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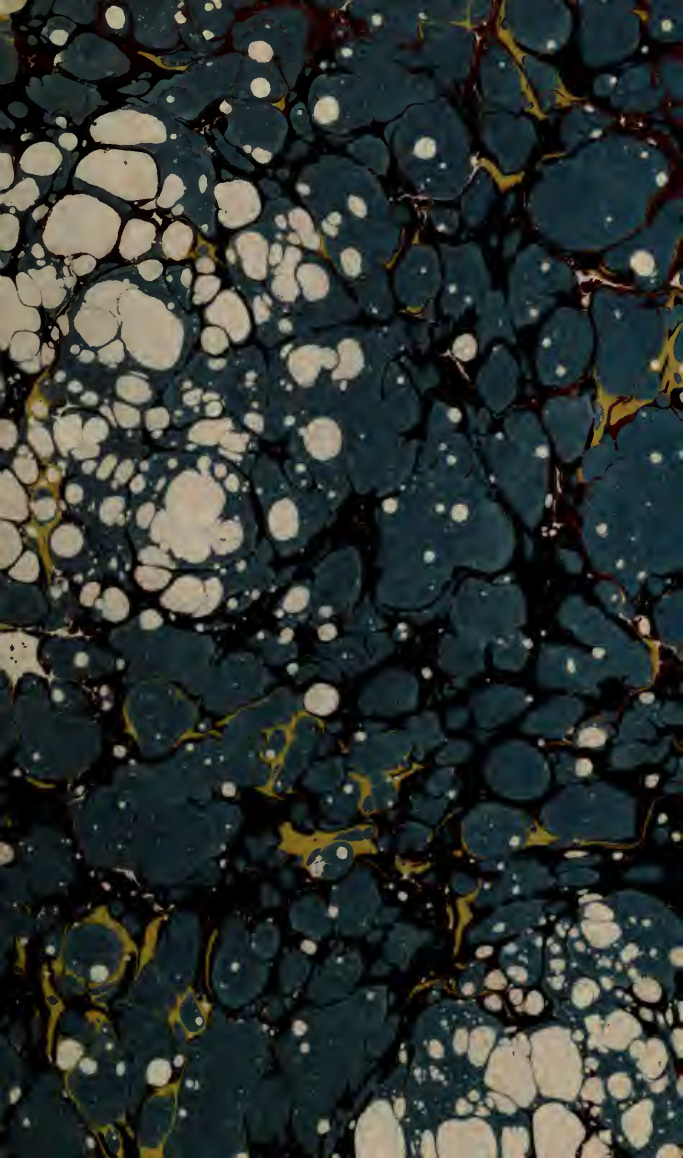
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ÆSCHYLUS

BY

REGINALD S. COPLESTON, M.A.

FELLOW AND LECTURER OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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C O N T E N T S.

	PAGE
CHAP. I. THE FEAST OF BACCHUS,	1
" II. THE SOLDIER-POET,	21
" III. PROMETHEUS BOUND,	33
" IV. THE SUPPLIANTS ; OR, THE CHILDREN OF IO,	63
" V. THE PERSIANS,	82
" VI. THE SEVEN CHIEFS AGAINST THEBES,	104
" VII. THE STORY OF ORESTES,	128
1. AGAMEMNON.	
2. CHOEPHORI, OR LIBATION-BEARERS.	
3. EUMENIDES.	

N O T E.

No discussion of the numerous points under dispute as to the structure of the theatre, the arrangement of the plays, and the dresses of the actors, has been admitted into this volume ; but in each case that view which appeared most probable and most intelligible has been adopted without any expression of uncertainty, and occasionally even the writer's own conjectures have been introduced. But, in truth, the greatest uncertainty prevails on all such points.

The writer desires here to express his thanks to Miss Swanwick and to Professor Plumptre for the courtesy with which they have granted permission to use their translations. To Professor Plumptre's Introduction, Chapter II. is greatly indebted ; nor is there any part in which his admirable book has not been of service.

ÆSCHYLUS.

CHAPTER I.

THE FEAST OF BACCHUS.

IN order rightly to understand the drama of the Greeks, and especially their tragedy, we must rid ourselves, as far as possible, of those associations which now cling in England round the names of "play" and "theatre." For our modern plays are so unlike a Greek tragedy, and the position which they occupy is so entirely different from that of the Athenian theatre, that the few points which both have in common are more likely to impede than assist us.

The Athenian theatre was a national institution; no private speculation, but the pride and glory of a great people; somewhat like, in this respect, to the celebrated theatres of some of the small German states, such as those of Dresden or Mannheim. It was also a religious institution; not merely a scene of national amusement, but at the same time a solemn ceremony in honour of the god Bacchus. The performances took place only at rare intervals, when the festivals of that

divinity came round, and so were invested with a dignity which cannot attach to our modern theatres, open as these are every day in the year or in the season. And as a consequence of the rarity of the representations, each play was, as a rule, enacted only once.

All these facts—that the theatre was national, and religious, and rarely open—combined to make the audience on each occasion very numerous. It was a point of national pride, of religious duty, and of common prudence on the part of every citizen, not to miss the two great dramatic festivals of the year when their season came. Accordingly, we hear that thirty thousand people used to be present together; and we may infer from this, as well as from other indisputable evidence, the vast size of the theatre itself. The performance took place in the day-time, and lasted nearly all day, for several plays were presented in succession; and the theatre was open to the sky and to the fields, so that when a man looked away from the solemn half-mysterious representation of the legendary glories of his country, his eye would fall on the city itself, with its temples and its harbours, or on the rocky cliffs of Salamis and the sunny islands of the Ægean. Finally, the performance was musical, and so more like an opera than an ordinary play, though we shall see that even this resemblance is little more than superficial.

From these few facts it will probably be clear that we shall do best if we entirely discard our modern notions of a theatre, and start quite afresh in our attempt to understand what a Greek play was like.

We must carry our thoughts back to the boyhood of the world. That expression does not only mean that in years the world once was young and now is older, nor only that once men lived of necessity simple lives, not knowing many sciences, and possessing no steam-engines or telegraphs; it means much more than these — that the tone of mind, the buoyancy, the thoughtlessness, which now are found only in boyhood, were then common, in a great measure, to all periods of life. This is a matter infinitely more important than any outward simplicity of life and manners. Let us see a little more closely what it means. The chief source of seriousness in later times is religion. A series of religions, of speculations about the meaning of life, the future to be expected after death, the system of punishments and rewards,—these have gradually sobered the nations of the civilised world. Secondly, the extension of civilisation itself has made each generation more busy than the last, and has deepened the sense of constant responsibility involved in transactions of commerce, in legal and official relations, and so contributed to take away the thoughtless ease and gaiety which existed in the boyhood of the world. To a Greek, in the early days, there were two serious occupations—war, and commerce or piracy; but both were rather opportunities for enterprise than subjects for anxiety. Religion, to a Greek, consisted in an intense love of all that is beautiful, and a firm belief that every stream and tree and cloud was tenanted by a god. All that for us is mere senseless imagery was for him a reality. In the sound of a

stream he really believed that he heard the sighing or the laughter of a nymph—how should the stream move and speak if it were not so possessed? The clouds gathered and the lightning flashed, not of themselves, or in obedience to laws of nature—of those mysterious powers the Greek had never heard—but simply because some person moved the clouds and hurled the lightning; and this was Zeus, or Jove.

Living thus with no anxieties; surrounded by the constant presence of deities who showed themselves to him through every form of natural beauty; reared on sunny hills amid the olive and the vine, and looking out always on bright bays and islands of the eastern sea; trained in every exercise of health; beautiful in face and person as the gods he believed in,—every Greek was in his measure an Apollo, always young in spirit, and cheerful and strong. The epochs of his simple life were the seasons of seed-time and harvest, of pruning and vintage; and they were marked by rustic ceremonies in honour of the gods of fruit and flowers and corn and wine.

Of all these seasons, those connected with the grape were naturally the merriest and most famous. When the rich clusters were carried home, all the country-side would gather round a rustic altar of Bacchus, at the foot of the warm hills on which the vines grew so richly, and there they danced, and sang, and played games,—simple indeed, but marked by the grace and beauty which seems inseparable from the nature of a Greek. This Bacchus whom they worshipped was not, as he is to us, a statue, or a picture, or a name, but a

real merry boy with a crown of ivy-leaves and a strange power of inspiring wild thoughts in the human breast. His laughing eyes had often peeped through the thick coverts of vines at the village maidens, and stories were told how once he had leapt from his tiger-chariot to win the love of Ariadne. When spring came round, and the last year's wine was opened, there was another festival, even more joyous, and merriment became boisterous as the power of the god made itself felt; and these spring festivals grew to be the chief ones of the year. Many rude games arose, in which the young men contended for a goat,* the victim sacrificed, or for a cup or tripod. One of the sports was to dance upon the slippery changing surface of a skin of wine, and he who kept his footing best carried off the skin of wine for his prize. Another was to sing extemporised songs in honour of the god; and when, in any district, a poetical spirit sprang up, this became a leading feature of the contests. Some particular village, we may suppose, would get famous for the hymns sung yearly at its spring festival, and become the centre of a district: the villagers made themselves a name, and went about to sing at neighbouring feasts; then matches were made up between different companies of singers, or individual poets contended together; and the thing grew until there were organised bands of twelve or more, who danced round the altar of Bacchus singing their hymns in his praise, and ballads describing his birth, and his loves, and his exploits. The first systematis-

* The memory of this custom is probably still preserved in the name of "Tragedy," which means "the goat-song."

ing of this form of entertainment is connected with the name of one Arion of Corinth. In his hands the dithyrambic dance and song (such was the name) became an orderly and solemn ceremony, and as such was kept up for many years in different parts of Greece. The number of the chorus was raised to fifty, and set music and words were composed for it. But it was in Attica, the land of the drama, that the first great addition was made to the simplicity of this chorus. Thespis, an inhabitant of one of the country districts, introduced into the pauses of the choric song a rude dialogue, maintained probably at first by himself on the one hand, and the leader of the singers on the other. This may have been sometimes comic, not much more dignified than the repartees with which our clowns fill up the pauses in a circus; sometimes it consisted of questions and answers concerning some story or exploit of Bacchus or Hercules;—at any rate, it soon grew to more. The actor, for so we must now begin to call him, would narrate, not without explanatory gesture and action, some mythical story, while the chorus would sing from time to time songs in continuation of his tale, or in comment upon it; songs of triumph when a victory was described, of mourning when the action was sad, and at all times of moral and pious reflection upon the dealings of the gods with men.

Such was the earliest form of the Attic tragedy, and much as it was afterwards developed, it never entirely lost this form. To the one actor of Thespis another was soon added, so that there was now a complete

dialogue independent of the chorus ; but to anything like the modern system, of many parts, each supported by a separate actor, the Greek tragedy never attained. Three is the largest number of actors employed in any of the plays of *Æschylus* ; so that, although each took more than one part in succession, there could never be more than three speaking characters upon the stage at once, except when, as was often the case, the chorus took part in the action.

The chorus of *Thespis* had danced upon a raised platform, in the midst of which stood the altar of the god ; the introduction of a second actor made an increase of space and means of entrance and exit necessary, and thus the platform grew into the stage. In course of time a separate place was made for the chorus, and called the *orchestra*, or dancing stage, while the stage proper was left for the actors, and for the chorus when it assumed an actor's part. Further, as there were now two actors exhibiting a story by means of dialogue, each naturally presented a different hero or deity ; to make this assumption of character more effective, masks were introduced, and before long great perfection was arrived at in their construction.

