamite. To the Greek maiden all beyond the Styx was dim, shadowy, and spectral as the ghosts with which Homer peopled Hades.

Retribution, in the drama, follows closely upon crime. Scarcely has Antigone been led away to death —scarcely have the Chorus ended their dirge in her memory, in which they illustrate the law of suffering, from which even gods are not exempt—when Teiresias, the blind prophet, whose approach is always ominous of woe, confronts Creon, as Elijah confronted Ahab on his return from the vineyard whither he had gone up to take possession. The augur has read signs of coming disaster portended in the heavens above and in the earth beneath. To Teiresias, as to Elijah, "the horizon was darkened with the visions of vultures glutting on the carcases of the dead, and the packs of savage dogs feeding on their remains, or lapping up their blood." † Seated on his "old augurial throne," he has heard a strange clamour of birds battling in the air, and tearing each other's flesh. Instead of the wonted flame rising bright and clear from the altar, the sacred fire had but smoked and spluttered; the victim's flesh had fallen to the ground and wasted; every shrine and hearth was full of unclean food.

* Ecce Homo, ch. xi.

† Stanley's Lectures on the Jewish Church, ii. 314.

"The gods no more hear prayers of sacrifice,
Nor own the flame that burns the victim's limbs;
Nor do the birds give cry of omen good,
But feed on carrion of a slaughtered corpse."—(P.)

Let the king, then, concludes the seer, listen to good counsel, and not reverse the common laws of humanity. Let him restore Antigone to the upper air, and bury Polynices.

But Creon, like Œdipus before him, is deaf to the voice of prophecy, and scorns repentance or atonement till repentance and atonement come too late. Like Œdipus, he adds impiety to crime, and in the stubbornness of his pride utters blasphemous words which must have outraged the pious sense of the Athenian audience. Teiresias may play his "augur's tricks" on others, and make his gains of amber from Sardis and gold from India; but

"*That* corpse ye shall not hide in any tomb,
Not though the eagles, birds of Zeus, should bear
Their carrion morsels to the throne of God,—
Not even fearing this pollution dire,
Will I consent to burial."—(P.)

And then, inspired by his evil genius (or, as the Greeks would have put it, infatuated by Até, the demon-goddess of destruction), Creon adds insult to reproach, until the prophet, sorely vexed, declares the doom which awaits the shedder of innocent blood. Sorrow shall come upon his own house; few and evil shall be the days that remain of his life. The sun shall not rise and set again before he shall repay blood for blood;—

"For that thou
Hast to the ground cast one that walked on earth,
And foully placed within the sepulchre
A living soul; and now they wait for thee,
The sure though slow avengers of the grave,
The dread Erinyes of the mighty gods."—(P.)

There shall be wailing and lamentation in the palace of Thebes, and the cities round shall rise in arms against the polluter of the holiest and most universal law of nature.

Creon, overawed by the reality of this prediction, is smitten with remorse almost before Teiresias is led from the stage. He will yield to necessity, and he summons his attendants to bring axes that may break open the tomb while there is yet time to release the maiden.

Then the Chorus utter a fervent prayer to Bacchus, "the god of many names," to come to the rescue of Thebes, the city of his mother, Semele:—

"Prince of each silver star
That breathes through darkness its celestial light,—
Lord of the train who on the car of night
Swell their wild hymns afar,—
Blest youth! high offspring of eternal Jove!
Haste, and thy fair attendants bring,
Those Naxian nymphs the livelong night who rove,
Dancing around thy throne in festive ring,
And shout Iacchus' name, their leader and their king."
—(D.)

Events crowd on one another in rapid succession, as the action hurries on to the catastrophe. In accord-

ance with the usual machinery of Greek tragedy, the messenger of evil tidings enters, and in one line tells his story :—

"Bathed in his blood, all lifeless, Hæmon lies."

Eurydice, the queen-mother, passing by on her way to the shrine of Minerva, overhears his words, and in an agony of terror demands to be told the whole truth. Then follows the tale of doom.

Creon had hurried to make what atonement he might to the outraged corpse of Polynices. It still lay upon the plain where the watchmen had left it, torn and mangled by the dogs, holding their carnival around the dead. After prayer had been made to the "Goddess of Pathways,"* Creon's attendants reverently wash the body in pure water, burn the remains, and raise a mound of earth. Then they take their way to "death's marriage-chamber," in which Antigone had been immured. Even before they reach it, a shrill cry of lamentation breaks upon their ears; and with a heart foreboding the worst, Creon bids his slaves roll away the stones and widen the entrance to the tomb. The sight which meets their eyes, as the set scene in the background opens, is piteous beyond all expression. The messenger continues :—

"In the farthest corner of the vault
We saw her hanging by her neck, with cord
Of linen threads entwined, and him we found
Clasping her form in passionate embrace."—(P.)

* Proserpine or Hecate—the goddess who guarded the highways which were polluted by the unburied body of Polynices.

Then Creon, groaning in the bitterness of his heart, entreats his son to leave the body and to come forth from the ill-omened chamber. Hæmon answers not, but, glaring with angry eyes, draws his sword; and as his father, believing his own life to be threatened, starts back in terror, the unfortunate youth buries the blade in his own body, and falls forwards on the earth, still clasping the dead Antigone :—

> "Yet ever, while dim sense
> Struggled within the fast-expiring soul,
> Feebler and feebler still his stiffening limbs
> Clung to that virgin form, and every gasp
> Of his last breath with bloody dews distained
> The cold white cheek that was his pillow. So
> Lies death embracing death."—(Lord Lytton.)*

But the doom of the house of Œdipus is not yet consummated. Eurydice had heard to the end the tale of the messenger, and had then rushed into the palace without a word or cry. The Chorus argue the worst from this ominous silence; and their fears are fulfilled, for hardly has Creon again come upon the stage, bearing the dead body of his son in his arms, when he is met by a second messenger with the news that the queen, his wife, has stabbed herself to the heart with a mortal blow.

And here the horror culminates. Nothing can be

* We are at once reminded of the last scene in 'Romeo and Juliet,' where rescue and explanation come too late to save the lovers, and where the tomb of the Capulets is, as the Friar says, "a nest

> "Of death, contagion, and unnatural sleep."

added to increase the agony and remorse of Creon—left living, it is true, but more to be pitied than the dead themselves,—crushed and humbled in the dust, all joy in life, all domestic happiness, all peace of mind gone for ever. Above all, he is tormented by the consciousness that it is his own stubborn pride, and not his evil destiny, that has thus made him the murderer of son and wife. "Heaven has sorely smitten me," he says,—

> "And I know not
> Which way to look or turn. All near at hand
> Is turned to evil; and upon my head
> There falls a doom far worse than I can bear."—(P.)

CHAPTER V.

THE DEATH OF AJAX.

Of all heroic families, perhaps none were more famous than that of the Æacidæ, to which Ajax, the hero of this tragedy, belonged. Æacus, the founder of the race, was a son of Jove, and he married a daughter of the centaur Chiron, from whom two sons were born to him, Peleus and Telamon. Peleus married the sea-nymph, "silver-footed" Thetis, and by her had Achilles; while Telamon took to wife Eribœa, who bore him Ajax. The cousins were both mighty warriors, renowned beyond all the other Greeks in the siege of Troy; but in character and appearance they were as different as Athelstane and Ivanhoe. Achilles was the true knight of chivalry, brave, graceful, and courteous, but high-spirited and passionate. Ajax was a man of war, of huge bulk and ponderous strength, taller than all the rest by the head and shoulders. More than once his single right arm had saved the army from destruction,—

"Stemming the war as stems a torrent's force
Some wooded cliff far reaching o'er the plain,"*—

* Lord Derby's Homer, Il. xvii. 847.

keeping his foes at bay, and then slowly retreating, covered by his shield of bull's hide, "huge as a tower." But he had waxed insolent in the pride of his strength, and more than once (as we are told in the play) his arrogant and impious words had provoked the anger of the gods. When he first left Salamis, his father, perhaps foreseeing the trouble which his haughty spirit was doomed to bring upon him, had given him prudent advice :—

> "Seek, my son, in fight,
> To conquer, but still conquer through the gods."

But Ajax, like the old Norseman, "put his trust neither in idols nor demons, but in his own battle-axe," and his reply was,—

> "Father, with heavenly aid a coward's hand
> May grasp the prize of conquest ; I confide
> To win such trophies e'en without the gods."—(D.)

Again, in the heat of battle, when Minerva herself had urged him to turn his arms where she led the way, he had defiantly rejected her gracious offer of assistance :—

> "O Queen ! to other Argives lend thine aid ;
> No hostile might shall break where Ajax stands."—(D.)

It would seem as if his sullen and haughty temper had estranged the friendship of men as well as the favour of the gods. He was certainly unpopular among his brothers in arms. To Agamemnon he was "most hateful;" Menelaus bore him no love ; and the Ulysses of Homer, like the Ulysses of Shakspeare,

despised this "beef-witted lord"* for being as stolid as he was arrogant. On the death of Achilles, it was decided that the celestial armour forged by Vulcan for the hero at the prayer of Thetis should be given to the bravest warrior in the host. Only two chieftains presumed to lay claim to it on the score of their personal valour, Ajax and Ulysses. But whatever Ajax might have been in the battle-field, in council or debate he was far inferior to his rival; and the other princes, after listening to the claims urged by the two candidates, influenced partly by personal feeling, partly by the eloquence of Ulysses himself, and partly by the inspiration of Minerva, adjudged the armour to the "king of rocky Ithaca."

Ajax left the council and retired to his tent, in bitter wrath at what he considered the unjust decision of the judges; and it is on the following morning that the play opens.

The scene represents the historic plain of Troy. The sea sparkles in the distance, and the shore is fringed by a line of boats—one larger than the others in the centre of the foreground. There is only one person on the stage—a chieftain narrowly scanning, as it seems, footprints on the ground. Suddenly there is a flash of light high up in the background of the scene, and the audience see a majestic form in radiant

* Troilus and Cressida, act i. sc. 3. M. Taine is even more uncomplimentary. In his classification of Shakspeare's characters, he places Ajax between Caliban and Cloten among "les brutes et les imbéciles."—(Lit. Angl., ii. 206.)

armour; and by the spear in her hand, the Gorgon's head upon her shield, and, above all, by the clear-cut face and by the "azure eyes," they recognise their own virgin goddess, Pallas Athene, or, as we may call her, Minerva.

Then, in that musical and sonorous Greek of which we shall never know the true sound or accent, she addresses the warrior on the stage. Why (she asks)—why does Ulysses scan these freshly-imprinted footsteps, as though, "like a keen-scented Spartan hound," he were tracking his foe to his lair? Ulysses recognises the voice, "clear as a Tyrrhenian trumpet," and makes answer. He is on the track of his foe, the hero of the seven-fold shield. In the night just past, the herds and herdsmen have been butchered by some unknown hand, and rumour points to Ajax, who was seen

> "The fields o'erleaping with a blood-stained sword."

Ulysses has come to spy out the truth, and is now ready to learn it from one whose wisdom he has proved of old.

Then Minerva tells him all,—how Ajax, burning with wrath at the loss of these much-coveted arms, had gone forth sword in hand at the dead of night, and was on the point of bursting into the tent of the Atreidæ, thirsting for their blood, when (says the goddess)

> "I held him back from that accursed joy,
> Casting strange glamour o'er his wandering eyes,
> And turned him on the flocks, and where with them
> The herd of captured oxen press in crowds,

Not yet divided. And on these he falls,
And wrought fell slaughter of the hornèd kine,
Smiting all round ; and now it seemed to him
That he did slay the Atreidæ with his hand,
Now this, now that, of other generals.
And I still urged the wild and moon-struck man
With fresh access of madness, and I cast
An evil net around him. After this,
When he had ceased that slaughter, binding fast
The oxen that still lived, and all the flocks,
He leads them to his dwelling, counting them
No troop of hornèd cattle, but of men ;
And now within he flouts his prisoners."—(P.)

Minerva is not even satisfied with having blinded the eyes and deluded the senses of the rash man who had insulted her. She wishes to humiliate her victim before her favourite hero, and loudly summons Ajax to come forth from the tent. At the second summons he appears, his eyes still glaring with a ferocious joy, carrying the scourge of cords with which he has been lashing his prisoners. No translation can express the bitter mockery with which the goddess humours his fancied triumph, "first gazing on her victim, while the depths of his mental ruin are lighted up by her irony, then turning in more benignant majesty to point the moral for her favourite." *

Ajax warmly thanks Minerva for her aid. His revenge has been glorious. Not only has he reddened his sword with the blood of the Atreidæ, but he has Ulysses, his bitterest foe (it is a ram which to his mad fancy represents him), bound to a pillar within, and

* Jebb's Ajax, p. 8, note.

he intends presently to scourge him to death. Then he re-enters the tent to complete his vengeance.

The real Ulysses, whom Minerva has hidden in a cloud from his rival's sight, cannot resist expressing his pity that so stout a warrior should have been brought so low; but the goddess has no such compassion. It is his impious pride that has brought these evils on the victim of her wrath. Let his fate be a warning to all, and let Ulysses himself take heed:—

"Do thou, then, seeing this, refrain thy tongue
From any lofty speech against the gods,
Nor boast thyself, though thou excel in strength
Or weight of stored-up wealth. All human things
A day lays low, a day lifts up again;
But still the gods love those of ordered soul,
And hate the evil."—(P.)

And with these parting words the goddess is borne upwards by some ingenious mechanism, and Ulysses departs, having learnt the object of his quest, and marvelling much at the strange frenzy which had come upon his unsuccessful rival.

Music in the "Dorian mode" is heard, and the Chorus, here composed of Salaminian sailors, the faithful comrades of Ajax, enter in search of their chieftain. They have been much perplexed and disquieted by an evil rumour, tending to the dishonour of their much-loved prince.

"Tis said that, rushing to the plain,
By thee the captured herds were slain
To Grecian valour due;

All that of martial spoils remain
Thy hand infuriate slew.
Such slanders does Ulysses bear,
Such whispers breathe in every ear:
His calumnies glad credence gain;
As he who speaks, so they who hear,
Insulting mock thy pain.
He rarely errs who flings on high
At gallant souls his contumely;
Whilst I of lowlier lot evade
The penalty by greatness paid;
For envy steals with silent aim
On nobler birth and loftier fame."—(D.)

Let their chief but come forth from his tent, and he will confound his enemies by his presence; at sight of him they will scatter "like a flock of birds."

Then the Chorus pause, waiting for an answer; but no word of response comes from the closed curtains of the tent of Ajax. They are alarmed by this strange silence. Can there be, after all, they ask, some truth in this dark rumour? Can Diana or the god of war have sent this curse of madness on their prince? Heaven help him, if this be so! But if Ulysses has invented the story,—"Up from thy seat," is their last appeal, "where all too long thou hast been tarrying, while the insolence of thy foes sweeps on like a breeze through wind-swept dells, mocking thee to thy heart's grief and to my abiding sorrow."

There is still no answer from Ajax, but a woman comes forth from his tent, weeping bitterly. The sailors know her well. It is Tecmessa, a captive of the

spear, whom Ajax, according to the existing rules of war, "deigned to take for his bride." She has to tell them of "a sorrow sharp as death." The rumour is all too true, for Ajax, the valiant, the mighty, the broad-shouldered hero (and she dwells fondly on each epithet), is the victim of a heaven-sent frenzy; and then she tells them all she knows of the wild work of the previous night. When the evening lamps burnt no longer, and all was darkness and silence through the camp, Ajax had taken his sword and gone forth alone, cutting short her remonstrances with a proverb (familiar to the Greeks, but which would find little favour in our days),—

"Silence, O woman, is a woman's grace."—(D.)

After a space he had returned, driving before him the sheep and oxen. Some of these he had slain, hacking and mangling them with insensate fury; others he had bound and lashed with the scourge, laughing madly the while, and threatening his fancied enemies. Then at last reason and remorse came upon him;—

"And when he saw the tent with slaughter filled,
He smote his head and groaned; and, falling down,
He sat among the fallen carcasses
Of that great slaughter of the flocks and herds,
Tearing his hair by handfuls with his nails.
And for a long, long time he speechless sat;
And then with those dread words he threatened me,
Unless I told him all the woeful chance,
And asked me of the plight in which he stood;
And I, my friends, in terror told him all,
All that I knew of all that he had done.

And he forthwith sent out a bitter cry,
Such as till now I never heard from him;
For ever did he hold such loud lament
Sure sign of one with coward heart and base;
And holding back from shrill and wailing cries,
Would groan with deep, low muttering, like a bull;
But now, thus fallen on an evil chance,
Tasting nor food nor drink, among the herds
Slain with his sword, he sits in silent calm,
And looks like one on some dire mischief bent."—(P.)

This burst of anguish followed by a sullen despair is, as Tecmessa fears, more dangerous than his first frantic state of madness. What help can they, his old and true friends, bring to their king in this extremity?

But the Chorus have not time to answer her; for groan after groan comes from the closed tent, and Ajax is heard piteously calling on his child Eurysaces, and on Teucer his foster-brother, then far away, to come to him. Then Tecmessa can refrain no longer, but throws open the door of the tent, and discovers Ajax seated in gloomy silence, with his head buried in his hands, while all about him lie the carcasses of the slaughtered sheep and oxen. Disturbed by the light entering the tent, he lifts up his head and sees his faithful sailors; but they can bring him no comfort. His baffled vengeance, the insulting joy of his foes,—more than all, of that wheedling knave Ulysses, whom he pictures to himself as "laughing long and loudly for very joy of heart,"—all these thoughts rankle in his breast, and render life itself unbearable. How, he asks, can he endure the light of day? how can he look on the face of men any longer? Let his own true friends, the

sailors of his fleet, come near and slay him with the sword. The sight of the mangled carcasses around him aggravates this sense of shame ; to think that he, the hero of a hundred fights, should have dyed his sword in the blood of dumb and defenceless beasts ! There is only one escape open to him now ;—

" Fair death it is, to shun more shame, to die." *

And he welcomes the thought. " O darkness," he continues, " my light ! O gloom of Erebus, bright as day to such as me ! Take me, take me to dwell with you ; for I am no longer worthy to look on the race of gods or mortals for any profit that I can bring to man, since the warrior-daughter of Jove torments me to my death. Whither, then, can I fly ? whither can I go and be at rest ? for my glory is gone, my friends, and vengeance presses hard upon me."

Then he turns (as every hero in Sophocles turns) to Nature—to the familiar plains of Troy—and bids them all an affectionate farewell.

" O paths by the ocean waves, and caverns on the shore, and grove o'ershadowing the beach, too long, too long have ye held me here a weary while ! but no longer shall ye hold me, while I have breath of life. Let him who is wise know this. O streams of Scamander, old friends of mine, never shall ye see me more ; the bravest warrior of all the host that came from Greece ! "

And then there crowd upon him the sweet and bitter memories of the past,—the promises of glory so

* Faery Queen, III. v. 45.

soon cut short,—the hopes of vengeance so ruinously frustrated. How can he return to Salamis, and meet the questioning looks of his father Telamon, deprived of the meeds of valour? He is hated by the gods; he is hated by the Greek host; "yea," he says, "all Troy and these plains hate me."

"I must seek out some perilous emprise,
To show my father that I sprang from him,
In nature not faint-hearted. It is shame
For any man to wish for length of life,
Who, wrapped in troubles, knows no change for good.
For what delight brings day still following day,
Or bringing on, or putting off our death?
I would not rate that man as worth regard,
Whose fervour glows on vain and empty hopes:
But either noble life or noble death
Becomes the gentle born. My say is said."—(P.)

Then Tecmessa implores him, in the name of all that he regards as dearest and most sacred upon earth, not to leave her and his child desolate, to eat the bread of slavery and bear the bitter insults of his enemies.

"For very shame,
Leave not thy father in his sad old age;
For shame, leave not thy mother, feeble grown
With many years, who ofttimes prays the gods
That thou may'st live, and to thy house return.
Pity, O king, thy boy, and think if he,
Deprived of childhood's nurture, live bereaved
Beneath unfriendly guardians, what sore grief
Thou in thy death dost give to him and me;
For I have nothing now on earth save thee
To which to look."—(P.)

The Chorus—themselves moved to tears—implore Ajax to listen to this touching appeal, and to forego his deadly purpose. But Ajax, if he is touched at all, is too proud to show it. If Tecmessa loves him, let her bring his child Eurysaces,—and Eurysaces is brought. Then Ajax, taking the child upon his knee, looks tenderly on him, as Hector looked on Astyanax, —so happily unconscious of his father's misery, and scarcely heeding the carnage with which the ground was strewed; and then addressing the child as though it could understand his words, he pictures it growing up in careless innocence, "as a young plant," sheltered from all rough winds under the guardianship of Teucer, rejoicing its widowed mother's heart, and perhaps hereafter (and the warrior's heart swells at the thought) avenging his father's wrongs. "O my child," he says, almost in the words of Æneas to the young Ascanius,—

> "Learn of your father to be great,
> Of others to be fortunate." *

Eurysaces, he concludes, shall inherit the famous shield—from which he takes his name: all his other arms shall be buried in his own grave. Then, with a hint that "sore wounds need sharp remedies," he bids her take the child within and fasten the tent-doors. Again Tecmessa implores him to relent—"in the name of the gods." "The gods!" bitterly repeats Ajax—what duty or allegiance does he owe the gods, who so plainly hate him? and once more he angrily orders her to leave him to himself.

* Virgil, Æneid, xii. 435 (Conington's Transl.)

But Tecmessa still lingers—finding it, perhaps, impossible to tear herself from the presence of one whom she loves with all a woman's devoted affection—and she stays near the tent-door, clasping the hands of Eurysaces.* Ajax does not look to see whether she has obeyed him; but, relapsing into profound melancholy, covers his face in his hands. And so the three remain, motionless as statues; while the Chorus, in their song, contrast the peaceful happiness of the island-home which they have left with the weary travail of the siege, and the gloom and dishonour of their king. "Blessed art thou," their chant begins, "glorious Salamis, where thou liest by the beating waves, famous in the sight of all for ever;"—and they deplore the fate which has befallen so noble a warrior—doomed to perish in his prime, though sprung from a race in which "prince after prince had lived out his span, and gone to the grave full of years and honours." †

"Oh! when the pride of Græcia's noblest race
Wanders, as now, in darkness and disgrace,
When reason's day
Sets rayless—joyless—quenched in cold decay,
Better to die, and sleep
The never-waking sleep, than linger on,
And dare to live, when the soul's life is gone:
But thou shalt weep,
Thou wretched father, for thy dearest son,
Thy best beloved, by inward furies torn,
The deepest, bitterest curse, thine ancient house hath borne!" ‡

* Bishop Thirlwall's view of the scene is here followed.
† Jebb's Ajax, p. 88. ‡ Praed's Poems, ii. 349.

Then Ajax comes forward again. His better nature has been touched—perhaps more by the allusions to his beloved island than by any awakened tenderness for Tecmessa. He addresses the Chorus, and there is no necessity for supposing his speech to be spoken with studied artifice: if there *is* artifice, it is the poet's "irony." Or it may be that he "desires, half in pity and half in scorn, to disguise from his listeners a purpose too great for their sympathy."* But whatever may have been the intention of the words, their purport is that his heart has been melted within him: he will atone for his rash deeds: he will purify himself from the stain of blood, that so he may find rest for his soul.

This famous farewell speech is worthy of being given in full, and the following is Mr Calverley's admirable translation:—

"All strangest things the multitudinous years
Bring forth, and shadow from us all we know.
Falter alike great oath and steeled resolve;
And none shall say of aught, 'This may not be.'
Lo! I myself, but yesterday so strong
As new-dipt steel, am weak and all unsexed
By yonder woman: yea I mourn for them,
Widow and orphan, left amid their foes.
But I will journey seaward—where the shore
Lies meadow-fringed—so haply wash away
My sin, and flee that wrath that weighs me down,
And, lighting somewhere on an untrodden way,
I will bury this my sword, this hateful thing,
Deep in some earth-hole where no eye shall see—
Night and hell keep it in the under-world!

* Jebb's Ajax.

For never to this day, since first I grasped
The gift that Hector gave, my bitterest foe,
Have I reaped aught of honour from the Greeks.
So true that byword in the mouths of men,
'A foeman's gifts are no gifts, but a curse.'
Wherefore henceforward shall I know that God
Is great; and strive to honour Atreus' sons.
Princes they are, and should be obeyed. How else?
Do not all terrible and most puissant things
Yet bow to loftier majesties? The Winter,
Who walks forth scattering snows, gives place anon
To fruitage-laden Summer; and the orb
Of weary Night doth in her turn stand by,
And let shine out, with her white steeds, the Day:
Stern tempest-blasts at last sing lullaby
To groaning seas: even the arch-tyrant, Sleep,
Doth loose his slaves, not hold them chained for ever.
And shall not mankind, too, learn discipline?
I know, of late experience taught, that him
Who is my foe I must but hate as one
Whom I may yet call friend: and him who loves me
Will I but serve and cherish as a man
Whose love is not abiding. Few be they
Who reaching friendship's port have there found rest.
But, for these things they shall be well. Go thou,
Lady, within, and there pray that the gods
May fill unto the full my heart's desire;
And ye, my mates, do unto me with her
Like honour; bid young Teucer, if he comes,
To care for me, but to be *your* friend still.
For where my way leads, thither must I go;
Do ye my bidding; haply ye may hear,
Though now is my dark hour, that I have peace."*

The Chorus are convinced that Ajax has shaken off the sullen despair which had brooded over his spirit,

* Verses and Translations, p. 177.

and give vent to their delight in a passionate burst of joy, which must have been far more effective in the original music of the ode than it can ever be in an English translation, however gracefully rendered. Once more they may see the "white glory of happy days;" and they call on Pan himself to lead their dance of triumph.

> "I thrill with eager delight,
> And with passionate joy I leap;
> Io Pan! Io Pan! Io Pan!
> Come over the waves from the height
> Of the cliffs of Cyllene, where sweep
> The storm-blasts of snow in their might!
> Come, come, O King, at the head
> Of the dance of the Gods as they tread.
> . . . . . .
> And over Icarian wave,
> Coming with will to save,
> May Delos' king, Apollo, gloriously advance!
> Yes, the dark sorrow and pain
> Far from me Ares hath set;
> Io Pan! Io Pan! once more;
> And now, O Zeus! yet again
> May our swift-sailing vessels be met
> By the dawn with clear light in its train."—(P.)

But hardly have these joyous strains died away, when a messenger from the Greek camp enters, inquiring for Ajax. Teucer has just returned from the foray, and has with difficulty made his way through the crowd of soldiers, who assailed him with a storm of insults and threats as "the madman's brother." On his entering the council chamber, Calchas, the

seer, had drawn him aside, and earnestly warned him to keep Ajax within doors till sunset. The wrath of Minerva would last for the space of this one day, which was destined to bring him death or life. But the warning and the message have come too late. Ajax has already gone forth, and the Chorus—realising the irony of his farewell speech to them—hurriedly summon Tecmessa, and disperse themselves to seek their prince, and stay his hand while there may yet be time.