From the very first, as we have seen, these choric songs were produced at annual contests during the spring festival of the god of wine ; and the same custom was continued when the dialogue had been added to the chorus, and the now developed dramas were presented in succession to compete for an annual prize. Having its origin in the country villages of *Attica*, this form of poetic contest found its centre in *Athens*, and the

two spring festivals there became distinguished among the chief solemnities of Greece. When Athens began to take the lead among Grecian states, as she did after the Persian war, while her art and literature, though still only in embryo, were preparing to rise to that eminence which soon afterwards they attained, all that was most solemn in religion, most enthusiastic in national feeling, most beautiful in art, found its expression in the rival dramas which twice in every spring were presented, one after another, in the great theatre of Bacchus to contend for the tragic prize. Foremost among the poets for many years was Æschylus; but there must have been many others who rivalled and sometimes defeated him, and these contributed their share towards the advances which were made in his time by the art. We, to whom a theatre means something so utterly different, can hardly fancy the enthusiasm with which the Athenian citizen, on the great religious day, went into the assembly of his countrymen to see the land's most gifted sons, in grand words decked out with every aid of art and dance and music, rival one another in celebrating the great deeds of gods and kings and heroes, the founders and patrons of the Grecian race. Let us endeavour as far as we may to realise the scene.

At the time of such a festival Athens was crowded. The city always contained a large number of resident foreigners, who lived there for commerce or security, and enjoyed a special legal protection. Then there were a great many passing merchants and sailors, and strangers impelled by one motive or another to visit

the state which was fast becoming the leader of Greece, and many no doubt were brought together by the feast itself. There were the country people of Attica, come in, as it were, from the suburbs ; and lastly, there were the regular inhabitants themselves. A busy, energetic people these were, living half their time at sea or in foreign cities ; full of all a sailor's vivacity and vigour and enterprise, yet without the sailor's ignorance and rudeness—their hardihood tempered by the culture which was fast gaining ground, and which this festival did much to foster. We have lively descriptions given us of the hurry and the bustle and the clamour in the docks and marts of this most stirring city ; and now all was at its height. The city itself was only just beginning to be beautified with the temples and groves and statues which were afterwards its glory ; but at present, while the heroes of Marathon were still in its streets, it needed no better decoration, and the rough walls and narrow roads spoke still of the haste with which they were built up, after the Athenians had so nobly left their homes to destruction to fight at Salamis for the liberty of Greece. Never has there been a city of which its people might be more justly proud, whether they looked to its past or to its future, than Athens in the days of Æschylus.

But all are tending, early in the day, to the great theatre of Bacchus, under the Acropolis. This sacred citadel stands high above the rest of the city, crowned even now with temples of the gods, and especially of Minerva, the patron goddess. Its south side is a steep precipice of rock, from which the ground slopes

gradually down. Here is the theatre.* The part occupied by the audience is semicircular, and consists of seats rising like steps one above the other, and cut in the solid rock. This vast semicircle is filled already with the mass of citizens, men and women, except in the lower ranges of seats, which are reserved for the magistrates and senators. In the centre a small area is left, on which is a raised platform with the altar of Bacchus upon it; across the front, from end to end of the semicircle, runs a high wall which closes the theatre, and in front of this wall is the stage. The stage is long and narrow;—it runs, that is, across nearly the whole front, but is only deep enough for four or five men to walk abreast—and steps lead down from it into the central area or orchestra; while, parallel to the stage, but on the lower level, run long passages to right and left, by which the chorus may enter or leave the theatre. As, then, we take our seat among the noisy crowd, we see before us, down on the floor of the house, as we should call it, the altar on its raised platform in the orchestra, and beyond it, fronting us, a high columned wall, fashioned perhaps like a temple, with great folding doors in the middle, opening upon the stage. We are going to stay here all day and see piece after piece, and join in approving the verdict of the judges when,

* Some readers may remember the representation of the “*Antigone*” of Sophocles in London some years ago. The Greek stage and its accessories were all carefully reproduced, and the result is described in the ‘*Times*’ of January 3, 1845. The same performance, as afterwards repeated in Edinburgh, forms the subject of one of De Quincey’s most instructive papers.

at the end, they award the prize to the play which has been best written, best put on the stage, best acted, sung, and danced, richest in free and patriotic sentiments or hits at the defeated Persians, and most illustrative of the glory of the city.

The sun shines full in the faces of the expectant multitude, but a Greek is not fastidious about weather;—besides, there is a pleasant breeze blowing over us from the sea. And the time is passed in discussion of the probable character of the different plays, and the chances of the competitors. These are not, as we might have expected, the poets whose plays are to be presented, but the rich men who put the several plays upon the stage. A poet is not usually a rich man, and could not of course afford to hire, as he must, a chorus and actors, and get dresses and scenery arranged; left to himself, he could no more bring out his piece than the ordinary composer could bring out an opera. So the plan in Athens was this. The rich men in each tribe were required to contribute out of their wealth to the benefit and amusement of their fellow-citizens. When ships were wanted, the burden of supplying them was laid on the wealthier citizens, to each of whom, or to several clubbed together, the duty of providing a ship was assigned. Similarly, when the festivals were to be supplied with plays, the office of putting a piece on the stage—of furnishing a chorus, as it was called—devolved upon some one very rich citizen, or upon several of moderate wealth who bore the expense between them. The play to be thus provided for was assigned by the magistrates out of those

which the rival poets had sent in. The furnisher of the chorus then collected men who could sing and dance to be trained for the chorus, chose the two or the three actors among whom the parts should be distributed, had scenes painted and dresses hired, and provided whatever else was needed for the due performance of the piece. It was a point of honour to do the whole as liberally and artistically as possible; and an ambitious man would gain popularity by introducing new stage-machinery, new effects in the music, or new inventions for making the gestures of the actors visible and their voices audible throughout the immense building. For it will seem most wonderful, if we consider the case, that any actor could make himself heard by thirty thousand people in the open air; still more that his voice, so elevated as to penetrate through all that multitude, should be able to preserve distinct the various tones of grief or joy, of submission or command. To meet this difficulty the Greeks contrived masks, which enclosed, it seems, the whole head, and were fitted with acoustic arrangements such as are unknown to us, by which the power of the human voice was wonderfully increased. In the same way, in order that the persons of the actors might not appear diminutive from the great distance at which most of the spectators saw them, they were made taller by very thick-soled boots, and broader by the judicious arrangement of their dresses; while the mask, no doubt, rendered the appearance of the head proportionate to this enlarged stature. There were, too, in the building of the wall which formed the back of the

stage, acoustic principles observed, by which those who spoke from the interior—as from within a house or a room—might be heard more distinctly. And improvements in these matters were made from time to time by those to whom the equipment of plays was assigned. So when the names of such and such men are mentioned as probable competitors, it is these furnishers of the chorus who are meant, though the success of any one of them would no doubt be considered the more probable if he had Æschylus or Sophocles for his poet.

On such matters the crowd are now exchanging rumours. Cimon, they say, is rich and liberal, and his play will be put on the stage with every advantage of art and machinery that money can procure, and he has a piece written by a favourite poet; but then Lysias has secured the best dancers, and the great actor is retained by Xenocles. “But after all,” says some one, “not much depends upon the actor; he is little more than a mouthpiece; any one who can strike a good attitude and walk with dignity, and who has good lungs, will make an excellent Agamemnon.” Some one has heard that the ghost of Clytemnestra is actually to appear and talk; another beats that piece of news by the information that the whole band of the Furies is to be brought upon the stage. With such conversation the time is beguiled till the first play begins; conversation for which topics were never wanting, since the entertainment provided for each festival was quite new, or rather there was always a series of entertainments to be expected, so that the interest of

many "first nights," as it were, was concentrated in a single morning.

But now the contest is to begin. The magistrates and generals have arrived and taken their places in the lowest tier, the senators in the benches just above them; and many have been the remarks made on each as he came in, for in this small city every distinguished man is well known, by sight at least, to all his fellow-citizens. At length the curtain is removed, and the scene in which the action is laid is disclosed to view. Perhaps it is the outside of a temple, whose columned front the wall itself of the theatre may adequately represent; or often it is the front of a royal palace, with the statues of the three great gods standing before the gates; or it is a lonely island, where a hero is to suffer, deserted by his fellow-chiefs; or a wild mountain scene, on whose craggy cliffs Prometheus is to expiate his unlawful kindness to mankind. At the sides are painted views of the country surrounding each scene of action; the neighbouring city, if there be one, is seen upon the left, and on the right are fields or open sea. And all this is executed with consummate skill, and knowledge of perspective, such as even modern scene-painters hardly, perhaps, surpass. In such a scene the two actors appear. Their dress soon makes it clear what characters they represent,* and the first few sentences explain to us sufficiently the posi-

* The dress, however, of the actors was in great measure conventional, following closely that of worshippers in the rites of Bacchus. It was generally gay and bright in colour, and admitted but little distinction between men and women.

tion of affairs. They use no elaborate gestures, and make no attempt to express feeling by changes of countenance—such efforts would be useless in so large a place, even if the face were not hidden by the mask—they stand generally still in solemn dignified attitudes, so as to look very much like coloured statues or figures in a bas-relief; and they utter the sonorous verse in a kind of recitative, yet so distinctly that the words may be accurately heard by all the audience, who would instantly perceive and notice any slip in accent or pronunciation. After perhaps a quarter of an hour, or generally less, the actors, or one of them, retire to set on foot the main action of the piece: then the chorus, if they have not already entered, appear in solemn procession, and take their station in the orchestra to sing. There are usually twelve of them, all dressed alike as old men, or maidens, or soldiers, or as the case may be, and they enter generally three abreast, and form and wheel with the stately regularity of a regiment. They move in time to music, marching or dancing, and sing as they advance a solemn hymn, which dimly prophesies the events that are to come, pointing out their connection with the past, and showing how all the history is ordered by the providence or vengeance of the gods. They are marshalled under a leader who walks in their midst; and if they engage, as sometimes they do, in dialogue with the actor, this leader is their spokesman. As they group themselves round the altar, they still sing their grand mysterious chant, and there from time to time they execute various complicated dances, illustra-

tive of the emotions which their words express. And here a word must be said of this expressive dance.

It seems to be an art entirely lost—so entirely that we now cannot well guess what difference of steps or figures would represent even the most marked difference of feelings; but to the Greeks such variation was most certainly represented. And thus much may be noticed in explanation. The Greeks, in accordance with the general simplicity and natural frankness of their manners, were in the habit of giving much more unreserved expression to their feelings by gesture than is thought among ourselves consistent with dignity or culture; so we may suppose that their eyes became more accustomed to such outward indications than ours are, and their taste was not offended by gestures which to us would seem forced and ridiculous. Further, we must consider the facility with which a conventional system of expressing passion by the dance might become generally recognised, until movements, which originally were only conventionally significant, might appear spontaneous to an eye habituated to their use. Lastly, the notion, so difficult to get rid of, that in dancing there is something trivial and undignified, must be as far as possible discarded; for, to the Athenian, the dances of the chorus were probably among the most impressive, even the most awful, spectacles which ever met his eyes; and if to us dancing seems fit only for merriment and trifling, the cause lies not in our advance in culture, but in our having lost an art or a sensibility.

The relation of the chorus to the rest of a Greek

play may be well learned from Milton's imitation of an Attic tragedy in the "Samson Agonistes;" and as corresponding in many respects to the choral ode, we might instance Gray's "Bard." In a tragedy whose subject was the death of Edward II., that impassioned and mysterious ode in which the punishment of the royal line is dimly prophesied would form a good opening chorus.

The ode comes to an end, and then, with successive periods of dialogue interspersed with more choric odes, the play goes on, till the catastrophe, generally a mournful one, has been effected. Then follow comments upon it from actor and from chorus, and all ends, it may be, with a grand procession, during which the chorus sums up the moral of the whole. In all this there is not much acting, not much that is really what we call dramatic: we have rather a series of *tableaux*, majestic, colossal, statuesque; dialogues or soliloquies intentionally stilted, in order that a certain distance and mystery may attach to them; while, giving tone to it all, and relieving the monotony of the long quiet speeches by comments such as a sensible spectator might be supposed to make, we have the stately dance and chant of the chorus.

One play would probably seldom occupy more than an hour and a half; but often three plays were connected together in one grand whole called a trilogy, somewhat as the several parts of Shakespeare's historical plays are connected; and these were followed by a comic piece by the same poet, which might relieve the seriousness of so much tragedy. Each competitor,

therefore, produced in these cases not one play, but a series of four, and several competitors followed one another throughout the day. Wearisome, dry, unimpassioned, all this may seem to us; but we must remember that to the Greek it meant religious service, literary culture, and the celebration of the national greatness. As he sat in the theatre, the gods of his country looked down approvingly from the Acropolis above, and his fellow-citizens, whom he loved with intense patriotism, were all about him. He might say of the assembly, what an old poet had said of the Ionians gathered for festival at Delos, that you would think them blessed with endless youth, so glorious they were and so blooming; and as the rocks under which he sat re-echoed to the applause of that great assembly, he must indeed have felt the thrill of sympathetic enthusiasm which Plato describes as produced by such occasions.

One word about the mental condition of a people whose masses could take pleasure in such an entertainment. That their culture must in some degree have exceeded our own is evident from a comparison of the plays in which we and they respectively delight. The majority of Englishmen, even among the so-called educated, do not care to see Shakespeare's tragedies; the effort of attention is too great, the beauties too subtle, the plot too simple. Now Shakespeare's plays stand to the Greek drama much as a picture does to a statue. And a picture most men can enjoy, but very few can really appreciate a statue. Shakespeare, then, is too severe for us, and Æschylus is much more

severe than Shakespeare; yet the ordinary Athenian citizen could enjoy Æschylus at the first hearing, and those of the next generation knew his plays almost by heart, and could appreciate the most distant allusion to them. In what lies the reason of their superiority? For that it is in some sense a superiority we cannot but feel. To have lost any power of enjoyment is in some sense a fall; and to have lost the power of enjoying what is simple, to want more piquancy, more excitement, is a fall somewhat like losing the innocence of childhood. The multiplication of our interests has made the ordinary course of life so exciting, that we want something still more violent for our amusements. This is one cause. The other lies in the leisure which the ordinary Athenian possessed, and the literature with which he was imbued. There were so many slaves in Attica, that the free population was but a small minority, and it is with the freemen only that we have to deal. These formed, therefore, virtually an aristocracy, freed, to a great extent, from servile work, so that they were provided with abundant leisure. But from their word for leisure our word "school" is derived, for their unoccupied time was all a time of learning. The great sculptors were already beginning to adorn Athens with the masterpieces which have not since been equalled, and in every man's mouth, as the national literature, were the noble poems of Homer. Against such means of forming a simple and natural taste there were no newspapers, or novels, or waxworks to be set; happily for the Athenians, their books and models were few and good.

Our taste has been spoilt by the multiplication of bad books, bad pictures, and bad statues. To recover the correctness of taste which is natural to a healthy and happy man, we must study from the Greek models, and imbibe insensibly the harmony and grace by which they are distinguished. Æschylus, it is true, does not present the most finished example of tragic art; his works are rather sublime than polished; but they possess a very high degree of beauty and moderation, and are executed on so large a scale that they may bear to dispense with finish. If all Greek art is typified by the statue, those statues which correspond to the plays of Æschylus are colossal. And to gain even a slight knowledge of his poetry is to enrich the mind with a store of beauty which cannot fail to be a joy for ever.

CHAPTER II.

THE SOLDIER-POET.

To us Æschylus is a poet, and a poet he has been to all ages since his own; but to himself he was a soldier, so that when he was to write an epitaph for himself, the one fact which he wished inscribed upon his tomb was this—that the long-haired Persians knew how he could fight. To the men of his own age he was both soldier and poet, and from their stand-point we must try to regard him.

Æschylus was born about the year 525 B. C. at Eleusis, near Athens, a village celebrated for the secret rites of Demeter there performed,—those Eleusinian mysteries which are among the most remarkable institutions that the world has seen. The great goddess of Eleusis, Demeter, or Mother Earth, was one of the most august of the divinities of Greece. She represented the earth in its power and its kindness; in the conception formed of her, the earth's venerable age and greatness, and the mysterious influence by which she quickens seed and nourishes life, were combined with the genial fertility and rich

healthy fruitfulness of the soil; and so was made up the notion of a goddess, awful from her power, but a kind mother still to men. Eleusis was one of the chief seats of her worship, and thence originated a sort of sacred freemasonry, which was widely spread among the different tribes of Greece. For there were certain secret doctrines which only the initiated might learn, and rites at which only the initiated might assist; and these rites and doctrines, whatever they were, were no formal or trifling thing, but furnished a creed and an interest which raised the initiated, in some degree, to a higher level than his fellow-men. We have no means of guessing what it was that was taught in them. It has been supposed that some vestiges of the true faith, ideas of the unity of God and the immortality of the soul, were kept alive and handed down by these mysteries: however that may be, they were regarded as peculiarly holy, and the place on which the shadow of their solemnity fell could not fail to suggest grand thoughts to a powerful and imaginative mind. It can hardly be merely fanciful to ascribe, in some degree at least, to this influence the delight which Æschylus shows, throughout his extant works, in all that is mysterious and awful, as well as his preference for the more dimly known and ancient of the gods. A boyhood passed in longing to know the meaning of the crowds that constantly were coming to his native village, and of the long processions which sometimes passed through its fields; in wondering at the awestruck look of the men who came out from the sacred place, or in guessing the import of the dim

allusions which he heard from time to time ;—a boyhood so passed must surely give a solemnity and earnestness to the whole nature of the man. And certainly Æschylus, if we may believe his biographers, was from an early age haunted by solemn imaginations, and by a consciousness of the presence of the gods. It is said that he told this story of himself. Once, when quite a child, he was left in a vineyard to guard or watch the grapes, and, tired with the sun, he lay down and slept ; and he saw coming through the rows of vines the flushed face of Bacchus, merry, yet terrible ; and Bacchus bade him give himself henceforth to the tragic art. On this anecdote we cannot place much reliance—it sounds like a later fabrication ; but we may well believe that a “ fine frenzy ” was early seen in the eyes of Æschylus, and that his character was early marked by a fiery earnestness and pride.

He was born of noble family, and in after-years, when he saw changes passing over the society of Athens, by which the prestige of nobility was lowered, and new men were helped to rise to the highest offices in the state, his pride of birth showed itself in a spirit of haughty reserve and stern conservatism. But in this contempt for the rising citizens of his day there was at least one great truth implied ; a truth, that is, very needful for the time in which he lived. Love of moderation and due proportion, and a hatred of the vulgarity of excess—this, the characteristic principle of Greek art in all its branches ; was beginning to make itself felt and consciously accepted ; and this is the very principle which new men, in every age, are

most apt to violate. And Æschylus, as a leader in the development of the artistic spirit, could not but be rightly indignant at the arrogance of newly-gotten wealth. To him, as to all true Greeks, such arrogance was a sin against the gods. A man exulting in his great prosperity, and presuming on it, was a sight at which the gods were angry: they would impel such a man to violent deeds, and make his pride the instrument of his destruction. The moderate wealth and well-founded dignity of an ancient family had all charms for Æschylus; he loved all that was venerable, and hated arrogance above all crimes. Of this influence of his noble birth we shall find frequent indications.

But an Athenian citizen, though he might plume himself in private on his birth, would not think of disdain to mingle on equal terms with the mass of his fellow-citizens in the field and the assembly. In many a stern battle Æschylus fought as readily as any; and his hardihood was not, as with some of our own well-born soldiers, a virtue rarely shown, called out by the occasion, and contrasting strangely with the almost effeminate indolence and luxury of ordinary days. Something of this character appeared afterwards in Alcibiades, but we may be very sure there was none of it in Æschylus. He, like all the Greeks of his day, was hardy and warlike always; more warlike than most, almost fierce perhaps he was; and though he could turn to elegant pursuits,—though he was a courtier and a poet as well as a soldier,—yet this was not to be noticed in him as an exceptional combination. For

an Athenian was expected to be a man of many powers, and not, because he excelled in one thing, therefore to fail in every other: rather, to be excellent was with them to excel in all things to which a free and cultivated man might turn his hand. This point it is which makes *Æschylus*, as soldier-poet, so remarkable an object for our consideration.

Haste and pressure of business make division of labour necessary among ourselves, and each man must cultivate a specialty; so that if a man should appear who was well qualified for all posts, we should not believe in him; and more than that, we should not find him out. So soon as he showed excellence in one matter, he would be ticketed with that and tied down to it: any attempts in any other subject would be regarded as graceful by-works, but not as likely to lead to high success. Now in Athens there was not so much pressure, there was not so much tyranny of public opinion, and the state was smaller.

Yet, even in that small state, it is matter for our admiration that excellence should have succeeded so uniformly as it did in attracting attention and reward. *Æschylus*, though holding no high command, was selected, with his two brothers, for the prize of pre-eminent bravery at Marathon, and his brother again won the highest honour in the battle of Salamis. Posterity may well admire the judgment of his contemporaries. No doubt all the Athenians fought well at those two battles, and it must have been hard to assign pre-eminence to any; but we, looking at the writings and history of *Æschylus*, can be sure that

there was that strength and majestic energy about him, which must have made him do acts worthy of such distinction. And to be distinguished at Marathon was something worth living for. Civilisation, art, and culture, against barbarism, wealth, and numbers; freedom against despotism; Europe against Asia,—no less a strife than this was decided that day. The Greeks came to the encounter with the anxiety of men who were trying a new weapon against an enemy of new powers. They were unused to the vast numbers and imposing equipment of the Persians, and the power of freedom and culture had hardly yet been tried. It would have been impious to distrust such weapons and such a cause, but still it was an anxious crisis. And when it ended in the utter rout of Darius and his innumerable hosts, the triumph was proportionate to that anxiety. Greece was greater that day than any country has ever been since, and on that day Æschylus was among the greatest of Greece. And ten years afterward there came a day, less critical, indeed, but even more splendid, when “ships by thousands lay” off Salamis, and the Athenians led the Greeks to the fullest victory. The Athenians then had sacrificed their homes and the temples of their gods to fight for fellow-countrymen who were ungrateful and remiss; the virtue of one Athenian and the genius of another had made the victory possible; and on this proudest day that Athens ever saw the brother of Æschylus was named as having borne himself the best, and the poet himself was doubtless not far behind.