For a moment the stage is vacant; then, by a skilful appliance of machinery, the scene changes. The sea still heaves in the distance; but, instead of the tents of the Salaminian sailors, there is seen the dark and lonely "grove by the shore," and near it stands Ajax himself, looking steadfastly at his sword, which is fixed point upwards with the hilt buried in the earth. All things, he says, are ready for the sacrifice. The sword that is to slay him—Hector's fatal gift, but his best friend now—is ready sharpened, and fixed where it may strike the surest blow. Then he invokes the gods, with whom he makes his peace by his blood. Let Zeus summon Teucer by a "swift rumour," that he may protect his body from the insults of his enemies; let Mercury guide his soul to a home of rest, after it has parted from his body "at one swift bound — without a struggle;" let the Furies avenge his wrongs, and "spare not the Greek host, but lap their fill of slaughter." Then a softer spirit comes over him, and he bids farewell to life—not with the bitter and half-affected

disdain of Romeo and Hamlet, but affectionately appealing to the bright daylight, and to Nature, with all their pleasant memories of the past :—

" And thou that mak'st high heaven thy chariot-course,
O Sun, when gazing on my Fatherland,
Draw back thy golden rein, and tell my woes
To the old man my father, and to her
Who nursed me at her bosom—my poor mother !
There will be wailing through the echoing walls
When—but away with thoughts like these ! the hour
Brings on the ripening deed. Death, death ! look on me—
Did I say Death ?—it was a waste of words ;
We shall be friends hereafter.
'Tis the DAY,
Present and breathing round me, and the car
Of the sweet sun, that never shall again
Receive my greeting !—henceforth time is sunless,
And day a thing that is not ! Beautiful Light,
My Salamis—my country—and the floor
Of my dear household-hearth ; and thou, bright Athens,
Thou—for thy sons and I were boys together—
Fountains and rivers, and ye Trojan plains,
I loved you as my fosterers—fare ye well !
Take in these words, the last earth hears from Ajax—
All else unspoken ; in a spectre-land
I'll whisper to the Dead."—(Lord Lytton.)

And we must remember, says a French critic, that this appeal was made in a theatre with the blue heaven for its canopy, and the mountains and sea for its decorations. When he saluted for the last time the sun and the sweet light of day, the real sun was actually shedding a radiance on the features of the dying hero, and the entranced faces of the audience.

"Salamis, sacred land of my fathers!" cried Ajax, and all the spectators could see Salamis and its glorious gulf. There it lay, sparkling in the sunshine, in the midst of the waves, which still murmur the name of Themistocles; there it lay, with all the memories which its name and sight could recall to the Athenians. "Fair and glorious Athens, sweet sister of my father-land!" again cried the hero; and not only did he say this *in* Athens, but Athens was all there centred beneath his gaze.*

With one last look at the sunlight, Ajax falls forwards on his sword, and his body lies concealed from the audience by the underwood of the grove. The Chorus enter hurriedly in two bands, right and left of the stage. They have wearied themselves with a vain search, far and wide, on the eastern and western sides of the camp, but they have not found their prince; and they appeal to the "children of the sea"—the nymphs and naiads of the springs—to aid their quest. Suddenly a woman's cry is heard from the grove. It is Tecmessa, who, searching nearer home, has just stumbled on the body of Ajax, as it lies "with the life-blood streaming from the nostrils;" and they see her covering it with her robe from the eyes of his friends.

Teucer enters in the midst of their grief, warned by a mysterious rumour from some god of the death of Ajax. He uncovers the body; and, gazing steadfastly at it, he too bursts into a passionate lament. As the sons of Jacob feared to return to their father without

* Translated from Girardin, Cours de Littérature Dramat., i. 29.

bringing Benjamin with them, so the foster-brother shrinks from returning alone to Salamis and facing the aged Telamon—fierce even in his gentlest mood; and he foresees, what actually happened, that he will be driven, like a slave and an outcast, from his doors. And then he moralises over the fatality of an enemy's gifts, which have brought death and dole to giver and receiver.

"Mark, by the gods, these hapless heroes' fate.
Bound by the very belt which Ajax gave
To the swift chariot, Hector breathed his last:
He too, possessing Hector's fatal gift,
By it hath perished with a mortal wound.
Did not some Fury forge that sword, and Death—
A stern artificer—that baldric weave?
Such fates, I ween, the gods for man ordain;
Yea, and all strange vicissitudes of life."—(D.)

Here it seems as if the play should end; but it is carried on into another act. To an Athenian audience, Ajax was more than a hero of tragedy: he was almost a tutelary god, the deified ancestor of one of their noblest families, to which not only Miltiades, but Alcibiades, and Thucydides the historian—perhaps actual spectators of the play—all belonged. Divine honours were paid to his tomb; and a yearly festival was held in his memory at Salamis. His burial, therefore, even on the stage, had almost the sanctity of a religious rite; and Menelaus and his brother (as types of Argos and Sparta, the national enemies of Athens) appropriately "fill the posts of 'Devil's Advocates' at this process of canonisation."*

* Bishop Thirlwall.

Just as Teucer is about to remove the body in order to prepare it for burial, Menelaus, accompanied by a herald, appears, and haughtily bids him leave the corpse as it lies upon the sand. "There," he says, "it shall remain, food for the birds that haunt the shore; for in his lifetime Ajax had been a worse foe to the Greeks than all the Trojans." Then follows an angry dialogue, in which the speakers, with Homeric roughness, exchange all degrees of insult, from the "reply churlish" to the "lie direct." Teucer is a fearless champion of the dead, and cares nothing for the rank of his opponent or for the consequences to himself. "Come, therefore," he replies, in a spirit as haughty as the Spartan's,—

> "Come, therefore, bring with thee a host of heralds;
> Yea, bring the King of men himself. I care not
> For all thy stir, while thou art—what thou art."

Menelaus, accordingly, goes to summon his brother Agamemnon; and Teucer calls Tecmessa and Eurysaces to watch the body while he prepares the grave. Then he bids the young child sit as a suppliant, with one hand on the corpse, and holding in the other a lock of his father's hair.

> "And should one
> In all our army tear thee from the dead,
> May he thus bare, unburied, basely die,
> An exile from his home, with all his race
> As utterly cut off, as I now cut
> This braided lock."—(P.)

The Chorus deplore the weary length of the siege, and curse the memory of him who first taught war to the

Greeks, and thereby cut them off from all the joys of life—"garlands, and brimming wine-cups, and the flute's sweet music, and sleep, and love."

"Yes, he from love and all its joy
Has cut me off, ah me! ah me!
And here I linger still in Troy,
By all uncared for, sad to see.
Till now, from every fear by night,
And bulwark against darts of foe,
Ajax stood forward in his might,
But now the stern god lays him low.

Ah! would that I my flight could take
Where o'er the sea the dark crags frown,
And on the rocks the wild waves break,
And woods the height of Sunium crown,
That so we might with welcome bless
Great Athens and her holiness!"—(P.)

Teucer enters again, and at the same moment there is seen approaching from the Greek camp a tall chieftain of stately bearing, in resplendent armour. It is "the King of men, the commander of the host," Agamemnon himself. He addresses Teucer with studied insolence, affecting not even to understand his "barbarous tongue." "Does the son of the bondmaid,"* he asks, "presume to set himself up as champion of a hero no whit better than his fellow-captains? Let him bring a free-born Greek to plead his cause." Teucer replies half in anger, half in sorrow, that the valour and the good services of Ajax should so soon have faded from men's remembrance. He apostrophises

* Teucer was the son of Telamon by a captive princess.

the dead before he will even condescend to notice the taunt of the living.

> "Alas! how swiftly doth man's gratitude
> Turn traitor to the memory of the dead!
> Lo, hath this prince not even one little word
> Of thought for thee, O Ajax, who didst oft
> In his behalf aforetime gage thy life?" *

Then he turns indignantly to the great king—"What, does he not remember? It was Ajax who had saved the ships from destruction, when wrapped in flames. It was Ajax who had confronted Hector himself—and the 'son of the bondmaid' had then stood by his brother's side." Then he retorts the charge of mean descent on Agamemnon—sprung from the "godless Atreus," and from a mother who played her husband false. He will die himself sooner than desert the dead—and it would be more glorious, he adds, to die for his gallant foster-brother than for Helen, the faithless wife.

At this point Ulysses enters, and acts as peacemaker between the angry disputants. His shrewd sense had argued that nothing could be gained by outraging the body of the dead warrior; and he appeals to Agamemnon not to press his hatred beyond the grave—basing his appeal upon common humanity and reason—

> "Unto me
> This man of all the host was greatest foe,
> Since I prevailed to gain Achilles' arms;

* "But yesterday the name of Cæsar might
Have stood against the world: now lies he there,
And none so poor to do him reverence."
—Julius Cæsar, act iii. sc. 2.

But though he were so, being what he was,
I would not put so foul a shame on him,
As not to own I looked upon a man
The best and bravest of the Argive host,
Of all that came to Troia, saving one,
Achilles' self. Most wrong 'twould therefore be
That he should suffer outrage at thy hands;
Thou wouldst not trample upon him alone,
But on the laws of God."—(P.)

Agamemnon reluctantly gives way, and leaves the scene. Then Ulysses, turning to Teucer, offers him his hand in friendship, with a generosity which is in strong contrast to the bitter insolence of the son of Atreus; he offers also to assist in paying the last honours to the noble dead. But this Teucer cannot allow, "lest it displease the dead himself;" and so Ulysses departs, having, so far as he could, made his peace with the manes of his ancient enemy.

Ulysses and Ajax met once more — so says the Homeric legend—in the lower world. While all the other heroes, in "the asphodel meadow," press forward to greet their old comrade in arms who has come to visit them in the flesh, the shade of Ajax stands aloof from all the others, brooding over the injuries of his lifetime, and sullenly turns away from the proffered courtesy of his rival.

Teucer returned to Salamis, taking with him Tecmessa and Eurysaces; but, as he had foreseen, Telamon received him with angry reproaches for allowing Ajax to perish. Then Teucer set sail for Cyprus, and there he founded a city which he called Salamis, after his

old home. Horace describes his farewell banquet, and his spirited address to the companions of his voyage:

"Where fortune bears us, than my sire more kind,
There let us go, my own, my gallant crew:
'Tis Teucer leads, 'tis Teucer breathes the wind;
No more despair; Apollo's word is true.
Another Salamis in kindlier air
Shall yet arise. Hearts, that have borne with me
Worse buffets! drown, to-day, in wine your care;
To-morrow we recross the wide, wide sea!" *

* Odes, I. 7 (Conington's Transl.)

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAIDENS OF TRACHIS.

This play, like many of the Greek tragedies, takes its name not from the plot or the hero, but from the personages of the Chorus—that very important element in the Greek drama. The vague title tells nothing to an English reader, but every Athenian knew, at least by name, the little Thessalian town of Trachis, nestling at the foot of Mount Œta, not far from the famous pass of Thermopylæ; and many, like Plutarch, had visited the spot, and seen for themselves what tradition had consecrated as the tomb of Dejanira. But what, after all, mattered to them the title of the play, even if Trachis had been as distant as Babylon, when its subject was perhaps the best-known story in all mythology?

Hercules in his wanderings had come to Pleuron in Ætolia. There he saw and fell in love with Dejanira, the king's daughter, whose hand was sought by a suitor of a strange sort—the river-god Achelous. This potent rival had, as she tells us, wooed her in various shapes (none of them, it must be confessed, attractive),

—now coming as a bull, now as a scaly dragon, now in human form, with a bull's head, "with streams of water flowing from his shaggy beard." Hercules wrestled with Achelous, while the maiden looked on at a prudent distance; and the river-god, after being nearly strangled and losing one of his horns, gave way, and the victor bore away his bride in triumph. On their way homewards they came to the river Evenus, where the centaur Nessus dwelt, who was wont to carry travellers across. Hercules himself breasted the stream, and reached the further bank in safety, carrying his lion's skin, his bow, and the famous arrows which had been dipped in the poison of the hydra. Hearing a cry, he looked back, and saw Nessus offering violence to Dejanira, as he was bearing her across. Ovid—who has told the whole story—describes the prompt vengeance of the hero, as the centaur tries to fly. "Think not, thou," exclaims Hercules—

> "'With all the speed of all thy hoofs to 'scape!
> My wounds are swifter than my feet!' The act
> Followed the word, and through his flying back
> Impelled before his breast the barb outstood.
> And as he plucked it thence, from either wound
> Mingled with Lerna's venom gushed the blood,
> And steeped his mantle's fold. 'Not unavenged,'
> He muttered, 'will I perish!' and to her
> He would have ravished gave the robe, yet warm
> With poisoned gore, and bade her with that gift
> At need assure her husband's wavering love." *

Dejanira herself comes forward, and, as the single actor was wont to do in the earlier drama, tells the

* Ovid's Metam. ix. ii. (transl. by King.)

audience the history of her troubles. All these years of her married life, though her husband has treated her kindly, and children have been born to her, she has known little peace of mind. Hercules was constantly absent, fulfilling the labours imposed on him by Eurystheus. He was seldom at Trachis, and saw his children as rarely as "the husbandman who visits his distant fields at seed-time and at harvest." For fifteen months he has now been away from home, and his wife is sorely troubled at heart; for on his last departure he had made disposition of his wealth, and left with her a tablet, on which was engraved an oracle to the effect that the next year would be the crisis of his life—bringing him either death or rest from all his toils. But month after month has passed, and still Dejanira has heard nothing of her husband, and she fears the worst.

Then her eldest son Hyllus enters, and bids his mother be of good cheer, for Hercules is even now close at hand, in the island of Eubœa, which could almost be seen from Trachis. There, as rumour said, he was making war on the town of Eurytus; and there, at the suggestion of Dejanira, Hyllus sets out, like Telemachus, to obtain more certain tidings of his father.

The Chorus enter—young girls from the town of Trachis; and in their opening song they endeavour to console and reassure their neighbour with warm sympathy. They beseech the Sun-god to tell them where the hero is at that moment.

"Thou flaming Sun! whom spangled Night,
Self-destroying, brings to light,
Then lulls to sleep again;
Bright Herald, girt with beaming rays,
Say, where Alcmena's offspring strays;
Say, lurks he on the main?
Or lays his head to rest
On Europe or on Asia's breast?
In pity deign reply,
Thou of the lordly eye!