During the interval between these two battles our poet had produced many plays, and several times won the prize; and a few years after the battle of Salamis he wrote the "Persians," a tragedy founded on that event, and representing the tragical end of Xerxes as brought on him by his overweening confidence and pride. In some other plays as well as in this—in "The Seven against Thebes," for instance, and the "Eumenides"—Æschylus treated political subjects directly or indirectly, and inculcated a conservative policy which should not seek through violence the aggrandisement of the state, nor carelessly change her venerable institutions. But in Athens at that time all was progress. Æschylus had neither the taste nor the opinions which would tend to make a man popular there. Discouraged perhaps by the changes effected in the constitution, piqued at the success of younger men, and, in particular, of Sophocles, and annoyed by a charge of sacrilege which he was supposed to have incurred by disclosing on the stage some details of the Eleusinian mysteries, he left Athens in his old age, never to return.

He retired to the court of Hiero in Syracuse, where he had before been a frequent guest, and there, in the midst of a literary circle, with Pindar, Simonides, and Epicharmus, he passed the remainder of his life. Several plays he wrote during his stay there, and these were probably produced at Athens by the care of his friends. It is likely that his greatest work, the Story of Orestes, was among them. He died at Gela, in Sicily, in the sixty-ninth year of his age. The in-

habitants of Gela gave him a splendid funeral, and inscribed his own epitaph upon his tomb:—

“This tomb the dust of Æschylus doth hide,
Euphorion’s son, and fruitful Gela’s pride:
How tried his valour Marathon may tell,
And long-haired Medes who know it all too well.” *

Not much is known of his life; indeed the few facts mentioned here form the greater part of what we are told, but even these are at least enough to show in what great times he lived, and how wide was the range of his gigantic powers. The character which we should be led by his works and his life to attribute to him is supported by the contemporary testimony of Aristophanes, who caricatures him, but with marked respect, in his comedy of “The Frogs.” He is represented there as proud and intolerant, but brave, noble, and dignified; given to big words and long pompous compounds, but not at all as frothy or empty of sound sense; as a sturdy representative of the genuine spirit of tragedy and of all that was best in the old Athenian temper; one of those “hearts of oak who had fought at Marathon,” and, like the rest of these, a little slow to follow the times, but made of a solid stuff of which there was too little remaining.

Two things then, in particular, are to be noticed in Æschylus by the modern reader. First, the “many-sidedness” of which we have already spoken, by which he was a soldier-poet; and, secondly, the prominent part

* Translated by Professor Plumptre, to whom this chapter is very largely indebted throughout.

which he played in a very stirring epoch of the world's history. By this prominence he was qualified, on the one hand, to represent his countrymen; on the other, to speak to the common sympathies of mankind. As a genuine Athenian citizen, mixed up in the battles and politics of his city, engaged in providing for Athenian taste, and to no small degree in guiding it, he cannot fail to express most truthfully the significant features of the Athenian mind. And since Athens was in a sense the world—represented the future civilisation against Persia, and was the chief scene of its growth—a citizen of Athens was a citizen of the world, and his character was not only not provincial, but not even transitory. Hence it is that, speaking from the Athenian stage, Æschylus can address men of all ages. Hence it is that his views of life, as well as the passions he represents, have interest for us still; and the pagan creed with which they are connected does not seem to impair their value.

What, then, was his view of life, or did he take any consistent view of life at all? It is possible, perhaps, that men should go through life, as some savages indeed probably do, without any attempt at explanation of the events that occur to them, regarding each as a separate fact, and not comparing them together. This, however, is only possible where there is not only no history, but not even any continuous memory of the past; and a nation like the Athenian, which had enjoyed for centuries a noble literature, could not be in any such case as this. To them the freewill of man and his responsibility, and such questions as these, had

long been suggesting themselves. Was their view of the answer to these questions a cheerful one or the reverse?

All that is bright and sunny, all that savours, as it were, of out-of-doors, seems to belong to the Greek, and cheerfulness, or even thoughtlessness, seems to characterise his temper. He loved light and sought it. Yet even out of this very search comes sadness, for there is not light enough in the world for man's needs.* The inquirer is baffled at every turn, and from that very brightness of his outward life which makes him love light and seek it, he is only led the more to find in the inner meaning of things darkness and mystery, to think the dealings of heaven inscrutable, and to believe in dreadful deities of dim and unknown, even of cruel, powers. So while on the one hand the Greek believed in gods of daylight, as it were, clad with sunny youth like Apollo, or fair like Venus, or wise and kind like Minerva; on the other hand there were Erinnys and Nemesis and the Furies, who pursued the proud or the impious, and Atè, who clung to a man or to a family in punishment of some half-forgotten crime, and led them into an infatuation under which they should incur new guilt and new vengeance. Hence a dark cloud hung over history: it was but the gloomy record of men raised to success and wealth, then waxing insolent and forgetting to give the gods their due, then by the angry gods abandoned to a reprobate hardihood, in which they began a course of crime whose consequences clung to them and their descendants, till some one holier than the rest, by a long

* See Ruskin's Oxford Lectures on Art, Lect. vii.

course of expiation, should win the pardon of heaven, and free his family from the curse. Over each step of this dismal round a deity presided. To the prosperous man came the goddess Insolence, and if he admitted her to his hearth, she led him into sin. Often Atè, who clung to him for some ancestral fault, would send Persuasion to him, to make him open his doors to Insolence. Then he would kill or wrong a man, a brother perhaps, or a father, and the righteous indignation of the spectators of his crime would be embodied in or expressed by Nemesis and the stern Erinnyes, and these would never cease to cry for vengeance on him, until the Furies seized the hapless victim, and dragged him to destruction. But when the curse at length is to be removed, then the bright gods come upon the scene: Apollo is the cleanser and the advocate; wise Minerva dictates the decision which sets the suppliant free. So strong was the light and shadow in the Greek creed. Æschylus is prone, perhaps, to dwell in the shadow, but his masterpiece, the "Story of Orestes," exhibits both in a beautiful and consistent whole.

Over these two worlds, as it were, one supreme ruler was dimly apprehended. Through all his mention of numerous deities there is ever in Æschylus a constant reference to one God, by whose will all the principles which govern the life of man have been eternally decreed. Sometimes he is identified with Jove,* but oftener he is vaguely thought of as an unknown God, in whom men may still trust that all is ultimately right.

* Or, as the Greeks call him, Zeus.

We have spoken of two distinct classes of gods ; the gloomy deities which belong to the sphere of conscience and moral responsibility, and the cheerful gods of the natural world. This distinction is a just one, but it must not be confounded with another. According to the old mythologies, before Jove became king of heaven, and all the young gods, Apollo and the rest, took their places by his side, the throne of Olympus had been filled by an older race of deities—Cronus, and Oceanus, and Prometheus, and the Titans—who had been exiled at the fall of their dynasty, or bound in prisons and tortures. About these there was something venerable from their age, and something mysterious from the slightness of the knowledge possessed about them. They were therefore favourite subjects with Æschylus, as we shall see in his “Prometheus.” But their darkness and mystery was of a different kind from that of Atè and Erinnyes.

What, then, in this strange medley is true and permanent ? The brightness of the natural world—this is our first and greatest lesson from the Greeks ; the deep, dreadful responsibility of man ; the possibility of restoration from sin to purity ; the overruling providence of a supreme Creator. We shall enjoy Æschylus more if we trace these truths in his poems, and we shall learn how much was good in the pagan creeds, instead of only being disgusted by their falsehood.

CHAPTER III.

PROMETHEUS BOUND.

THE "Prometheus Bound" is probably not the earliest even of the few remaining plays of Æschylus; and yet, for many reasons, it is the fittest of the seven* to begin with, for it is the easiest, the most typical, and the most interesting.

It is, in several respects, as simple as it could be. The interest is undivided, for the one hero is present throughout, and the other persons who appear from time to time are all introduced directly for the sake of their connection with him. The unity which all plays, and indeed all works of art, ought to possess, is generally attained, if at all, by less simple means. The main thread is often lost sight of for a time, and our interest is temporarily engaged in some side-plot, which is only afterwards and indirectly seen to bear upon the main issue; so that the poet's skill is shown in enlisting our sympathies in the separate aims of a number of persons, and yet making all those aims

* Æschylus is said to have written seventy or even a hundred plays, but we have only seven extant.

subservient, in one way or another, to the chief action of the piece. But in the "Prometheus" unity is directly secured by having only one person of predominant influence. There is not much elaborate art, certainly, in this course, nor is a result so attained ever quite as striking as that of the more complicated process, when that is used with great power and is completely successful; but such success is rare indeed. It is too often the case that the surrounding interests, instead of contributing their several currents to the main stream, are only so many drains detracting from it. And so it is that few plays of those written with most elaborate art produce anything like the imposing sense of unity which we gain from the "Prometheus."

In its plot, too, this play is exceedingly simple. If we consider the series of steps by which the catastrophe is brought about in a modern play, the great number of events which take place between the rising of the curtain and its fall, how many people pass through vicissitudes of hope and despair, are married and killed, what a long time often elapses, long enough even for changes to appear in the character of the persons;—if we consider this complexity, and then turn to the plot of the "Prometheus," we shall feel that we are dealing with quite a different kind of composition.

Prometheus is nailed to a rock, and refuses even under this torture to yield to the will of Jove. That is all. Other persons come and speak to him, urge or command him to relent, or threaten him with the result, but only to be repelled in turn. The attitude

of the hero never alters, the issue is never doubtful. This naturally seems to us only a scene out of a longer play—and such, in a sense, it is. It is probably the second part in one of those series of three plays, or trilogies, of which we have one complete specimen in the “Story of Orestes.” The first of the three would have exhibited the crime of Prometheus, his stealing the divine fire for men; then came the Prometheus Bound, his punishment; and lastly, Prometheus Freed, his restoration. There were, in that case, three complete pictures, together making one story. We have only one picture left, and it is perhaps the simplest, and certainly the most affecting, of the three.

Another respect in which the play is simple is its scene. From the nature of the story, this remains unchanged throughout, until it is lost in the final convulsion.

Now, to have the attention concentrated on one person, in one set of circumstances, in one place, would of course be most tedious, unless the play were short. And it is, like most of our author’s plays, much shorter than even the average of Greek tragedies. It is little more than a *tableau vivant*, exhibiting the punishment and fortitude of Prometheus; a signal instance of that character by which the Attic tragedy is especially distinguished from the modern, of statuesque and colossal simplicity. It is a single statue, not even a group: it is less complicated than the Laocoon: though evidently one of a series, it is complete in itself.

There remains the most important reason why this

play is a good one to begin with—it is much the most universally interesting of the surviving dramas of Æschylus. There is very little in it that is exclusively Greek or Athenian; no allusions, or very few, to historical events or national institutions, so that it is as suitable almost to one place and time as to another. The spectacle of a god suffering for the sake of men, so wonderful a prophecy as it is of the great fact of Christianity, has, for most minds, a strong fascination. Goethe, Shelley, and many others, have tried their hands upon the subject—not, it is true, following the plain story of Æschylus, but each adapting the materials to his own creed. Goethe's work is only a fragment. The "Prometheus Unbound" of Shelley, though it is a poem in many points painful and in many fantastic, yet has many passages which illustrate Æschylus with remarkable clearness. But one thing must always prevent any modern adaptation of the situation from being complete, if it is to avoid being blasphemous. In the Greek play Prometheus represents the cause of man against Zeus, and openly rebels against him. Now, so long as the supreme god is represented as wicked or unjust, such an attitude can be an object of sympathy; but to those who believe in the true God, a rebel against Him cannot be regarded as a friend to men, or be an object of anything but hatred. Hence it is that the nearest parallel to Prometheus which modern literature affords is Satan himself in "Paradise Lost." As a spectacle of indomitable will, not succumbing under torture, and raising to the last a voice of defiance to heaven, Satan is the very coun-

terpart of Prometheus ; but all that wins our sympathy for Prometheus,—his goodness, and gentleness, and love of men—is of course wanting in the character of Satan. Shelley has made his adaptation more complete, and it scarcely escapes the charge of blasphemy. The race of men are represented, in the person of his Prometheus, as always baffled in all desires and aims at good by the tyranny of some cruel power. In Byron's "Cain," this attitude is still more openly assumed, but the person of Cain is not represented as entirely deserving of our sympathy. However, these instances show how favourite a theme this, of mankind suffering in the person of one, has been with later poets.

But we will turn to a pleasanter comparison, and see mankind suffering, not in antagonism but in conscious submission to the will of God. In the oldest of all poems, it may be, in the Book of Job, the same great spectacle of heroic endurance is set before us, and there too the hero represents humanity. Prometheus, after his long suffering, is restored to happiness ; humanity suffers and is restored in his person. So it is, in a much higher sense, with Job. Not only in his physical sufferings and restoration, but in the deeper agony of the moral problem which overpowers him, and the higher elevation of the future to which he looks, Job represents all mankind. In him are answered the angry questions which Shelley and Byron ask. "What means," say they, "this constant baffling of man's best efforts, this universal presence of pain and sin, this obscurity in the ways of God?" These are the questions of humanity in its sufferings,

and in Job is found the answer. As he was restored, mankind will be freed from this pain; as he learned the explanation of God's ways, so will mankind be taught. The resurrection will come, and the latter end of the human race will be blessed abundantly; for, in a higher sense than Job could know of, its "Redeemer liveth, and will stand at the latter day upon the earth."

So Prometheus is the Job of the heathen—their prophecy of Christ; and this gives this drama an interest which no other can possess.

There is one other point which must be mentioned about this play, before we proceed to its actual description. It does not so much give us excitement or instruction, as imprint on our minds a figure. This is somewhat the case with "Hamlet;" it is the case with 'Don Quixote.' We rise from the perusal of such a work enriched with a constant companion: a strongly-marked character, almost a well-defined form, is stored up within our minds. So is it with the "Prometheus." Just as those who have been among the Alps may carry about with them the vivid presence of some solitary height which stands up alone and defiant in the face of heaven, its rough sides beaten by a thousand storms, and the great mountains sinking at its feet,—so those who have studied the "Prometheus" have always in their mind that exhibition of unapproachable greatness and indomitable will.

Now who was this Prometheus? He was one of the Titans of whom we spoke in the last chapter,—of the older race of gods who reigned in Olympus before Jove

and his dynasty came to the throne of heaven. Jove was supposed to have obtained his position by conspiracy against his father Saturn—an impiety in some sort justifiable, because Saturn had dispossessed his father Uranus by means not less outrageous. It is a curious question, What could have led the Greeks to rest the claims of their gods on such foundations?—but we cannot enter upon it here. Jove was aided, of course, in his enterprise, by the gods who, when he had succeeded, found places by his side; and Prometheus, at the first, was one of these. He had always been a pitying friend to the human race, and his mother Themis, or Right, had encouraged him in the hope that the reign of Jove would be beneficial to mankind. His name, Prometheus, means “forethought,” and in his love of men is implied the lesson that forethought is the source of all human happiness. Hoping, then, to confer a blessing on mankind, he had helped to raise Zeus to power, at the expense of the old gods, and the Titans, his kindred; but he was disappointed at the result. Zeus entirely neglected mankind, or even sought to depress them more and more, till he should have put an end to the race altogether. To remedy their sad state, Prometheus carried down from heaven by stealth some sparks of fire concealed in a stalk of fennel, that men might learn to forge tools and instruments, and so arts and wealth might arise upon the earth. But to use this element of fire had been the special prerogative of the gods, and they would not have an inferior race strengthened by it; fearing, perhaps, lest, so equipped, mankind might aspire to supplant them

in the empire of heaven. So their wrath was great against Prometheus, and he was regarded as the foe of the gods and the friend of the upstart tribes of men, and Zeus condemned him to be bound upon a peak of Mount Caucasus, there to linger out the long years of eternity; and all the other gods, who enjoyed their prerogatives only through his aid, joined in rejoicing over his fall. Only a few who, like himself, were victims of the tyranny of the new Ruler, were found to sympathise with his troubles.

Supplied with this knowledge, which nearly every citizen of Athens possessed, we may now take our places in the theatre under the Acropolis, and watch the play.

When the great curtain has been removed which hung over the back wall of the stage, the wild scene in which all is to take place is opened to our view. Barren craggy cliffs rise up in front and on one side, while on the other we can see down a great precipice, over lower hills and slopes, marked with the course of mountain streams, to the sunny rippling sea. This spot is a peak of Caucasus, and before we can duly estimate the scene, we must just remember what it meant to an Athenian. To us, mountains are beautiful and picturesque. We see them only in our holidays, and have not to cross them in hardship and famine; but a Greek had no friendly feeling for them. A mountain was to him only a hard cruel place, barren and ugly.* And besides the horror that attached to mountain scenes in general, we must remember that

* See, on the Classical Landscape, Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. iii.

Caucasus was the very type of all that was most remote, barbarous, inhospitable. It was a place to which no civilised man could ever bear to go; and the vivid representation of its crags must have struck horror into the minds of the spectators, and prepared them for what was to come.

The hero is led upon the scene. He is of more than human stature, and his mask represents a face of unusual dignity; while the calm resignation with which he walks to the scene of his torture contrasts strongly with the violence of those who are dragging him thither. These are two beings of superhuman strength and savage face, to whom Zeus has intrusted the execution of his decree. Their names are Strength and Force, but though their persons are two their office is the same, and one only speaks for both. With them comes the lame god Vulcan, the god of fire, for it is his office to forge the chains and bolts, and to bind the victim. Though it is his own special prerogative which Prometheus has injured, yet Vulcan is reluctant to bind a brother god, and to consign so noble a being to such a wretched fate. He walks somewhat behind the others, his heavy tramp echoing across the theatre.

When they reach the middle of the stage, Strength begins to urge Vulcan to the execution of his task. "We are come," he says, "to this desert spot of Scythia: bind the crafty trickster fast, as the Father bade thee, in adamantine bonds, that he may learn henceforth to submit to the will of Zeus, and cease from his philanthropy." Vulcan acknowledges the duty, and confesses that he durst not disobey the Fa-

ther ; but he cannot refrain from expressing his sympathy for Prometheus. "Against my will," he says,

"I fetter thee against thy will with bonds
 Of bronze that none can loose, to this lone height,
 Where thou shalt know nor voice nor face of man,
 But scorching in the hot blaze of the sun
 Shalt lose thy skin's fair beauty. Thou shalt long
 For starry-mantled night to hide day's sheen,
 For sun to melt the rime of early dawn ;
 And evermore the weight of present ill
 Shall wear thee down. Unborn as yet is he
 Who shall release thee : this the fate thou gain'st
 As due reward for thy philanthropy.
 For thou, a god not fearing power of gods,
 In thy transgression gav'st their power to men ;
 And therefore on this rock of little ease
 Thou still shalt keep thy watch, nor lying down,
 Nor knowing sleep, nor ever bending knee ;
 And many groans and wailings pitiless
 Thy lips shall utter ; for the mind of Zeus
 Remains inexorable. Who holds a power
 But newly gained, is ever stern of mood."*

Strength despises this pitifulness, and suggests that Vulcan ought to hate one who had injured him so especially ; and when the fire-god pleads the force of kindred and friendship, hints that no course is so painful as to encounter the wrath of Zeus. Vulcan bitterly regrets that his possession of the art of working in metals should have brought on him, instead of any other, so distasteful a task. This leads to a remark

* The translations throughout this play are by Professor Plumptre.

from Strength which, though not so intended, is quite in the spirit of that indignation against the tyranny of Zeus which runs through the whole play. "Every lot," he says, "has some trouble in it, except the throne of heaven: none is free but Zeus." Vulcan proceeds reluctantly to his task; and now the spectators are horrified by the actual sight of the impaling and enchaining of Prometheus; and the sound of the iron hammer rings through the theatre. Strength meantime urges on the work:—

"In thine hands take him. Then with all thy might
Strike with thine hammer; nail him to the rocks.

Vul. The work goes on, I ween, and not in vain.

Str. Strike harder, rivet, give no whit of ease:

A wondrous knack has he to find resource
Even where all might seem to baffle him.

Vul. Lo this his arm is fixed inextricably.

Str. Now rivet thou this other fast. . . .

Now drive the stern jaw of the adamant wedge
Right through his chest with all the strength thou hast.

Vul. Ah me, Prometheus, for thy woes I groan!

Str. Again, thou'rt loath, and for the foes of Zeus
Thou groanest: take good heed to it, lest thou
Ere long with cause thyself commiserate."

Vulcan begs to be spared these constant exhortations, and is moved angrily to say that the cruel words of Strength are only what might be expected from his savage face. Strength answers,—

"Choose thou the melting mood; but chide not me
For my self-will and wrath and ruthlessness."

And now the work is done ; but Strength cannot resist the temptation to stay behind and insult over his victim :—

“ Here then wax proud, and stealing what belongs
To the gods, to mortals give it. What can they
Avail to rescue thee from these thy woes ?
Falsely the gods have thee Prometheus called,
The god of Forethought : forethought dost thou need
To free thyself from this rare handiwork.”

Then the torturers depart, and Prometheus is left alone. The ring of the hammer and the sound of Vulcan's heavy tread have ceased, and for a few moments there is an oppressive silence. While his executioners were at hand, he has not uttered even a groan ; but now that they are gone, his grief breaks out, and he appeals to the only companions that are in sight,—the sun, and earth, and rivers, and distant sea. Few scenes are more striking than that of the solitary sufferer in a noble cause, left now to face alone the long years of misery that await him, with no sympathising ear to hear his lamentations. And no translation can do justice to the majestic lines in which his appeal is expressed :—

“ Thou firmament of God, and swift-winged winds,
Ye springs of rivers, and of ocean-waves,
Thou smile innumeros !* Mother of us all,
O Earth, and Sun's all-seeing eye, behold,
I pray, what I, a god, from gods endure.
Behold in what foul case
I for ten thousand years

* The reader will be reminded of Keble's fine adaptation of the figure—“The many-twinkling smile of ocean.”

Shall struggle in my woe,
 In these unseemly chains.
 Such doom the new-made Monarch of the Blest
 Hath now devised for me.
 Woe, woe ! the present and th' oncoming pang
 I wail, as I search out
 The place and hour when end of all these ills
 Shall dawn on me at last.
 What say I ? All too clearly I foresee
 The things that come, and nought of pain shall be
 By me unlooked for ; but I needs must bear
 My destiny as best I may, knowing well
 The might resistless of Necessity."