His bride, erst won by desperate fray,
Muses where lies his dangerous way;
Like some sad bird, her soul is set
On constancy and vain regret:
Sleep never seals those eyes, where woe
Lies all too deep for tears to flow,
While thought and boding Fancy's dread
Flit ever round her lonely bed.
Oft when the northern blast,
Or southern winds unwearied rave,
Ye see the ocean cast
In quick succession wave on wave;
So to whelm old Cadmus' son,
Rush redoubled labours on,
Thick as round the Cretan shore
The swoln and turbid billows roar:
Yet his step from Pluto's halls
Still some unerring God recalls.
My Queen! disdain not thou to brook
My chidings kind, and soft rebuke,
Nor cast away, in morbid mood,
The cheering hope of future good.
For universal nature's lord,
Saturn's great son, by all adored,

Enjoyment willed not to bestow
On human lot, unmixed with woe :
Grief and delight, in endless change,
Round man in mazy circles range,
Like never-setting stars, that roll
In ceaseless courses round the pole.
Soon spangled night must yield to day,
Soon wealth, soon trouble flits away ;
In turn, so fixed the eternal plan,
Bliss and bereavement wait on man.
My Queen ! on hope thy soul be stayed,
Nor yield thee to despair ;
When hath not Jove his children made
His providential care ?"—(A.)

But Dejanira, though she appreciates their kindness, is but half-convinced by the words of the Chorus. They are but young girls, she says, and know little of the sad experiences of a wife and mother. Night after night she has started up in an agony of terror, lest she should be bereaved of the "noblest man on earth ;" and that mysterious tablet causes her grave misgivings.

Suddenly comes a messenger with good news. Hercules is not only alive, but is on the point of returning home after victory, and has sent his herald Lichas with the captives on before him. Then Lichas himself enters, and behind him follow a train of women, the unfortunate prizes of the war. Dejanira turns eagerly to the herald. "Tell me," she asks, "O dearest of messengers, what I most wish to know,—shall I receive Hercules again alive ?" "Yes," is the answer ; "I left him alive and strong, and smitten of no

disease." Dejanira is made happy by the answer—so happy, that she fears some fresh disaster. She cannot help contrasting her own joy with the forlorn and helpless state of these captive women. Heaven grant, is her prayer, such sorrow may never come on her or hers!

Then her attention is caught by one of the captives standing somewhat apart from the others, and a woman's instinct impels her to ask of Lichas the name and history of this pale and graceful stranger—

> "For, more than all, my own heart pities her,
> And, more than all, her soul is quick to feel."—(P.)

But Lichas professes ignorance. He knows nothing of this maiden, except that she has done nothing but weep and wring her hands ever since she left her home on the "windy heights" of Œchalia; and she has been possessed by a dumb spirit, and will answer no questions. And then he leads his retinue off the stage.

Then the same old messenger who had preceded the herald enters again. He is, as M. Girardin terms him, an "indiscreet Iago," * whose meddlesome loquacity produces graver mischief than the machinations of a hardened villain. With a mysterious and important air he begs an audience; he tells his mistress that Lichas has deceived her; that this fair and graceful maiden is none other than Iole, the daughter of Eurytus; and that it was love of her which had im-

* Cours de Litt. Dramat., v. 255.

pelled Hercules to attack and storm Œchalia. Such is the whole truth, concludes this ancient mischief-maker, which it has been his painful duty to tell—at all costs.

Lichas now comes to ask his mistress if she has any parting message for Hercules; and Dejanira confronts him with his falsehood. He protests and denies, and repeats his former story. Then Dejanira, with a woman's duplicity, bids him speak out and fear nothing. She knows the ways of men—she knows the power of love—she knows the amorous temper of her husband:—

> "Has he not,
> Our Hercules, of all the men that lived,
> Wedded most wives, and yet not one of them
> Has had from me or evil speech or taunt?
> Nor will *she* have; though she in love for him
> Should melt and pine—for lo! I pitied her
> When first I saw her, for her beauty's sake:
> For it, I knew, had wrecked her life's fond hope,
> And she, poor soul, against her will, had wrought
> The ruin of her fatherland, and brought
> Its people into bondage. Let all this
> Go to the winds. For thee, I bid thee, I,
> Be false to others, but to me be true."—(P.)

Lichas is completely deceived by this speech, and is persuaded that Dejanira will resign herself quietly to her fate. Accordingly he confirms what the messenger had already told her; but, like a good servant, he makes out the best case he can for his master.

> "Well then, dear mistress, since I see that thou,
> Being human, hast a human heart, and know'st

No stubborn purpose, I will tell thee all,
The whole truth, nought concealing. All is so
As this man tells thee. Strong desire for her
Did seize on Heracles, and so her land,
Œchalia, was laid waste by armèd host,
And brought full low. And this (for I must tell
His doings also) he nor bade conceal
Nor yet denied ; but I myself, dear lady,
Fearing to grieve thy heart with these my words,
Did sin, if thou dost count it as a sin.
And now, since thou dost know the whole of things
For his sake and for thine, full equally
Treat the girl kindly, and those words of thine
Thou saidst of her, be firm and true to them;
For he whose might prevails in all things else,
In all is conquered by his love for her."—(P.)

Then he takes his leave. Dejanira bethinks herself of some means by which she may recall the waning affections of her husband, and she remembers that she has still preserved the blood which had flowed from the wound of Nessus, but has never yet used it, though the Centaur had assured her it would prove a resistless love-charm. After taking counsel with the Chorus, who advise her to make experiment before putting her project into action, she smears an embroidered robe with the blood, and intrusts it to Lichas, with strict charge that none should wear it before Hercules himself:—

"Nor must the light of sunshine look on it,
Nor sacred shrine, nor flame of altar hearth,
Before he stands, conspicuous, showing it
On day of sacrifice, in sight of gods.
For so I vowed, if I should see him safe

At home, or hear his safety well assured,
To clothe him with this tunic, and send forth
The glorious worshipper in glorious robe."—(P.)

But hardly has Lichas departed, carrying with him the fatal gift, than Dejanira enters again in an agony of alarm. She had, according to the Centaur's instructions, kept the blood in a bronze vessel "untouched by fire or sunlight"—even when she smeared it on the robe, it had been in a dark chamber within the house; but she had thrown the wisp of wool which she had used for the purpose on the ground in the sunshine. There it had melted and crumbled into dust in a strange fashion—

"And from the earth where it had lain, there oozed
Thick clots of foam, as when in vintage bright
Rich must is poured upon the earth from vine
Sacred to Bacchus; and I know not now
Which way of thought to turn, but see too well
That I have done a deed most perilous."—(P.)

Why, she reasons, should the Centaur have wished her well? No—the philtre must have been given with a purpose, and her husband will die of that "black poison" in which his own arrows have been steeped.

And at that moment Hyllus rushes in, and charges her with being his father's murderess. He has just come from witnessing the agony which had convulsed Hercules in the midst of his triumphal sacrifice to Jove. The blaze of fire from the altar had excited the latent and deadly power of the venom in which the robe had been steeped; maddened with pain, the hero had seized on Lichas, the unlucky bringer of the pre-

sent, and had dashed his brains out against the rocks; then he had burst away from his attendants, and—Ovid gives even a more vivid picture of the giant's sufferings than Sophocles—

"And filled all leafy Œta with his groans,
Striving to rend away the deadly robe
That with it rent the skin, and horribly
Or to his limbs inseparably glued
Refused to part, or, as it parted, bare
From the big bones the quivering muscle tore!
And in that poisonous heat his very blood,
Like white-hot steel in cooling water plunged,
Seethed hissing in his veins;—the greedy fire
Devoured his inmost vitals;—audible snapped
The crackling sinews; and from every limb
The lurking venom broke in livid sweat,
And sucked the melting marrow from his bones." *

Then Hyllus, in compliance with his prayer, had placed him in a ship, and he was even now on his way to Trachis. But may all the curses of the gods fall on his mother's head, he concludes, for

"Murdering the noblest man of all the earth,
Of whom thou ne'er shalt see the like again."

Dejanira had listened in silence, both to the tale of her husband's agony, and to the cruel reproaches of her son. All her happiness had been bound up with the wellbeing of Hercules. She had loved him with devoted affection, in spite of his long absences and his countless amours; and now by her own thoughtless act she has destroyed this idol of her heart, and

* Ovid, Metam. ix. iii. (King.)

has plunged the man whom she so faithfully loved into bodily torment such as she could not have devised even for her bitterest enemy. She is powerless to avert or to heal the sufferings which she has so unwittingly inflicted; and the voice of conscience within tells her that she can give but one real proof of her affection. It is the resolve which forms the refrain in the pathetic epistle which Ovid imagines her to have written to her husband—

"Impia, quid dubitas, Deianira, mori?" *

And so, without answering her son, she leaves the stage, and soon her nurse comes to tell the maidens that all is over. After wandering restlessly from room to room, mourning for the evil fate which had come upon her, she had thrown herself upon the bed of Hercules, and there ended her sorrow by a mortal wound from his sword; and then Hyllus, learning her innocence too late, had embraced the insensate body, with idle tears and kisses.

As the Chorus are lamenting her cruel death, the tramp of approaching steps is heard, and Hyllus and some attendants are seen carrying a litter, on which the huge frame of Hercules lies stretched. The convulsive pains which had so cruelly tortured him are lulled for the moment, and he is plunged in a death-like stupor; but he is roused by his son's voice, and with consciousness his agony revives, and he groans aloud in his despair. Will none, he asks, smite him with the

* "Why, guilty Dejanira, why not die?"

sword, and give him the death he longs for? Then his thoughts turn to her who has wrought these sufferings, and it angers him to think that the gigantic strength, which, Samson-like, had overcome all forms of death, and had tamed even the lion in his wrath, should have fallen victim to the snares of a Delilah—

"For she a woman, woman-like in mind,
Not of man's strength, alone, without a sword,
She hath destroyed me. . . . .
. . . . . Come, my son, be bold,
And pity me, in all ways pitiable,
Who like a girl must weep and shriek in pain;
And yet lives there not one, who, ere it came,
Could say that he had seen this man thus act,
But ever I bore pain without a groan."—(P.)

Let Hyllus, therefore, if he loves him, bring this false woman near him, that he may slay her before he dies himself.

Then Hyllus tells him of the fatal mistake of Dejanira, and how fatally the mistake had been atoned. When Hercules hears that the robe had been dipped in the Centaur's blood, he recognises the will of the gods, and bows to his fate. It had been foretold to him long before, that, like Macbeth, he should die by the hand of "none of woman born"—

"And thus the centaur monster, as was shown,
Though dead did slay me, who till now did live."

This knowledge seems to teach him resignation. He utters no more groans or cries of anguish, but conjures Hyllus to bear his body to the top of Œta, and there

to place it on a pile of wood, and kindle the flames himself:—

"Let no tear
Of wailing enter in, but do thy deed,
If thou art mine, without a tear or groan;
Or else, though I be in the grave, my curse
Shall rest upon thee grievous evermore."—(P.)

One more demand he makes (according to our ideas, a revolting request)—Hyllus must take Iole to wife. The son, after much reluctance, promises obedience; and so the drama ends. Ovid tells us how one of these commands was obeyed—how the pile was reared; how calm, "as though at a banquet," the hero spread his lion's skin over it and reclined thereon; how the roaring flames rose upwards and around him—

"And as some serpent casts his wrinkled skin
Rejuvenate, and with new burnished scales
Delighted basks, so, of these mortal limbs
Untrammelled, all the Hero's nobler part
In nobler shape and loftier stature rose
Renewed, august, majestic, like a God!
Whom with those four immortal steeds that whirl
His chariot-wheels, the Sire omnipotent
Upbore sublime above the hollow clouds,
And set amid the radiant stars of Heaven."*

* Ovid, Metam. ix. iv. (King.)

CHAPTER VII.

PHILOCTETES.

All that was mortal of Hercules, as we have seen, perished in the flames on Mount Œta; but his famous bow and the arrows with the hydra's blood were not burnt with the hero. Philoctetes, his armour-bearer, had been among the few who had aided Hyllus in carrying his father up the steep sides of the mountain; he had gathered the wood for the funeral-pile; and it was said that he had with his own hands applied the torch and kindled the flames. In gratitude for these last offices, Hercules had given him the bow and the poisoned arrows; which proved a possession almost as full of trouble to their new owner as they had to the hero himself.

Philoctetes had sailed for Troy with the rest of the armament; but on the voyage it happened that the Greek fleet touched at Chrysa, and there, while rashly treading on consecrated ground, he had been bitten in the foot by a venomous serpent. The wound gangrened and festered—and so noisome was the stench from it, and so terrible were the sufferer's cries of agony, that,

by the advice of Ulysses, he was landed while asleep on the desert isle of Lemnos, and there left alone in his misery.

It is at Lemnos, accordingly, that the scene of this tragedy is laid. Instead of the usual palace or ancestral mansion in the background—with the city on one side and the open country on the other—the spectators have nothing before them but rocks and waves; and these for nine weary years had been the sole companions of Philoctetes.* From time to time some stray ship had come, and the sailors had so far pitied him as to give him some scanty supplies of food and clothing; but none would listen to his prayers that they would carry him home with them to Greece. And so he had lingered on, tortured by his rankling wound,—satisfying his hunger with the birds that he brought down with his bow, and with difficulty dragging his limbs to the spring to quench his thirst.