"This," he cries, "is all my reward for my goodness to mankind." Suddenly he stops and listens.—"What sound," he cries, "what fragrance is this that floats up to me? Is some one come to enjoy the spectacle of my woes?"

"Ah me! what rustling sounds
 Hear I of birds not far?
 With the light whirr of wings
 The air re-echoeth:
 All that draws near to me is cause of fear."

The preceding words had not been more remarkable for dignity than these are for their airy lightness, and for the sudden startled tone which they express. We seem in reading them to see, almost as clearly as the spectators saw upon the stage, the chorus of Ocean-nymphs who now enter, floating in the air, and hovering near the place where Prometheus is bound. Their leader tells him that they are come in friendship, to

show their sympathy, borne by the breeze from their father Ocean's halls, overcoming their maiden modesty in their eagerness to condole with him. They are as indignant as Prometheus is at the tyranny of the new rulers of heaven, and, with the enthusiasm of their sex, are even more open in expressing their indignation; and when Prometheus feels as the bitterest pang the exultation which he knows his sufferings cause to the other gods, and cries that to be buried in the depths of Tartarus, out of sight, though bound in darkness for ever, would be better than their mockery, the Chorus scarcely can believe, they say, that any god but the relentless Zeus could rejoice at such a sight. "He," they say, "will grow more and more tyrannous, till some one overthrows his power at last." "Such a time," says the Titan, endowed as he is with a god's prophetic power, "will come, and Zeus himself will then need my help, for I only know how the plot will be laid, and how he can escape it."

"I know that Zeus is hard,
 And keeps the right supremely to himself;
 But then, I know, he'll be
 Full pliant in his will
 When he is thus crushed down.
 Then calming down his mood
 Of hard and bitter wrath,
 He'll hasten unto me,
 As I to him shall haste,
 For friendship and for peace."

On this the Ocean-nymphs beg to hear the story of his offence, and, painful as it is to go over the sad

tale again, Prometheus consents to tell it. He tells how war arose in heaven, how he had helped Zeus to the throne, and joined him in the overthrow of his own brother Titans. The ingratitude of Zeus suggests a remark which was welcome to Athenian ears—a remark in disparagement of despotism,—

“For somehow this disease in sovereignty
Inheres, of never trusting to one’s friends.”

For when Zeus set his kingdom in order he entirely neglected the wellbeing of mankind, and even designed utterly to obliterate the race. “And I only,” says Prometheus, “dared to cross his will, and my present plight is the result.” After a few words of sincere sympathy from the Chorus, Prometheus goes on to describe the steps by which he had improved the condition of mortals. Especially he gave them blind hopes, to keep them from dwelling on their fate, and Fire, the mother of all arts. This is his only sin; for this is laid on him a punishment which can have no end except by the will of Zeus. The Chorus would urge him to leave off regrets and seek some remedy for his trouble; but he tells them that the consequences of his act were all well known to him, and that he did it all advisedly. He begs them to descend from their airy place and listen to the rest of his story. So they quickly alight upon the stage, form into rank, and walk down to the orchestra, chanting as they go the words,—

“Not to unwilling hearers hast thou uttered,
Prometheus, thy request.

And now with nimble foot abandoning
My swiftly-rushing car,
And the pure æther, path of birds of heaven,
I will draw near this rough and rocky land,
For much do I desire
To hear the tale, full measure, of thy woes."

No sooner have these taken their places in the orchestra than another floating car appears, drawn by a winged gryphon; and in it is borne Oceanus, the father of the nymphs who form the Chorus. He is bound to Prometheus by ties of kindred as well as by respect for his character, and he has come a long journey—from the river which bears his name, the mighty river which encircles the earth—to offer his assistance. He professes earnest friendship, and his professions are sincere; but he is too confident in his advice, and has too little tolerance for what he thinks the folly of Prometheus, to be a much better comforter than the friends of Job. Like them, he reminds the sufferer that it is all his own fault; that the same overbearing pride which he now expresses brought on him originally the wrath of Zeus, and that even now Zeus may hear his words and lay on him far heavier tortures. Prometheus is inclined to suspect the friendship of his visitor, and bids him not endanger himself in his behalf, but take his own advice and keep clear of the wrath of Zeus. Oceanus persists in his offer of help, confident that he can persuade the king of heaven to relax his anger, but still mingles reproaches with his advice, and Prometheus sarcastically rejects it. "Take," he says,

"I pray, no trouble for me : all in vain
 Thy trouble, nothing helping, e'en if thou
 Shouldst care to take this trouble. Nay, be still ;
 Keep out of harm's way : sufferer though I be
 I would not therefore wish to give my woes
 A wider range o'er others. No, not so :
 For lo ! my mind is wearied with the grief
 Of that my kinsman Atlas, who doth stand
 In the far west, supporting on his shoulders
 The pillars of the earth and heaven, a burden
 His arms but ill can hold : I pity too
 The giant dweller of Kilikian caves,
 Dread portent, with his hundred hands, subdued
 By force, the mighty Typhon, who arose
 'Gainst all the gods, with sharp and dreadful jaws
 Hissing out slaughter, and from out his eyes
 There flashed the terrible brightness as of one
 Who would make havoc of the might of Zeus.
 But the unsleeping dart of Zeus came on him,
 Down-swooping thunderbolt that breathes out flame,
 Which from his lofty boastings startled him,
 For he i' the heart was struck, to ashes burnt,
 His strength all thunder-shattered ; and he lies
 A helpless, powerless carcass, near the strait
 Of the great sea, fast pressed beneath the roots
 Of ancient Etna, where on the highest peak
 Hephæstos sits and smites his iron red-hot,
 From whence hereafter streams of fire shall burst,*
 Devouring with fierce jaws the golden plains
 Of fruitful fair Sikelia. Such the wrath
 That Typhon shall belch forth with bursts of storm,
 Hot, breathing fire, and unapproachable,

* The words point probably to an eruption, then fresh in men's memories, which had happened B.C. 476.—(P.)

Though burnt and charred by thunderbolts of Zeus.
 Not inexperienced art thou, nor dost need
 My teaching : save thyself, as thou know'st how ;
 And I will drink my fortune to the dregs,
 Till from his wrath the mind of Zeus shall rest."

Warned by such examples, and finding it impossible to persuade Prometheus, the Ocean-god retires. His four-footed bird is eager, he says, to be in his stall at home, and he sets forth gladly on his return through the blue path of ether.

Prometheus is alone again with the Chorus, who now express their sympathy in a beautiful ode. Tears for his lot, they say, are flowing down their tender cheeks—tears of grief and of indignation at the tyranny of Zeus. All the neighbouring regions mourn for the fall of the stately power of ancient days ; the dwellers in holy Asia, and the bold Amazons upon the Colchian coasts, and the savage Scythians, and the warlike natives of the Caucasus,—all mourn in universal sympathy. Then they speak again of the like fate of Atlas, ever groaning under the burden of the world, with whom all nature laments, as with Prometheus.

“ And lo ! the ocean-billows murmur loud
 In one accord with him ;
 The sea-depths groan, and Hades' swarthy pit
 Re-echoeth with the sound,
 And fountains of the rivers, flowing clear,
 Wail the sad tale of woe.”

When the soft sweet accents of this graceful song have died away, there is silence for a space, while we

wait anxiously for the next words of the hero. It is not pride, he says, that keeps him silent, but indignation. He had himself set these young gods on their thrones ; that is his bitterest pain—that, and the cruelty shown to men, for whom he had laboured so much. His efforts in behalf of mortals he then describes in a speech as noble for its poetry as it is remarkable for its philosophy. “ These woes of men,” he begins,—

“ List ye to these,—how them, before as babes,
I roused to reason, gave them power to think ;
And this I say, not finding fault with men,
But showing my goodwill in all I gave.
But first, though seeing they did not perceive,
And hearing heard not rightly. But, like forms
Of phantom-dreams, throughout their life’s whole length
They muddled all at random ; did not know
Houses of brick that catch the sunlight’s warmth,
Nor yet the work of carpentry. They dwelt
In hollowed holes like swarms of tiny ants
In sunless depths of caverns ; and they had
No certain sign of winter, nor of spring
Flower-laden, nor of summer with her fruits.
But without counsel fared their whole life long,
Until I showed the risings of the stars,
And settings hard to recognise. And I
Found Number for them, chief of all the arts,
Groupings of letters, Memory, handmaid true
And mother of the Muses. And I first
Bound in the yoke wild steeds, submissive made
Or to the collar or men’s limbs, that so
They might in men’s place bear his greatest toils ;
And horses, trained to love the rein, I yoked
To chariots, glory of wealth’s pride of state ;

Nor was it any one but I that found
 Sea-crossing, canvas-wingèd cars of ships :
 Such rare designs inventing (wretched me !)
 For mortal men, I yet have no resource
 By which to free myself from this my woe."

He had taught them, too, the arts of healing and of prophecy, and showed them many ways of augury ; disclosed to them the earth's stores of metal, and taught them their use ; in short, he says, from Forethought came all arts to mortals.

This speech has been closely imitated by Shelley, who has amplified it with many beautiful thoughts ; but it has lost in the change its stern simplicity, and gained instead a wonderful richness and voluptuous splendour. Still it explains our author so well that it will not be out of place to subjoin the greater part of it :

"Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes
 Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers,
 Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth, fadeless blooms,
 That they might hide with thin and rainbow wings
 The shape of Death ; and Love he sent to bind
 The disunited tendrils of that vine
 Which bears the wine of life, the human heart ;
 And he tamed fire, which, like some beast of prey,
 Most terrible but lovely, played beneath
 The frown of man ; and tortured to his will
 Iron and gold, the slaves and signs of power,
 And gems and poisons, and all subtlest forms
 Hidden beneath the mountains and the waves.
 He gave man speech, and speech created thought,
 Which is the measure of the universe ;
 And Science struck the thrones of earth and heaven,

Which shook, but fell not ; and the harmonious mind
Poured itself forth in all-prophetic song ;
And music lifted up the listening spirit
Until it walked, exempt from mortal care,
Godlike, o'er the clear billows of sweet sound ;
And human hands first mimicked, and then mocked
With moulded limbs more lovely than its own
The human form, till marble grew divine,
And mothers, gazing, drank the love men see
Reflected in their race, behold and perish.
He told the hidden power of herbs and springs,
And Disease drank and slept. Death grew like sleep.
He taught the implicated orbits woven
Of the wide-wandering stars, and how the sun
Changes his lair, and by what secret spell
The pale moon is transformed, when her broad eye
Gazes not on the interlunar sea.
He taught to rule, as life directs the limbs,
The tempest-wingèd chariots of the ocean,
And the Celt knew the Indian. Cities then
Were built, and through their snow-like columns flowed
The warm winds, and the azure æther shone,
And the blue sea and shadowy hills were seen.
Such, the alleviations of his state,
Prometheus gave to man, for which he hangs
Withering in destined pain."

—Shelley: "Prometheus Unbound."

A remarkable dialogue ensues, in which Prometheus intimates that over Zeus himself the inevitable laws of necessity have power, but that in what way they will cross his path may not yet be told, for on the keeping of this secret depends the ultimate liberation of Prometheus himself.