Meanwhile Troy was still being besieged, though many of the great heroes of the war had met their

* We may compare a similar passage in Tennyson's Enoch Arden, p. 32,—

> "The mountain wooded to the peak, the lawns
> And winding glade high up like ways to heaven,
> The glories of the broad belt of the world,
> All these he saw; but what he fain had seen
> He could not see, the kindly human face,
> Nor ever heard a kindly voice, but heard
> The myriad shriek of wheeling ocean-fowl,
> The league-long roller thundering on the reef,
> As down the shore he ranged, or all day long
> Sat often in the seaward-gazing gorge,
> A shipwrecked sailor, waiting for a sail."

deaths around its walls. Hector had fallen by the sword of Achilles. Achilles himself had been struck with an arrow from the bow of Paris, guided by his enemy the Sun-god. Ajax, as we have seen, had slain himself in his despair. But the surviving chieftains maintained the war with the same obstinacy as before; and recently a new aspect had been given to the struggle. They had captured Helenus, son of Priam, endowed like Cassandra with the gift of prophecy; and from him they learned that an oracle had disclosed that Troy should never be taken but by the son of Achilles and with the bow of Hercules.

Accordingly, when the play opens, a Greek vessel has just reached Lemnos, bearing a deputation from the camp, to fetch Philoctetes and his fated arrows. At last in their own need the Greeks have bethought them of the comrade whom they had so cruelly deserted. And it is Ulysses, of all men,—Ulysses, by whose advice the unhappy man had been left behind,—who now comes to induce him—by persuasion if possible, by force if need be—to give the allies the aid of his weapons. Such an ambassador on such an errand would have seemed of all men the least likely to succeed. Sophocles probably did but take this part of the tale as he found it; and loyalty to the epic tradition, that no enterprise which required diplomacy, eloquence, or subtle device, could possibly be undertaken by the Greeks without the aid of "the man of many wiles," led the story-tellers, and Sophocles after them, to make him the envoy on this as on similar occasions. With him, however, is a comrade of a very different charac-

ter. This is the young Neoptolemus (better known to us, perhaps, by his surname of Pyrrhus—"the Red"), son of the dead Achilles. The poet's reasons for thus associating him with Ulysses (for here the dramatist takes original ground of his own) are sufficiently clear. The young chief was wholly guiltless of any complicity in the injury done to the hero by the older Greeks in deserting him; for he was then a boy in Phthiotis, far from the scene of action. Neoptolemus, too, has a special interest in procuring the charmed weapons, for it is to him the Fates point as the hero who is to win the town of Troy.

The two voyagers have landed, and they commence the dialogue of the piece. Ulysses knows the localities well. The cave with double entrance, with the fountain close at hand—it was here that, so many years ago, they had left their wretched comrade asleep. He bids Neoptolemus advance along the rocks and explore the neighbourhood, and look cautiously into the cavern, to ascertain whether he whom they seek lies within. He keeps himself in the background, for to be discovered by Philoctetes would be ruin to his plan. The younger chief easily finds the place—the bed of leaves, the wooden drinking-vessel, the few rags for dressing the wounded foot—such is the poor wealth of the occupant; but he is not within. Ulysses, then, after setting one of the crew to watch, discloses to his young companion—very conveniently for the audience—the plan which he wishes him to pursue in order to get Philoctetes and his arrows on board their vessel. If the too prosaic and curious reader should remark that this

disclosure comes very late, when there had been such ample time during the voyage for Ulysses to explain his whole design, it may be very fairly answered, that the wily Greek was aware that there was much in it which was sure to disgust the young chief's ingenuous nature, as it presently does; and that he was anxious not to enter into these awkward details until the last moment, when it would be almost too late for the other to draw back. The plan is this: Ulysses himself is to keep out of sight entirely,—for him to show his face on the island would be quite enough to determine the sufferer never to set foot on board the same vessel as his enemy, and probably to make them both a mark for his terrible arrows. Neoptolemus is to approach him, with a very plausible tale; how the Greeks, after bringing him to Troy, had refused to give him the arms of his father Achilles, awarding them instead to Ulysses, upon whose name he receives full permission to shower every term of scorn and reproach. Ulysses will take it rather as a compliment, under the circumstances, that he should do so. He is to add that, stung by this insult, he had left the fleet, and is now on his voyage homewards, and to offer Philoctetes a safe passage to his own country.

The younger chief at first repudiates utterly any such falsehood and treachery:—

> "The thing which even in word I loathe to hear,
> Son of Laertes,—that I scorn to do.
> My nature was not made for crooked guile;
> Nor mine, nor, as men say, his that begot me.
> I am content to take the man by force,

So not by treachery; for his single strength
Were scarce a match, I trow, for all our crew.
Still, having shared thine errand, I were loath
To seem a recreant now; yet would I rather
Fail through fair deeds than win a foul success."

The reader wants little more to put him in possession of the character of Neoptolemus. Gallant and impetuous, open and chivalrous, he is the true son of the ideal knight of Greek romance, the great Achilles, who had declared, in Homer's words—which we can see, from the brief passing allusion, were in the mind of the dramatist, as he knew they surely would be in those of his audience—

"Who dares think one thing and another tell,
My heart detests him as the gates of hell." *

Not so Ulysses. The crafty man of the world sneers at the youthful enthusiast for honesty and straightforwardness. Such things are very well—in their time and place. He himself had tried them :—

"Son of a gallant sire, I was young once,
And used my tongue not much, my hand full promptly;
But now, schooled by experience, I can see
That in all mortal dealings 'tis the tongue
And not the hand that wins the mastery."

After a brief parley, the plausible counsels of Ulysses prevail over the better feelings of his comrade. The argument which the latter cannot resist is, that without these arrows of Hercules he will lose the

* Iliad, ix. 312—Pope's translation, which even Mr Gladstone pronounces "not quite unworthy" of the original.

glory of taking Troy. So Ulysses leaves the stage, commending his young friend — with a calculating piety which unhappily is not peculiar to pagan dramatists—to the care of the goddess of Wisdom, his own special protectress, and to Hermes, the god of guile. The piety of Ulysses (for he was pious after his own fashion) breathes the spirit of the famous prayer in the 'Critic,'—

> "Grant us to accomplish all our ends,
> And sanctify whatever means we use
> To gain them."

The Chorus, who now take up the action, are composed in this play of the crew of Neoptolemus's vessel, and appear, from their reminiscences, to be some of the veteran "Myrmidons" who had served at Troy under his father Achilles. They proceed, by the young chief's permission, to explore the island; keeping a careful watch, however, lest its solitary inhabitant should suddenly surprise them, and launch against such intruders his poisoned shafts. Neoptolemus shows them the opening in the rock which leads to the cavern, but tells them that the sufferer is not now within. They soon hear the cry of one in pain; as they listen, the sound comes nearer, and, dragging his steps painfully along the rocky pathway, Philoctetes makes his appearance. He hails the strangers, and inquires their country and their errand:—

> "Your outward guise and dress of Hellas speak,
> To me most dear, and yet I fain would hear
> Your speech; and draw not back from me in dread,
> As fearing this my wild and savage look,

But pity one unhappy, left alone,
Thus helpless, friendless, worn with weary ills :
Speak, if it be ye come to me as friends.

Neop. Know this then first, O stranger, that we come
Of Hellas all ; for this thou seek'st to know.

Phil. O dear-loved sound ! Ah me ! what joy it is
After long years to hear a voice like thine !
What led thee hither, what need brought thee here ?
Whither thy voyage, what blest wind bore thee on ?
Tell all, that I may know thee who thou art.

Neop. By birth I come from sea-girt Skyros' isle,
And I sail homeward, I, Achilles' son,
Named Neoptolemos. Now know'st thou all."—(P.)

And does Neoptolemus know the wretched man before him? asks Philoctetes. The young chief, of course, professes entire ignorance ; and Philoctetes proceeds to tell his miserable history, which we have told before ; and he invokes curses on the Atreidæ and on Ulysses, who planned his wrongs.

Then Neoptolemus tells his story, as arranged between himself and Ulysses previously. He, too, has reason to curse the brother-kings and the false Ulysses. But his very first words remind Philoctetes, and remind the audience, of the long years which have elapsed since he was here deserted by his comrades,

"When the Fates ruled it that Achilles died."

What—breaks in the exile—is Achilles dead ? He is indeed, and Ulysses and the Atreidæ have rejected his son's rightful claim to the hero's armour. Nothing which he hears of Ulysses, in the way of baseness or falsehood, can surprise Philoctetes. Nor had he ever much confidence in the justice of the sons of Atreus.

But there was one chief among the Greeks who would surely, he thought, have prevented this wrong. Ajax was honest surely, if none else—

> "He was no more, O stranger. Had he lived,
> I had not thus been cheated of my right."

True—the questioner had again forgotten the changes of ten years. Is it then possible (he grasps eagerly at the hope) that his bitter enemy Ulysses—"the bastard of Sisyphus," as he calls him—and Diomed, who had been his abettor in the treachery, are they too dead? for at least they were unfit to live. Neoptolemus replies—

> "In sooth, not they: be sure they flourish yet,
> Holding high place amid the Argive host."

And Nestor—the noble old warrior, his personal friend, whose prudent counsel was wont to curb the rashness of the younger captains—he is probably dead also? No; the old man lives, but lives to mourn the loss of Antilochus, the son of his old age, whom death, in its bitter irony, has taken before the father. And Patroclus, the trusty friend of Achilles?—

> "He, too, has fallen. Lo! in one brief word
> I tell thee all: War never, with good will,
> Doth choose the evil man, or leave the good.
> *Phil.* I hold it true; and for that very cause
> Will ask thee yet as to one worthless wretch,
> Of subtle tongue and crafty, how he fares?

He must mean Ulysses, says Neoptolemus,—following his chief's instructions to abuse him, apparently with considerable zest. But it is Thersites, the mob-orator of Homer, the man who boldly speaks evil of

dignities, who is in Philoctetes' mind. Every Athenian in the audience would remember the description of him in the Iliad. He is alive, of course? Neoptolemus understands that he is, though he has never seen him. Philoctetes replies bitterly—

> "Well may he live, for nothing bad will die,
> So well the gods do fence it round about;
> And still they joy to turn from Hades back
> The cunning and the crafty, while they send
> The just and good below."—(P.)

Neoptolemus purposes ostensibly to return to his ship, to wait for the rising of the breeze which is to bear him home to Scyros. For he will never see the Greek camp and the sons of Atreus more. Never again will he be found amongst a company

> "Where still the evil lord it o'er the good,
> And honour starves, and cowardice bears sway."

He bids farewell to Philoctetes, and prays that heaven may soon send some cure for his pains. Then follows a scene which, in the hands of a good actor, must have been one of the most effective in the play. Seeing himself about to be thus a second time deserted, Philoctetes breaks into an agonised entreaty that the young chief and his sailors will take him on board their vessel. Put him where they will, "in hold, or stem, or stern," he cares not, so he may see once more his father and his native land. It will be a noble deed, and

> "Noble souls
> Still find the base is hurtful, and the good
> Is full of glory."

The young chief acts his assumed part well. It is easy to imagine, from the frequent breaks in the appeal made to him by Philoctetes, the by-play of hesitation—now turning to depart, and now apparently half relenting—with which he listens to the sufferer's entreaties. The Chorus are moved to pity. They pray their young captain to assent. They, for their own part, are quite willing to bear the inconvenience of such a passenger, though his grievous affliction will, as he warns them, make him no very pleasant companion on ship-board. So he yields to this double solicitation, and Philoctetes turns to bid a pathetic farewell to the scene of his long and miserable exile, to which he nevertheless bears some sort of affection, when two men are seen approaching. They are two of the ship-guard—one of them disguised as a merchant, who professes to have just landed on the island, and, hearing of Neoptolemus's presence there, has come to bring him important news from the coast of Troy, whence he himself has lately sailed. It is, in fact, an additional stratagem of Ulysses, brought into play apparently for the purpose of hurrying Philoctetes on board the vessel. The pretended merchant's tale is that the Greeks, in their wrath at the defection of Neoptolemus, have despatched an expedition to overtake him and bring him back by force. Another party has also sailed under Ulysses and Diomed, in quest of a certain Philoctetes, without whom the Fates have declared Troy cannot be taken, and whom Ulysses has pledged himself—and offered his own head as a forfeit if he fails—to bring into the Grecian camp either by force or by persuasion. Great

is the apparent dismay of the stranger at being told that Philoctetes stands before him; and great the indignation of Philoctetes to hear that he is to be taken now to Troy, as he had been before left in Lemnos, at the pleasure of his detested enemy :—

"Wretch that I am! this villain, most accursed,
Hath he then sworn to lure me back to Greece?
As soon shall he persuade me, when no more,
Like his false father, to return to earth." *

The agent of Ulysses is far too discreet to understand the sneer at his master's birth. He makes answer sedately,—

"Of this I nothing know, but to my ship
Depart. The gods aright direct you both."—(D.)

The object of this particular scene, which seems, in point of fact, rather to throw difficulties in the way of Neoptolemus and rouse the obstinacy of Philoctetes, is by no means easy to understand. It serves to complicate the action, and that is all. It may be that the poet wishes to show, in the character of Ulysses, that insolence of conscious power which does not care so much to accomplish its object easily, as to enjoy the discomfiture of a weaker opponent. If this was the intention, and if, as seems possible, Ulysses is all the while supposed to be within ear-shot (as he certainly is at a later stage of the action), then there would be produced upon the audience, as is not uncommon in

* Sisyphus, who (and not Laertes) was said to have been the real father of Ulysses.

the Attic tragedies, a half-comic effect by the protest of Philoctetes, delivered, as it were, in the very presence of the man between whom and himself he is determined to put the wide barrier of the sea, and into whose very arms he is thus about to rush in his eager haste to escape him.

The wind is against them as yet, says Neoptolemus—they must wait a while. Nay, replies the other,—

"All winds are fair to him who flies from woe."

But before he embarks, he has some poor treasures which he must needs get together and take with him. A herb there is which he has found on the island, which in some sort soothes the anguish of his wounded foot. And—he must take good heed that he leaves behind no one of the fateful arrows. Then, for the first time, Neoptolemus seems to remark the bow which he carries. Is this the wondrous bow of Hercules? May he be allowed to handle it for a moment,—nay, to print a reverent kiss upon the sacred relic of so renowned a hero? And while the sufferer, leaning on his new-found friend, withdraws into his cavern to seek what he requires, the Chorus, as they tread the stage in measured time to the accompanying music, chant an ode expressive of their kindly sympathy.

And now the pair reappear upon the scene, to begin their way to the ship, when suddenly Philoctetes stops, and utters a suppressed cry. One of those paroxysms of agony which his wound causes him from time to time has come on at this moment. Dreading the effect which it may have upon Neoptolemus and his crew, as

reminding them of the annoyance which the close companionship of such a wretch is sure to prove to them throughout their voyage, he strives for a while to conceal his anguish. "'Tis but a trifle"—"he is better again." But at last the trial is too much for him. Maddened by the pain, he begs of his friend to draw his sword and smite off the miserable limb,—nay, if it cost him his life, the deed will be a charity. But no,—these paroxysms are terrible while they last, but after a while, having run their course, they will subside. He cannot bear even the touch of the hand which Neoptolemus extends to support him :—

"Nay, not so :
But take my bow and arrows, which but now
Thou askedst for, and keep them till the force
Of the sharp pain be spent ; yea, guard them well,
For slumber takes me when this evil ends,
Nor can it cease before ; but thou must leave me
To sleep in peace ; and should they come meanwhile
Of whom we have heard, by all the gods I charge thee
Nor with thy will, nor yet against it, give
These things to them, by any art entrapped,
Lest thou shouldst deal destruction on thyself
And me who am thy suppliant.
Neop. Take good heart,
If forethought can avail. To none but thee
And me shall they be given. Hand them to me,
And good luck come with them !
Phil. (*giving the bow and arrows.*) Lo there, my son !
Receive thou them ; but first adore the power
Whose name is Jealousy, that they may prove
To thee less full of trouble than they were
To me, and him who owned them ere I owned.
Neop. So be it, O ye gods, to both of us ;

And may we have a fair and prosperous voyage
Where God thinks right, and these our ships are bound!"
—(P.)

Alas! the prayer, Philoctetes fears, will be in vain. The spasms have come on afresh; and his great fear is lest his new-found friend shall desert him after all:—

"And wilt thou stay?
Neop. Deem that beyond all doubt.
Phil. I do not care to bind thee by an oath.
Neop. I may not go from hence apart from thee.
Phil. Give me thy hand as pledge.
Neop. I give it thee
As pledge of our remaining."—(P.)

At length—after a scene of physical suffering protracted to a length which proves that the taste of an Athenian audience for sensation was as keen as that of any modern play-goer, though the sensation is of a different type—nature is exhausted, and the sufferer sinks into a death-like sleep. As he lies there, while Neoptolemus retires into the background, the Chorus take up their chant again. It is in part an invocation to sleep, mingled with hints to Neoptolemus (whose instructions from Ulysses they seem partly to understand, partly only to suspect) that now, while he lies thus helpless, there is an opportunity to carry him off bodily, or to make safe prize of the coveted weapons of Hercules:—

"O sleep that know'st not pain!
O sleep that know'st not care!
Would thou mightst come with blessed balmy air,
And blessing long remain,

And from his eyes ward off the noontide blaze,
Now full upon him poured.
Come as our healer, lord!
And thou, my son, look well to all thy ways;
What next demands our thought?
What now must needs be wrought?
Thou seest him;—and I ask
Why we delay our task;
Occasion that still holds to counsel right
With quickest speed appears as conqueror in the fight."

They continue their chant in this strain of innuendo, while Philoctetes lies stretched in the sleep of physical exhaustion.

The conflict between the better nature of the young chief and the uncongenial task he has undertaken, has begun long before the sufferer awakes. It is shown but faintly in the dialogue; but an actor who threw himself into the part would no doubt express it very intelligibly by his movements and gestures, while he watched the sleeper and listened to the strains of the Chorus. Loyalty to what he holds to be the public interest of the Greek cause, the overwhelming importance of the capture of Troy, the renown which awaits him personally as its conqueror,—all these have to be weighed in the scale against an act of unquestionable treachery,—yet after all, it might be said, a treachery rather to the advantage of the victim. His embarrassment is completed by the words of Philoctetes, when at length he awakes from his troubled sleep, the agony subdued for a while, and addresses his deliverers, as he thinks them, with simple gratitude and confidence:—

"*Phil.* (*waking.*) O light that follows sleep! O help, my thoughts
Had never dared to hope for from these strangers!
For never had I dreamt, O boy, that thou
With such true pity wouldst endure to bear
All these my sorrows, and remain and help.
The Atreidæ ne'er had heart to bear with them
As well as thou hast borne. Brave generals they!
But thou, my son, who art of noble heart,
And sprung from noble-hearted ones, hast made
But light of all."—(P.)

Philoctetes begs that they may sail at once. And Neoptolemus assists him to rise and move in the direction of the ship. But suddenly the young man stops; he can endure to keep up this deception no longer.

"*Neop.* O heavens! what now remains for me to do?
Phil. What ails thee, O my son? what words are these?
Neop. I know not how to speak my sore distress.
Phil. Distress from what? Speak not such words, my son.
Neop. And yet in that calamity I stand——
Phil. It cannot be my wound's foul noisomeness
Hath made thee loath to take me in thy ship?
Neop. All things are noisome when a man deserts
His own true self, and does what is not meet.
Phil. But thou, at least, nor doest aught nor say'st,
Unworthy of thy father's soul, when thou
Dost help a man right honest.
Neop. I shall seem
Basest of men. Long since this tortured me."—(P.)

At length he tells Philoctetes the truth,—he is commissioned to carry him to Troy. Then Philoctetes

breaks out into very natural indignation, and demands his weapons back. "That may not be," says Neoptolemus. His victim's wrath, mingled with an unwillingness to believe in such treachery under so fair an outside seeming, is expressed in one of the finest passages in the play :—

"Thou loathed inventor of atrocious fraud,
What hast thou done—how wronged my easy faith?
Doth it not shame thee to behold me thus,
A suitor and a suppliant, wretch, to thee?
Stealing my bow, of life thou hast bereft me.
Restore, I pray thee, O my son, restore it!
By thine ancestral gods, take not my life!
Wretch that I am, he deigns not e'en reply,
But still looks backward, as resolved to spurn me.
Ye ports, ye beetling crags, ye haunts obscure
Of mountain-beasts, ye wild and broken rocks,
To you I mourn, for I have none beside!
To you, who oft have heard me, tell the wrongs,
The cruel deeds Achilles' son hath wrought!
Pledged to convey me home, he sails to Troy;
Plighting his hand in faith, he meanly steals
My bow, the sacred arms of Jove's great son,
And would display them to the Grecian host.
By force he takes me, as some vigorous chief,
Nor knows his triumph is achieved o'er one
Long helpless as the dead—a shadowy cloud—
An empty phantom. In my hour of might
He ne'er had seized me thus, since, in my ills,
He but by fraud entrapped me. I am now
Deceived to my despair. What shall I do?—
Ah! yet restore them, be again thyself.
What dost thou say?—Yet silent?—Then I perish.
Thou double portal of the rock, again

I enter thee, of arms, of life, deprived.
But I must pine forsaken in the cave;
Nor wingèd bird, nor mountain-ranging beast,
Shall these good darts bring down. I yield in death
To those a banquet, who supplied my own.
. . . . . .
I will not curse thee, ere I learn if yet
Thou wilt relent—if not, all evil blast thee!"—(D.)

Neoptolemus makes a motion to restore the bow, when Ulysses (who, we must suppose, has been a listener to at least the latter portion of the dialogue) rushes in between them:—

"*Ulys.* What wouldst thou do,
O vilest of mankind? Wilt thou not hence,
The sacred arms resigning to my hand?
Phil. Ha! who is this? Ulysses do I hear?
Ulys. Ay, I who stand before thee am Ulysses.
Phil. O, I am sold, undone! This is the wretch
Who snared and hath despoiled me of mine arms.
Ulys. 'Tis I, in sooth—none else. I own the deed.
Phil. Restore, give back the arms to me, my son!
Ulys. This, did he wish, he would not dare to grant.
But thou must hence with us, or those around
By force must drag thee."—(D.)

In vain does the sufferer appeal to Heaven against such wrong; it is Heaven, says Ulysses, whose will he and Neoptolemus are obeying in forcing him to Troy. Then he will throw himself headlong from the rock, and end his misery at once, rather than be thus disgraced. But he is seized and overpowered by order of Ulysses, who listens with a calm composure to the

bitter invectives which his prisoner hurls at him. When Philoctetes at last pauses in his denunciation, Ulysses replies in measured words which are a perfect index to his character, as drawn by the poet :—

"I might say much in answer to his words,
If there were time. Now this one word I speak :
Where men like this are wanted, such am I ;
But when the time for good and just men calls,
Thou couldst not find a godlier man than me.
In every case it is my bent to win,
Except with thee. To thee of mine own will
I yield the victory. Ho, leave him there !
Lay no hand on him,—let him here remain.
With these thy arms, we have no need of thee :
Teucros is with us, skilled in this thine art ;
And I, too, boast that I, not less than thou,
This bow can handle, with my hand shoot straight ;
What need we thee ? In Lemnos walk at will,
And let us go. And they perchance will give
As prize to me what rightly thou mightst claim."—(P.)

The character of Ulysses is drawn in stronger and less favourable colours by the dramatist than as he appears in either of the Homeric poems. There is a cold cruelty in his treatment of Philoctetes, from first to last, which does not characterise him in either the Iliad or Odyssey. It is true that he is serving no selfish end ; it is in the cause of Greece that he undertakes this commission, as it was in the same interest (we must suppose) that he advised the desertion of Philoctetes at Lemnos. We must not wonder that, like many diplomatists, he is little scrupulous as to

means. But he seems almost to revel in the odiousness of his self-imposed duty.

He withdraws again from the scene, taking with him the reluctant and repentant Neoptolemus, who is half inclined to listen to the appeal of their victim. The crew, by Neoptolemus's permission, remain, and strive to console the sufferer, who laments his miserable fate in strains to which the Chorus make such reply as they can :—

"Ah me ! upon the shore,
Where the wild waters roar,
He sits and laughs at me,
And tosseth in his hand
What cheered my misery,
What ne'er till now another might command.
O bow most dear to me,
Torn from these hands of mine,
If thou hast sense to see,
Thou lookest piteously
At this poor mate of thine,
The friend of Heracles,
Who never more shall wield thee as of old ;
And thou, full ill at ease,
Art bent by hands of one for mischief bold,
All shameful deeds beholding,
Deeds of fierce wrath and hate,
And thousand evils from base thoughts unfolding
Which none till now had ever dared to perpetrate."
—(P.)

But they are interrupted by the sudden return of Neoptolemus, in high dispute with Ulysses, who is trying to hold him back. The young chief has made up his mind. He will do the right, come what may.

The glory of taking Troy will be no compensation for the loss of self-respect. He will at once give back the weapons of Hercules. In vain Ulysses threatens him with the vengeance of the allied Greeks; in vain—or worse than in vain—he lays his hand significantly upon his sword. The young chief replies to the threat by a fierce grasp of the hilt of his own weapon; and Ulysses, too wary to involve himself in a dangerous and discreditable brawl, contents himself with an appeal to the Greeks in council. Neoptolemus will not spare him a natural sarcasm on his discretion:—

> "Thou hast shown prudence; be as prudent ever,
> And thou mayest chance to keep thyself from harm."

But Ulysses, as he turns off in disgust, either does not hear, or affects not to hear, the taunt. Then the other calls Philoctetes out of his cave, and restores to him the weapons. Ulysses comes forward again, and loudly protests against such weakness; but Philoctetes, once more master of his bow, vengefully prepares to launch an arrow at his enemy, when Neoptolemus stays his hand. Once more the latter tries to urge upon him to go with them to Troy of his own free will, and so reap the glories which await him there; but arguments on this point have no avail, and he prepares to redeem his pledge to carry the exile home.

The perplexity is solved by an expedient allowable in the Greek drama, though it would be held inartistic in our own. Hercules himself intervenes. The hero-god appears suddenly in mid-air (and we have reason to believe the scenic appliances were complete enough for

such appearance to be highly effective), and stands before the mortal captains radiant in the glories of Olympus. Such a visitor is, after all, not a bolder appeal to the supernatural than the ghost in Hamlet; and perhaps the half-imaginative belief of the educated portion of an Athenian audience in the continual existence, in some higher state, of their national heroes, might correspond pretty nearly to the belief in ghosts which would have been found amongst the same class of Englishmen in Shakspeare's day. It would be sufficient—indeed, it is practically sufficient still—for the sentiment of the tragedy. The tableau on the stage was no doubt highly effective when Hercules, with a commanding gesture, arrests the steps of Philoctetes as he is moving off:—

> "Not yet, O son of Pæas, ere once more
> Our accents reach thine ear.
> Know 'tis the voice of Hercules thou hearest,
> His form thine eyes behold.
> To watch thy fortunes I awhile have left
> My own celestial seat,
> That Jove's almighty mandate I may breathe,
> And in his name forbid thy purposed course."
>
> —(Dale.)

He tells his friend of the glory which yet awaits him,—how he shall be healed of his wound, shall slay Paris with one of the fateful arrows, and be judged the bravest of the Greek host. And when Troy has fallen by his hands and those of Neoptolemus, let them not forget, in the hour of their triumph, to reverence the gods; for that alone can bring lasting happiness to mortals.