In the beautiful little ode which follows—an ode which Mr Plumptre has translated admirably—the Chorus express a pious fear of the power of Zeus, and dread of the effects of such boldness in speech as Prometheus has displayed. Too great, too hopeless was his endeavour on behalf of men, and grievous is its consequence; an end so different from that happy day on which, as the Ocean-nymphs sadly remember, he led as a bride to his halls their own sister Hesione. Their gentle sympathy has reached its tenderest point, and the soft music, which has held those thirty thousand Athenians enthralled, dies quietly away.

And now a new person comes upon the scene; one who, like Prometheus, is a sufferer under the wrath of heaven, the maiden Io. She wears the form of a heifer, though her face is still a woman's, and in this shape she is driven up and down the world, by the jealousy of Juno, because her beauty, by no fault of hers, had attracted the love of the sovereign of Olympus. Behind her follows a spectral form, the ghost of Argus the many-eyed, who still, though dead, drives her before him through the earth, while a gadfly, with its constant stings, adds to her restlessness. She comes upon the scene lamenting her lot, and calling upon Zeus for an answer to her prayers. Prometheus recognises her at once. "Surely," he says,—

"Surely I hear the maid by gadfly driven,
Daughter of Inachos, who warmed the heart
Of Zeus with love, and now through Here's hate
Is tried, perforce, with wanderings over-long."

In answer to her surprised inquiries, the hero tells her his name and the cause of his sufferings; and she asks him, as a prophet, what the end of her own wanderings will be. He would at first conceal from her knowledge which could only give her pain, but he yields at last to her request; yet before he proceeds to the prophecy, Io herself, at the request of the Chorus, narrates the history of her past life. When a girl in her father's home, she was visited by frequent dreams which told her of the love of Zeus. Her father Inachus, on hearing of those portents, consulted many times the oracles of Delphi and Dodona, and at last was told to drive her from his doors. Reluctantly he did so; and straightway she became a horned heifer, and the gadfly came to madden her, and the giant herdsman Argus with his innumerable eyes to watch her, and even his death, by the hand of Apollo, failed to free her from his constant pursuit. And so she is driven from land to land. The Chorus bewail her incredible griefs, but Prometheus tells them that the worst is still to hear. She must yet go through the land of the nomad Scythians, and round the Black Sea's coast, to the dwellings of the Chalybes, the inhospitable race who work in iron; and thence, across the starry peaks of Caucasus to the country of the Amazons, and on through many wild regions, to the Bosphorus, whose name, meaning Ox-ford, will be derived from her journey. And this is only the beginning of her troubles. Her sufferings are grievous indeed, but death will bring an end to them; for Prometheus there is no respite "till Zeus be hurled out from his

sovereignty." The mention of this possible release occasions a dialogue in which the connection of Io's fate with that of Prometheus is gradually disclosed:—

Io. What! shall Zeus e'er be hurled from his estate?

Prom. 'Twould give thee joy I trow to see that fall.

Io. How should it not, when Zeus so foully wrongs me?

Prom. That this is so thou now may'st hear from me.

Io. Who then shall strip him of his sovereign power?

Prom. Himself shall do it by his own rash plans.

Io. But how?—tell this, unless it bringeth harm.

Prom. He shall wed one for whom one day he'll grieve.

Io. Heaven-born or mortal? tell, if tell thou may'st.

Prom. Why ask'st thou who? I may not tell thee that.

Io. Shall his bride hurl him from his throne of might?

Prom. Yea; she shall bear child mightier than his sire.

Io. Has he no way to turn aside that doom?

Prom. No, none, unless I from my bonds be loosed.

Io. Who then shall loose thee 'gainst the will of Zeus?

Prom. It must be one of thy posterity.

Io. What! shall a child of mine free thee from ills?

Prom. Yea, the third generation after ten."

Thus mysteriously is it foretold how Hercules, the thirteenth from Io, should be the means of Prometheus's freedom. Prometheus goes on, at the earnest request of Io herself and of the Chorus, to tell the rest of her wanderings and the manner of his own release. Through many strange countries she is to pass, and see many monsters—the three Graiæ, with the shapes of swans, and only one eye and one tooth between them; the three Gorgons, their sisters; the one-eyed Arimaspians who dwell by the ford of Pluto; and at last, passing the Ethiopians, she is to come to the land of

the Nile. There her descendants will found a colony. At this point Prometheus bitterly says : " If any of this is not clear, ask, and I will repeat it ; I have far more leisure than I like." To confirm his prophecy he tells her what her past wanderings have been ; how she visited Dodona, and how she gave a name to the Ionian Sea. Then, passing on to the prophecy of his own release, he tells her that in Canopus, at the mouth of the Nile, a child Epaphus shall be born to her ; from him in the fifth generation shall spring those fifty maidens who, in flight from wedlock with their fifty cousins, are to seek the land of Argos, and there each bride slay her husband, except one, who shall " prefer to be known as weak rather than murderous," and shall save her husband alive. From them will spring Hercules, whose arrows will slay the eagle which devours Prometheus, and set him free. So much and no more he will tell.

Immediately his prophecies about Io begin to accomplish themselves. The frenzy which the gadfly's bite inspires seizes on her afresh, and in a wild agony she rushes forth to renew her wanderings through the earth. The music of the Chorus is now heard again, and dancing slowly and sadly round the altar, they chant their reflections on the fate of Io ; deprecating for themselves any ill-matched love, such as Io received from Zeus ; praising the propitious and temperate union of equals, and condemning—this is quite *Æschylean*—any desire on the part of the working man for wedlock with the rich or the high-born. Such are the thoughts which Io's suffering suggests to these maidens ; above all, they dread any collision with the will of Zeus.

All that has passed—the yielding of Vulcan, the caution of Oceanus, the misery of Io—has contributed to increase in our minds the estimate of the irresistible power of Zeus, and so prepare us to admire the more the heroic resistance of Prometheus. A stronger trial of his determination is still to come. In tremendous words he foretells the certain fall of Zeus; he defies his thunders, and thinks rather how a stronger weapon than the thunder will some day be found; more violently still he asserts his certain ruin, and even now exults in its anticipation. His words have been heard in heaven. Mercury, the messenger of the gods, approaches, and bears a solemn message to the haughty Titan. The father of heaven commands that Prometheus should disclose all the details of the danger which his words have threatened. At once, and without hesitation, the answer must be given. And the answer is this:—

“Stately of utterance, full of haughtiness
Thy speech, as fits a messenger of gods.
Ye yet are young in your new rule, and think
To dwell in painless towers. Have I not
Seen those two rulers driven forth from thence?
And now the third, who reigneth, shall I see
In basest quickest fall. Seem I to thee
To shrink and quail before these new-made gods?
Far, very far from that am I. But thou,
Track once again the path by which thou camest;
Thou shalt learn nought of what thou askest me.”

Mercury threatens the extremest fury of heaven's wrath, and would persuade Prometheus not, by his

stubbornness, to incur such tortures. Taunting him with his youth and his menial service as messenger of Zeus, Prometheus openly defies the king of heaven :—

“ Let then the blazing levin-flash be hurled ;
 With white-winged snowstorm and with earth-born
 thunders
 Let him disturb and trouble all that is ;
 Nought of these things shall force me to declare
 Whose hand shall drive him from his sovereignty.”

Warning the stubborn hero of the storm and earthquake which presently will crush and bury him, and of the eagle who will then be sent to feed constantly upon his living flesh, Mercury departs, assuring him that of this suffering there will be no end, until some god shall be willing to suffer for him and go for his sake to Hades and gloomy Tartarus. This was done, according to the legend, by Cheiron ; a strange foreshadowing, as Mr Plumptre says, of the mystery of the Atonement. But of this restoration we see nothing in this play ; the rest is all darkness, and terror, and storm, through which the grand figure of Prometheus stands out with a majesty which has certainly not been surpassed in poetry. The heroism of the Ocean-nymphs, who will not leave him in this terrible hour, is only what the neighbourhood of his own heroism required. In ordinary levels of daring their conduct would be very noble ; here it attracts only a passing thought of pity : great tragic characters always carry others down in their fall. But the whole of this final passage is so inimitably sublime, even in a translation, that we cannot say another word which might mar its effect :—

Prom. To me who knew it all
He hath this message borne ;
And that a foe from foes
Should suffer is not strange.
Therefore on me be hurled
The sharp-edged wreath of fire ;
And let heaven's vault be stirred
With thunder and the blasts
Of fiercest winds ; and earth
From its foundations strong,
E'en to its deepest roots,
Let storm-winds make to rock ;
And let them heap the waves
Of ocean's rugged surge
Up to the regions high,
Where move the stars of heaven ;
And to dark Tartaros
Let him my carcass hurl,
With mighty blasts of force ;
Yet me he shall not slay.

Merc. Such words and thoughts from one
Brain-stricken we may hear.
What space divides his state
From frenzy ? what repose
Hath he from maddened rage ?
But ye who pitying stand
And share his bitter griefs,
Quickly from hence depart,
Lest the relentless roar
Of thunder stun your soul.

Chorus. With other words attempt
To counsel and persuade,
And I will hear ; for now
Thou hast this word thrust in
That we may never hear.

How dost thou bid me train
 My soul to baseness vile ?
 With him I will endure
 Whatever is decreed.
 Traitors I've learnt to hate ;
 Nor is there any plague
 That more than this I loathe.

Merc. Nay, then, remember ye
 What now I say, nor blame
 Your fortune ; never say
 That Zeus has cast you down
 With evil not foreseen.
 Not so ; ye cast yourselves :
 For now with open eyes,
 Not taken unawares,
 In Atè's endless net
 Ye shall entangled be
 By folly of your own.

*[A pause, and then flashes of lightning
 and peals of thunder.]*

Prom. Yea, now in very deed,
 No more in word alone,
 The earth shakes to and fro,
 And the loud thunder's voice
 Bellows hard by, and blaze
 The flashing levin fires ;
 And tempests whirl the dust,
 And gusts of all wild winds
 On one another leap
 In wild conflicting blasts,
 And sky with sea is blent :
 Such is the storm from Zeus
 That comes as working fear,
 In utter chaos whirled
 In terrors manifest.

O mother venerable !
O Æther! rolling round
The common light of all,
See ye what wrongs I bear ?”

During all this the storm and the thunder have been increasing, till at last the earth is opened, and Prometheus, with the rock to which he is chained, sinks into the abyss.

Our first feeling is one of indignation against Zeus, but it is not altogether the right feeling. His triumph is, after all, in accordance with the great moral laws by which, according to Æschylus, the world is governed. We, with our better morality, cannot help sympathising with Prometheus more than perhaps the poet did: we love him for his love of men, and admire his courage and high spirit. But this is partly because we do not believe in Zeus. Æschylus called that high spirit arrogance; and arrogance or excess, wherever it is found, must always appear a crime to the Greek and the artist. When a good man is murdered in the midst of excessive prosperity, we must tremble, but we cannot complain; and the divine justice will assert itself in taking vengeance on his murderer. So we must feel here rather awe than indignation, and be confident in the ultimate restoration of Prometheus, and his reconciliation with the lord of heaven. Such, at least, is the Æschylean estimate of the hero's fate; and probably, if we could see it worked out in the preceding and following plays, which have unhappily been lost, we should find it not so altogether alien from our own.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SUPPLIANTS ; OR, THE CHILDREN OF IO.