Philoctetes cannot resist the voice of the great hero whom he still loves and honours. He accompanies Neoptolemus to the ship; but before they go, he chants his last words of farewell to the scene of his long banishment:—

"Come, then, and let us bid farewell
To this lone island where I dwell:
Farewell, O home that still didst keep
Due vigil o'er me in my sleep;
Ye nymphs by stream or wood that roam;
Thou mighty voice of ocean's foam,
Where oftentimes my head was wet
With drivings of the South wind's fret;
And oft the mount that Hermes owns
Sent forth its answer to my groans,
The wailing loud as echo given
To me by tempest-storms sore driven;
And ye, O fountains clear and cool,
Thou Lykian well, the wolves' own pool—
We leave you, yea, we leave at last,
Though small our hope in long years past:
Farewell, O plain of Lemnos' isle,
Around whose coasts the bright waves smile,
Send me with prosperous voyage and fair
Where the great Destinies may bear,
Counsels of friends, and God supreme in Heaven
Who all this lot of ours hath well and wisely given."
—(P.)

This tragedy has been highly praised both by French and by English critics, and it has undoubtedly the merit of being simple and natural, though the interest is of a weaker quality than in most of the plays of Sophocles. The character of Neoptolemus is well

drawn; and the struggles between interest and duty—or rather between what seem to him two conflicting duties—are interesting, if not highly tragic. But the play has one prominent feature which mars the whole effect to our English taste. No man can be a hero, to our notions, whose sufferings are wholly physical; and far less one who demands our sympathies for such sufferings by physical expressions of pain. Upon a Greek audience, no doubt, the effect was different. The enjoyment of life was very keen among the Athenians: they also felt bodily pain more keenly, with their sensitive organisations, than we do, and they certainly expressed their feelings with far less reticence. For them, the diseased foot, and the cries of agony to which it gives occasion, had possibly a real tragic interest. To us it is not so. All the ingenuity and ability of critics fails to make such a subject anything but distasteful to an ordinary English mind. We almost forgive the Greeks for leaving Philoctetes behind, if he was always shrieking and bemoaning himself after the fashion assigned to him in the play. It is one of the hardest things connected with continued bodily suffering, when it finds vent in audible groans and complaints, that instead of rousing the sympathies of those in attendance on the sufferer, it is too apt to dull and weary them. Cries and complaints may be unavoidable, but to our notions they are always undignified and unmanly. Our cold and stern temper demands that pain be borne in silence — ignored altogether, so far as possible. Its audible expressions belong with us to comedy, not to tragedy. Even in

the Iliad, we are not touched with the dying groans of the heroes. Our ideal hero is mute in suffering—he must have more of the nature of the Roman wolf-cub—

> "He dies in silence, biting hard,
> Amid the dying hounds."

But in this respect, the Philoctetes of Sophocles is not only at variance with modern tastes and sympathies; it stands also in strong contrast with an earlier Greek tragedy of a severer type, in which the hero is also represented in the extremity of physical suffering—the Prometheus of Æschylus. The Titan is brought upon the stage to be fastened to his rock, there to waste away for long years in sufferings compared with which those of Philoctetes are but ordinary: the adamantine rivets are driven through his chest, but he utters no cry of physical anguish. Nay, so long as his tormentors are present, he is mute altogether. When he utters his grand appeal to Earth, and Sky, and Sea,—it is against the injustice of his doom, rather than the bitterness of the torture. He launches defiance against his torturer, not complaints. Therefore, even across the gulf of centuries, we feel almost as an Athenian audience felt the grandeur of the conception. It is true enough, as has been said, that Sophocles is far more human in his tragic pathos than the elder poet; but there are phases of humanity, intensely natural, which are yet no fit subjects for dramatic representation; and it is surely not a decline but a development of critical taste, which reckons physical pain as one of them.

CHAPTER VIII.

ELECTRA.

In this drama Sophocles has selected a portion of the same story which formed the subject of the famous trilogy of Æschylus. The Electra is simply the return of Orestes, and the vengeance which he takes on Clytemnestra and Ægisthus. By both poets this act of vengeance is elevated to a religious duty. The gods above and the shades of the dead below demand that a "foul unnatural murder" shall not go unpunished. Accordingly Orestes never swerves for a moment from his deadly purpose. Pity and tenderness have no place in his breast, nor do we ever find him reasoning with himself after the manner of Hamlet—

> "O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
> The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;
> Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
> I will speak daggers, but will use none."*

Once more—as in the trilogy of Æschylus—the scene is the royal palace of the Pelopidæ, "rich in

* Hamlet, act iii. sc. 3.

gold and rich in slaughter," as Electra describes it, fronted by the stately "Gate of Lions" which then guarded the statue of Apollo, and built in that stupendous Cyclopæan style which still impresses every traveller. But Agatharchus, or whatever artist Sophocles employed, has given us on this occasion more than the usual architectural background. There is the grove of Io, "the tormented wanderer," and the market-place sacred to Apollo as the "Wolf-god;" on the left is the famous temple of Juno, while in the far distance are seen the towers of Argos.* The time is early morning in Athens as well as on the stage, and it is such a morning as Chaucer would have loved, with the hills and greenwood bright and fresh in the sunlight, as one of the speakers describes it,—

"Which wakes the birds to tune their matin song,
And star-decked night's dark shadows flee away.—(P.)

Two young men enter. They are the famous friends, whose names, like those of David and Jonathan, have consecrated all later friendships,—Orestes and Pylades. With them comes an old and faithful servant (perhaps "the watchman" of Æschylus's 'Agamemnon'), who had saved the young Orestes at the time of his father's murder, had reared him up to manhood, and is now

* Mr Jebb quotes Clark's Peloponnesus (p. 72), with reference to the famous historic localities which Sophocles has thus brought together in one picture, irrespectively of distance, and which Clark compares with a stage direction in Victor Hugo's play of 'Marie Tudor.' "Palais de Richmond: dans le fond à gauche l'Eglise de Westminster, à droite la Tour de Londres." —Jebb's Electra, p. 3.

guiding him back, after his long exile, to the familiar scenes of Argolis. Orestes has returned to Mycenæ (as he tells his friends and the audience) on a holy mission of vengeance, consecrated by Apollo himself; but in order to gain his ends he must use a pious fraud. His old attendant must enter the palace, and represent himself as a Phocian stranger, sent by an old friend of the family :—

"And tell them—yea, and add a solemn oath—
That some fell fate has brought Orestes' death
In Pythian games, from out the whirling car
Rolled headlong to the earth. This tale tell thou ;
And we, first honouring my father's grave,
As the God bade us, with libations pure
And tresses from our brow, will then come back,
Bearing the urn well wrought with sides of bronze,
Which, thou know'st well, 'mid yonder shrubs lies hid,
That we with crafty words may bring to them
The pleasant news that my poor frame is gone,
Consumed with fire, to dust and ashes turned.
. . . . . .
So I, from out this rumour of my death,
Shall, like a meteor, blaze upon my foes."—(P.)

Then the three retire, for the purpose of pouring a libation at Agamemnon's grave. Pylades, it should be observed, owing to the strict rule of the Athenian drama limiting the speakers on the stage to three, never takes part in the dialogue throughout the play.

Even before they left the stage, they had heard the wailing of women from the palace; and now there issues from the gates Electra, the sister of Orestes,

meanly clad and with dishevelled hair, followed by a train of Argive maidens. Her history had been a sad one. Years had passed away since that day of horror, when her father had been cut off in his glory—not slain by the sword on the battle-field, but felled by the axe of Ægisthus, "as the woodman fells the oak-tree in the forest." Years had passed away, but each year had only imbittered the resentment of Electra, and turned to gall all the sweetness of her woman's nature. She can neither tear from her heart the remembrance of that deed of blood, nor forgive those who wrought it. It had needed no message from the grave, no spirit returned from limbo, to keep alive this memory. Always before her was the same repulsive contrast which tortured the keener sensibilities of Hamlet,—the cowardly Ægisthus, sitting in the dead man's place, and receiving the caresses of the perjured wife; while the guilty pair had seemed to glory in their shame,—the one pouring libations on the very hearth where the king had fallen, and the other, with an impious and unnatural joy, celebrating each month the day of her husband's murder, as though it were a religious festival, with sacrifices and solemn dances. Meanwhile, the portion of Electra had been mockery and insult; for her proud spirit had scorned such submission as her more facile sister Chrysothemis had been ready to give. She had been a living protest against the sin of Clytemnestra and Ægisthus; her incessant grief had provoked their hatred, and this hatred had found its vent in bitter and continual re-

proach. Day and night, as she tells the Chorus, she had been mourning over the ruin of her race in the plaintive strains of the nightingale, whose note was proverbial among the Greeks for a never-ending grief; and she had been rated by her mother much in the same style as Hamlet is lectured by his uncle:—

> "To persevere
> In obstinate condolement is a course
> Of impious stubbornness.
> . . . 'Tis a fault to heaven,
> A fault against the dead, a fault to nature;
> To reason most absurd; whose common theme
> Is death of fathers." *

Then, again, these tears had been followed by a sterner feeling, and soon

> "Vengeance, deep-brooding o'er the slain,
> Had locked the source of softer woe."

She had cherished the thought of a day of retribution, and had implored all the gods of the lower world not to overlook the shedding of innocent blood, or to allow "the guile which devised and the lust which struck the blow" to go for long unpunished. But years had passed, and still Orestes, for whose coming she had prayed, came not; and Electra, in her despair, had begun to question the justice of those careless gods who allowed the guilty to flourish in their sin, and murder to go unavenged—

> "For if the dull earth cover thus the blood
> Of him who basely died,

* Hamlet, act i. sc. 2.

And they who wrought his fall
Repay not life for life ;—
Then perish shame for aye,
And piety be banished from mankind !"—(D.)

The Chorus vainly try to comfort her. No tears or prayers, they say, can recall the dead from "the lake of darkness." Let her trust to Time, that "calm and patient deity," to bring her brother home at last.

Then there enters to her "bright Chrysothemis with golden hair,"* bearing funeral offerings. The scene between the sisters recalls a similar one in a former play, with the difference that here the characters are more strongly drawn. Electra is cast in a harsher and sterner mould than her counterpart, Antigone, for it is hatred rather than love which hardens her resolution. Chrysothemis, again, is more deliberately selfish than Ismene. "She should have been the ally, but is only the temptress of her sister, a weaker Goneril or Regan, serving as a foil to a more masculine Cordelia." † Electra cannot conceal her scorn and indignation at this unworthy daughter of a king, who attempts to justify her baseness, and whose cowardly spirit can endure to sit at the same table with her father's murderers. For her own part, she prefers the isolation of a slave to the gifts and delicacies which Chrysothemis accepts at such hands.

"Loin d'eux, à ces festins, leur esclave préfère
Le pain de la pitié qu'on jette à sa misère,
A leur table insolente allez courber le front ;
Flattez les meurtriers, mes pleurs me suffiront.

* Iliad, ix. 145 (Pope). † Jebb's Ajax, p. 34, *note.*

Des pleurs sont mes trésors, des pleurs ma nourriture,
Ils ne me verront pas outrageant la nature,
A mon père infidèle, indigne de mon nom,
Boire avec eux dans l'or le sang d'Agamemnon."*

Chrysothemis is too well accustomed to her sister's reproaches to attempt any further justification. In reply, she tells her the strange mission on which she has now come from the palace. On the previous night Clytemnestra had dreamed a dream, in which she had seen her husband, tall and majestic as in his lifetime, and carrying the sceptre which had descended from prince to prince in the dynasty of Argos,† and was now wielded by the murderer Ægisthus. In her vision, Clytemnestra sees him plant this sceptre in the hearth of his palace, and there it had seemed to take root downwards and bear fruit upwards, spreading forth into boughs and branches, and overshadowing all Mycenæ. So terribly significant had been this vision of the night, and so accordant with the restless dread of her son's return which has haunted the guilty woman,

* Chénier's Electre, act i. sc. 3. (Quoted by M. Patin.)

† Homer gives us the history of this sceptre:—

"His royal staff, the work of Vulcan's art,
Which Vulcan to the son of Saturn gave,
To Hermes he, the heavenly messenger;
Hermes to Pelops, matchless charioteer;
Pelops to Atreus; Atreus at his death
Bequeathed it to Thyestes, wealthy lord
Of num'rous herds; to Agamemnon last
Thyestes left it—token of his sway
O'er all the Argive coast and neighbouring isles."
—Iliad, ii. 100 (Lord Derby).

that after rising early in the morning, and telling her dream to the Sun-god, she had sent Chrysothemis to carry libations to the tomb of Agamemnon, in the hope of appeasing the manes of the murdered king.

Electra can hardly restrain the fiery wrath which consumes her, as she hears of what she considers a fresh act of impious effrontery on the part of Clytemnestra. Her sister must never insult the dead by presenting these offerings from the guilty wife :—

> "Cast them forth
> To the wild winds, or hide them in the earth
> Deep, deep ; that never to my father's tomb
> The accursed thing may reach ; but when she dies,
> Lie hid in earth to grace her sepulchre.
> For had she not been formed of all her sex
> The most abandoned, never had she crowned
> These loathed libations to the man she slew.
> Think'st thou the dead entombed could e'er receive
> In friendly mood such obsequies from her
> By whom he fell dishonoured, like a foe,
> While on her mangled victim's head she wiped
> His blood for expiation ?"—(D.)

Let her rather offer at her father's tomb locks of hair cut from his daughters' heads, accompanied by a prayer that the son may speedily return to avenge his death. Chrysothemis assents, but begs her sister to keep her counsel.

Then follows a noble choral ode—almost rising to the grandeur of Æschylus. The dream which had terrified the queen animates the dying hopes of the

Argive maidens. Something in their hearts tells them that the day of vengeance is nigh at hand. Neither the spirit of the murdered man, nor the axe which struck that felon stroke, "though dimmed by the rust of years," has ever forgotten the deed of blood. They can already see the shadow—nay, they can almost feel the breath and hear the approaching tramp —of the "brazen-footed fury with many hands and feet." And then their thoughts revert to the fountain-head of all these troubles—the curse invoked on the treacherous Pelops by Myrtilus, as he was "dashed headlong from his golden chariot, and sent to his last sleep beneath the waves." *

There is a pause upon the stage, and a low murmur of expectancy runs through the audience, as the Chorus respectfully move back to make way for Clytemnestra, who comes forward with a haughty and defiant mien, and whose speech shows that she is as "man-minded" as of old. She at once sharply rebukes Electra for taking her ease abroad in the absence of Ægisthus; and then she vindicates her murder of Agamemnon. He had slain his daughter, and she had only slain her husband in retaliation; and why should she not?

Electra is not slow to reply, and her tone and manner are as defiant and insulting as her mother's. It was the wrath of Diana, she says, reverting to a "wasted theme," and the contrary winds at Aulis,

* Myrtilus was the charioteer of Œnomaus, and was bribed by Pelops to take out the linch-pins from his master's chariot. Pelops won the race, but, unwilling to give him his reward, threw him from Cape Geræstus.

that forced the king, sorely against his will, to sacrifice Iphigenia. And as to the doctrine of "blood for blood," if it were put in force, Clytemnestra herself would be the first victim. "Yes," says the maiden, with a fierce look,

"And I own,
Had I but strength, be sure of this, 'twere done."

The Chorus stand too much amazed and terrified at this stormy altercation between mother and daughter to offer advice, or even to speak, and at last Electra's passion exhausts itself. She turns her back upon her mother, and stands aloof in gloomy silence. Then Clytemnestra makes her secret prayer to the Sun-god :—

"Hear thou the while, Phœbus who guard'st our gates,
My secret prayer ; for not to friendly ears
Can I speak forth, nor dare I breathe in air
All that I mean, while *she* stands here beside me.
Yet hear me—thus—as I with heed will speak.
Those visions of the night, whose two-edged sense
I dimly read,—if they be good, O King
Grant them fulfilment ! but, if they be evil,
Then launch them back upon mine enemies !
And if there be who by their cunning plots
Would strip me of this wealth, suffer it not ;
But grant me still, living an unharmed life,
To wield the sceptre here in Atreus' halls,
Consorting still with whom I consort now,
And happy in such children as may nurse
No secret hate or bitter grudge against me.
Such boon, Apollo, Slayer of the wolf,
Grant of thy grace as fully as we ask it !
And, for the rest, even though I be silent,

Thou art a god—and needs must understand me.
For they see all things who are born of Jove."

It would seem as if her prayers were to be quickly answered; for at this moment the old attendant enters, and announces, according to the previous agreement, the death of Orestes. Clytemnestra, strangely disturbed herself by conflicting feelings, cuts short the bitter cry of grief which bursts from the lips of Electra, and bids the messenger tell the manner of his death.

Then follows a false but closely circumstantial account of the death of Orestes in the Pythian games at Delphi—a tragedy within a tragedy, so real and life-like, that it is difficult to believe that it is not a description of some actual catastrophe. The lists were set, says the supposed Phocian stranger; the herald made proclamation; all Greece was there; every nation had sent its representatives, and among them came Orestes, winning the hearts of the spectators by his grace and noble bearing. His achievements on the first day were worthy of his name and lineage, for he came off victorious in five contests. On the second day followed the fatal tournament of chariots, in which there were ten competitors.

"They took their stand where the appointed judges
Had cast their lots and ranged the rival cars.
Rang out the brazen trump! Away they bound,
Cheer the hot steeds and shake the slackened reins;
As with a body the large space is filled
With the huge clangour of the battling cars.
High whirl aloft the dust-clouds; blent together,
Each presses each, and the lash rings; and loud

Snort the wild steeds, and from their fiery breath
Along their manes and down the circling wheels
Scatter the foam."—(Lord Lytton.)

Six times they had rounded the goal at the end of the course; but in the seventh the horses of one chariot had proved unmanageable, and dashed against the next.

"Then order changed to ruin,
Car crashed on car; the wild Crissæan plain
Was sea-like strewed with wrecks; the Athenian saw,
Slackened his speed, and, wheeling round the marge,
Left the wild tumult of that tossing storm.
Behind Orestes, hitherto the last,
Had yet kept back his coursers for the close;
Now one sole rival left—on, on he flew,
And the sharp sound of the impelling scourge
Rang in the keen ears of the flying steeds.
He hears, he reaches—they are side by side—
Now one—the other—by a length the victor.
The courses all are past—the wheels erect—
All safe—when, as the hurrying coursers round
The fatal pillar dashed, the wretched boy
Slackened the left rein: on the column's edge
Crashed the frail axle: headlong from the car,
Caught and all meshed within the reins, he fell;
And masterless the mad steeds raged along!

Loud from that mighty multitude arose
A shriek—a shout! But yesterday such deeds,
To-day such doom! Now whirled upon the earth,
Now his limbs dashed aloft, they dragged him—those
Wild horses—till all gory from the wheels
Released,—and no man, not his nearest friends,
Could in that mangled corpse have traced Orestes.
They laid the body on the funeral-pyre;

And while we speak, the Phocian strangers bear,
In a small brazen melancholy urn,
That handful of cold ashes to which all
The grandeur of the Beautiful hath shrunk.
Hither they bear him, in his father's land
To find that heritage—a tomb!"—(Lord Lytton.)

So circumstantial is this narrative, that no doubt is left on the minds of the hearers as to its truth. Even Clytemnestra is touched and impressed by the sudden end of one

"So young, so noble, so unfortunate."—(P.)

After all, she is a woman and a mother. Orestes is dead, and the secret prayer of her heart is thus fulfilled. Orestes is dead, and she is at once delivered from those terrors which had haunted her sleep. But, hardened and guilty as she is, there is sorrow in the thought that her peace of mind should be regained only by the death of her first-born, "the child of her own life." "Wondrous," she exclaims, almost against her will, as if excusing her emotion—

"Wondrous and strange the force of motherhood!
Though wronged, a mother cannot hate her children."
—(P.)

It is a finer touch like this which stamps the poet. "These few words of genuine grief," says Mr Jebb, "humanise, and therefore dramatise, Clytemnestra more vividly than anything in Æschylus."

But the queen's better nature does not assert itself for long. A question put by the messenger as to

whether his news be not welcome, and the sight of Electra's unfeigned sorrow, rouse in her a feeling of triumph and relief. Now at last, she says, she may sleep soundly, and pass her days in peace. Then, bidding the disguised attendant follow her, she retires within the palace, while Electra bemoans her own fate, left thus desolate and friendless. Her day-dreams of vengeance have come to an end for ever, since the brother on whom she had built her hopes has died cruelly, trampled to death under horses' feet, in a strange land—

"By strangers honoured and by strangers mourned."

Suddenly Chrysothemis runs eagerly in with what she conceives to be good news. She had found her father's tomb covered with flowers, and moist with freshly-poured libations, while on its summit lay a lock of hair, which she at once divines to be a token from Orestes. "My poor sister!" says Electra, "your Orestes is dead;"—and then she tells the story she has heard; but though he be dead, she continues, let us, women as we are, take upon ourselves the work of vengeance, and earn a glorious renown by slaying Ægisthus, our mother's paramour.

"All men love to look
On deeds of goodness. Dost not see full clear
All the fair fame thou'lt gain for thee and me,
If thou obey my counsels? Who, seeing us,
Or citizen or stranger, will not greet us
With praises such as these: 'Behold, my friends,
Those sisters twain, who saved their father's house,

And on their foes who walked in pride of strength,
Regardless of their lives, wrought doom of death!
These all must love, these all must reverence;
These in our feasts, and when the city meets
In full assemblage, all should honour well
For this their manly prowess.' Thus will all
Speak of us, so that fame we shall not miss,
Living or dying."—(P.)

But Chrysothemis recoils from the suggestion. Her spirit is too weak to venture on such a hazardous enterprise. Besides, she says, our foes are stronger than we are;—

"And nothing does it help or profit us,
Gaining fair fame, a shameful death to die."—(P.)

Then the pretended Phocians enter, carrying, as they say,

"In one small urn
All that is left, sad relics of the dead."—(P.)

The sight only increases Electra's sorrow, for it confirms what she had at first hoped might have been only an evil rumour. She takes the urn from the stranger—(we must remember that the brother and sister had not met for years)—and she muses over her shattered hopes, and over the untimely death of the Orestes whom she had loved with such devoted affection:*—

* An anecdote is told of the great actor Polus, that once, when playing the part of Electra (for no woman ever appeared on the Athenian stage), he embraced an urn containing the real ashes of a much-loved son who had lately died, and, affected by

"But now all joy has vanished in a day
In this thy death, for, like a whirlwind, thou
Hast passed and swept off all. My father falls;
I perish; thou thyself hast gone from sight;
Our foes exult. My mother—wrongly named,
For mother she is none—is mad with joy.
. . . . . .
How hast thou brought me low, thou dearest one!
Therefore receive thou me to this thy home,
Ashes to ashes, that with thee below
I may from henceforth dwell."—(P.)

Then the disguised stranger knows that this maiden —noble even in her mean dress—must be his sister; and his heart yearns towards her, and he can contain himself no longer. He burns with indignation as he looks on one whom he had left a light-hearted and innocent girl, now worn and wasted, as she says herself,

"By blows, by hardships, and all forms of ill."

"Funeral urns," he cries, "are not for the living, and Orestes is alive." Then he shows his father's signet-ring, and Electra knows that he must be indeed her brother. The haughty spirit which had defied Ægisthus, and repaid the queen with scorn for scorn, is at once softened. She bursts into tears, and with wild exclamations of joy throws herself into the arms of "her own, her dear Orestes."

Even when told through the cold medium of a dead language—without a stage direction, without the aid of dress or scenery—no "recognition" in any drama

uncontrollable emotion, burst into genuine tears, and uttered a cry of sorrow which deeply moved the sympathies of the audience.

comes up to the simple reality of this, although critics may object that it is not in the highest style of art.*

But this is not a time for caresses and embraces. Orestes remembers that there is sterner work before them, and that

"Much speech might lose occasion's golden hour."—(P.)

And while Electra still clings to her brother, as though loath to leave him even for a moment, the old attendant roughly breaks in upon their dialogue. Are they weary of their lives, he asks, that they stand thus idly prating on the brink of danger? It is well that he has kept good watch. Let them go in, and they will find Clytemnestra alone within the palace. Then Orestes and Pylades obey his advice and enter. For a while there is a dead silence; but suddenly the silence is broken by a woman's shriek, and Electra turns exultingly to the Chorus:—

"A cry goes up within; friends, hear ye not?
Cho. I heard what none should hear—ah, misery!—
And shuddered listening.
Clytem. (*within.*) Ah me! ah me! Woe, woe!
Ægisthus, where art thou?
Elec. Ha! List again.
I hear a bitter cry.
Clytem. (*within.*) My son, my son,
Have pity on thy mother!
Elec. Thou hadst none
On him, nor on the father that begat him.

* Aristotle (Poet. xi. 30) calls recognition by signs "most inartistic."

Clytem. (*within.*) Ah, I am smitten !
Elec. Smite her yet again,
If thou hast strength for it.
Clytem. (*within.*) Ah ! blow on blow !
Elec. Would that Ægisthus shared them !
Cho. Yes ; the curse
Is now fulfilled. The buried live again ;
For they who died long since now drain in turn
The blood of those that slew them."—(P.)

The shrieks from within have grown fainter and fainter; and then follows the stillness of the grave, until Orestes and Pylades come forth from the palace, carrying their swords unsheathed and dripping with blood. Almost at the same moment Ægisthus is seen coming from the country, and Electra hurriedly pushes back her brother and his friend behind the scene. The usurper has heard on the way a rumour of the death of Orestes, and is radiant with triumphant joy. He asks for the Phocian strangers, that he may hear these good tidings from their own lips. "And so they really report," he asks Electra, half incredulously, "that your brother is dead?" "You may see the corpse," is her guarded answer. Then he bids the palace-doors be thrown open, that all Mycenæ may behold the welcome sight. The set scene in the background opens, and the interior of the palace is discovered. There, on a bier, lies a body covered with a veil.

"*Ægis.* Great Jove ! a grateful spectacle—if thus
May it be said unsinning ; yet if she,
The awful Nemesis, be nigh and hear,

I do recall the sentence. Raise the pall,—
The dead was kindred to me, and shall know
A kinsman's sorrow.
Ores. Lift thyself the pall;
Not mine, but thine, the office to survey
That which lies mute beneath, and to salute,
Lovingly sad, the dead one.
Ægis. Be it so,—
It is well said. Go thou and call the queen.
Is she within?
Ores. Look not around for her,—
She is beside thee."—(Lord Lytton.)

Then Ægisthus lifts the veil, and recognises the body of Clytemnestra. He knows at once that it must be Orestes who stands before him, and that he is a doomed man. "Let me speak one little word," he pleads; but Electra fiercely cuts him short, and bids her brother "slay him out of hand, and cast his body to the dogs and vultures:"—

"Qu'il tombe, il en est temps, sous vos glaives vengeurs!
Que son corps soit privé des funébres honneurs!
Aux oiseaux dévorants qu'il serve de pâture,
Et trouve dans leurs flancs sa digne sépulture!" *

Orestes accordingly forces him within the palace, that the murderer may die by the son's hand on the same spot where the father had fallen. And thus "poetical justice elevates what on the modern stage would have been but a spectacle of physical horror into the deeper terror and sublimer gloom of a moral awe; and vin-

* From the 'Electre' of M. Léon Halévy, acted on the stage at Paris in 1863 and 1865.

dictive murder, losing its aspect, is idealised and hallowed into a religious sacrifice." *

In an ancient epigram, a statue of Bacchus (the patron god of the drama) is supposed to shadow and protect the tomb of Sophocles. This statue holds in its hands a mask, representing a woman's face of perfect beauty. "Whose face is that?" asks a passer-by. "The face of Antigone," is the answer; "or, if you prefer it, that of Electra. You can make your choice, for both are masterpieces."

* Lord Lytton's Athens, ii. 568.

END OF SOPHOCLES.

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