THIS play takes its name, as many do, from the persons who form its chorus. In this case these are the principal characters in the drama ; they are the "Suppliants" whose supplication is the subject of the piece.

We have seen in the "Prometheus" the unhappy Io wandering through the world, and we have heard there the prophecy of the end which was to be set to her troubles ; how she should come at last to Egypt, and there bear a son, Epaphus—"the Touch-born"—begotten by the touch of Zeus, whose descendants should form a colony at Canopus. In the fourth generation arose Belus, king of this race of exiles, and to him were born two sons, Danaus and Ægyptus. Danaus had fifty daughters, and his brother had fifty sons ; and these desired to take their cousins for their wives. The maidens, horrified at the proposal, but unable, even with their aged father's help, to resist the determination of fifty men, took flight, with Danaus himself to lead them, to Argos, the cradle of their race, the home of Io. Argos was the chief city of the

Pelasgians who then dwelt in Greece, and from their king Pelasgus the maidens sought protection. Their prayer and its success constitute the simple plot of the drama.

The legend may possibly strike us as absurd, and in particular the obvious improbability of the numbers of the cousins may seem to indicate a childish credulity in those who could receive it. It is something like the story of St Ursula and her eleven thousand companions, whose bones are still shown at Cologne; one of the most improbable of medieval legends, and the offspring of a time when there was neither power nor inclination to distinguish between what was proved and what was incapable of proof. But the Danaids are not to be classed with the martyrs of Cologne, nor the keen, travelled Athenian with the credulous medieval. Rather the obvious improbability in the Greek story is entirely in keeping with the spirit of Attic tragedy, which did not, as modern dramas do, aim at imitating the actual life of men, at being probable or like the truth, but set forth an ideal picture of a life apart from and above the real, whose impressiveness was due in great measure to its being far removed from reality.* In a colossal statue, to repeat the old comparison, it is right to represent hair and dress only conventionally, to make the locks of hair and the folds of dress all large and regular—regularity giving grandeur, and literal truth not being here desirable; so, in the tragedy before us, the large and

* See, on this subject, De Quincey's admirable essays on the Greek tragedy.

equal numbers of the cousins contribute to the solemnity and greatness of the whole, while the improbability increases that separation from the actual world, by which an event, in itself not heroic, is raised to the level of the ideal.* This consideration is necessary to a due appreciation of the poetical value of the plot, and is not at all invalidated by the fact that Æschylus only used the story as he found it. Had it been other than it was, he would probably have modified it; but if it had been other, it would not have been Greek. The story of Io was well fitted to interest an Athenian audience for two reasons: because it gave opportunity for the romance of geography in general, and because it was connected with Egypt. The naval enterprise of the Athenians had of late been greatly developed, and they were becoming by this time acquainted with many distant countries; and an interest in geography was spread even among those who had stayed at home; while yet knowledge had not advanced far enough to remove the halo which the dimness of distance throws around strange lands, or to destroy the notion that far-off countries contained wonders and monsters innumerable. Something similar was the case in England in the great times of discovery, when the Plymouth sailor told the boy Raleigh endless stories of the Great Cham and Prester John, or the wondrous wealth of El Dorado. But of all wonderful lands of monsters,

* This consideration, however, will not excuse the monstrous fable of St Ursula, in which the numbers are so exaggerated as far to pass the boundary which separates the sublime from the ridiculous.

the most wonderful was Egypt. There was no good or strange thing which was not supposed by the Athenians of that day to have come from Egypt. The gods of Greece, the letters, the philosophy, all inventions and all history, were popularly derived from the country of the miraculous Nile; and to explore Egypt was the great object of the traveller's ambition. Among the experiences of Herodotus his Egyptian researches occupy a prominent place; and any story which the priests chose to tell him about their animals or their gods, or their endless genealogies, was eagerly accepted. In the light of this fact we see why Æschylus dwelt so much in the "Prometheus" on the wanderings of Io, and traced her finally to Egypt; and we are ready to appreciate the interest with which a chorus of Egyptian girls, in the dress and character of their country, would be received on the Athenian stage. Of these there were of course fifty, as the story required; but as the usual number of the chorus was twelve, we must imagine twelve only of the Danaids as singing and dancing, while the rest remained silent, and probably were disposed in a group behind the actual chorus.*

With the entrance of these fifty Danaids the play begins. Slowly they march, with audible tramp, to the sound of their own chanting; appealing as they go to Zeus, the god of suppliants, for the protection which he especially owes them as the founder of their race. They describe in few words the causes of their flight,

* If this was part of a trilogy, the choruses of all four plays perhaps appeared here, as at the end of the "Eumenides."

and pray that their pursuers may be overwhelmed in the sea, and never reach the shores of Argos. And now they have reached the orchestra, and dividing into ranks and companies, they range themselves about the altar, there to sing, no longer to the music of a march, but in more varied strains, their prayers and lamentations. Just as Prometheus compares his sufferings with those of Atlas and Typhon, so these maidens compare themselves to Tereus' bride, the piteous nightingale:—

“As she, driven back from wonted haunts and streams,
Mourns with a strange new plaint,
And takes her son's death as the theme of song,
How he at her hand died,
Meeting with evil wrath unmotherly;
E'en so do I, to wailing all o'ergiven,
In plaintive music of Ionian mood,
Vex the soft cheek on Neilos' banks that bloomed,
And heart that bursts in tears,
And pluck the flower of lamentations loud.”

In their appeals to Zeus, here and throughout the play, the suppliants assert the sublimest truths about the one supreme God. The mystery that shrouds His ways and the certainty of His justice are their favourite themes:—

“For dark and shadowed o'er
The pathways of the counsels of His heart,
And difficult to see.

And from high towering hopes He hurleth down
To utter doom the heir of mortal birth :

Yet sets He in array
 No forces violent ;
 All that God works is effortless and calm :
 Seated on loftiest throne,
 Thence, though we know not how,
 He works His perfect will."

There is much in these songs of the Chorus that reminds us of the Hebrew poetry. They exhibit the same intermingling of general statements about the ways of God and the nature of man with particular applications to the immediate occasion, while their form closely resembles the "parallel" structure of the Jewish writings. The Chorus is divided into two bands, which answer one another in strophe and antistrophe. One band sings a stanza, and then rests while the other, in a corresponding stanza, utters a somewhat similar sentiment, repeating sometimes the same words, and always using the same metre, music, and measure of the dance. And in the "Suppliants" these points are particularly noticeable, for the chorus predominates here more than in any other of our poet's dramas. Hence it has been thought to be one of his earliest, written when the dialogue had not yet acquired its full prominence on the stage ; and even if other evidence makes this doubtful, yet certainly we have in this play a return to the older style.

But the long choric song comes to an end ; and now Danaus, who has hitherto been waiting in suppliant posture at the foot of the statues of the gods which stand upon the stage, addresses his daughters, and calls them to come and take a position near him, within the

place of sanctuary. For a host, he says, is approaching; and whether their coming be friendly or hostile, it is well to await it under the immediate protection of the gods. He warns them, too, how to bear themselves towards the strangers; to tell their tale simply and modestly;

“And be not prompt to speak
Nor full of words; the race that dwelleth here
Of this is very jealous: and be mindful
Much to concede; a fugitive thou art,
A stranger and in want, and 'tis not meet
That those in low estate high words should speak.”

Then they all ascend to the stage, and group themselves there under the statues which decorate the temple front. The scene is a striking one. Their limbs are dark, and their robes and veils are chiefly white, though varied with rich embroidery of gold and purple, and in their hands they bear branches of myrtle wreathed about with festoons of white wool, the well-known badge of the suppliant; and as the sunshine streams in upon them, with contrast of bright light and deep shadow, the whole group stands out in intense relief of black and white, with a strange and fascinating distinctness. At their father's bidding they offer prayers to each of the great gods in turn, those “gods of contest” who presided over the great games of Greece, to Zeus, Apollo, Neptune or Poseidon, and to Hermes or Mercury, the herald and guide. These prayers are scarcely completed when the king Pelagus, with his chariot and his train, comes on the scene. “Whence,” he asks, “is this strange company,

whose dress proves them of no Grecian race? How has a band of helpless women, without guide or herald, ventured to our shores?" In return the maidens ask to whom they speak, whether to a citizen, a herald, or a prince. Pelasgus unfolds his name, and boasts the greatness of his kingdom; and tells how it gained its name of the Apian land from Apis, a physician-prophet of old, who had cleared the region of the dragons and monsters by which it had been infested. Finally he asks them to tell their story, and to tell it shortly. That they are of Argive ancestry he will not at first believe, for they resemble more, he says, the Egyptians or the Cyprians, or Indians who ride on camels, or the hateful Amazons; but in the course of a series of short leading questions and suggestive answers their true connection with Argos is explained.

On hearing the causes of the maidens' flight, the king is reluctant to incur, as he must by protecting them, the dangers of a war with Ægyptus and his sons; while, on the other hand, he fears the anger of the gods if he should neglect the sacred claim of the suppliants. And so he trembles when he sees the branches and the woollen fillets with which the shrines are decked. But religion is to prevail over fear. The two bands of the Chorus sing each in turn an appeal to his piety and generosity, and after each the king replies. At first he only expresses his hope that no evil may come upon his land through their request; then he reminds them that it is for the whole state, not for himself alone, to answer them; soon he acknowledges that he cannot willingly consent to

reject them. The appeal is continued. The king urges objections. "What if the suitors have some legal claim upon them? What if his people condemn his clemency, and say that he prefers the interest of foreigners to that of his own subjects?" But it gradually becomes evident that his inclination is to yield, so terrible is the risk of provoking the suppliants' god. Loss of wealth may be repaired by Zeus the giver; malicious words, if the people were offended, a soft answer might appease; but if he should incur, for himself and his people, any stain from the blood of suppliants abandoned, and those suppliants, too, a kindred race, that pollution many sacrifices could scarcely expiate. One more argument remains, a threat so horrible that it is only dimly and gradually unfolded. If Pelasgus refuses their request, the desperate maidens will destroy themselves at the very shrines of the gods, will hang themselves by their girdles to the statues, and so lay the whole land under an intolerable pollution. Pelasgus resists no longer. "Lo then!" he says—

"Lo then! in many ways sore troubles come.
A host of evils rushes like a flood;
A sea of woe none traverse, bottomless,
This have I entered; haven is there none,
For if I fail to do this work for you,
Thou tellest of defilement unsurpassed;
And if for thee against Ægyptos' sons,
Thy kindred, I before my city's walls
In conflict stand, how can there fail to be
A bitter loss, to stain the earth with blood
Of man for woman's sake? And yet I needs

Must fear the wrath of Zeus, the suppliant's god ;
 That dread is mightiest with the sons of men.
 Thou then, O aged father of these maidens,
 Taking forthwith these branches in thine arms,
 Lay them on other altars of the gods
 Our country worships, that the citizens
 May all behold this token of thy coming ;
 And about me let no rash speech be dropped,
 For 'tis a people prompt to blame their rulers.
 And then perchance some one, beholding them
 And pitying, may wax wrathful 'gainst the outrage
 Of that male troop, and with more kindly will
 The people look on you ; for evermore
 All men wish well unto the weaker side."

Danaus expresses the thanks of his daughters, and goes forth, attended by an escort given him by the king, to seek the other altars and appear as a public suppliant before the citizens. Meanwhile the Chorus are bidden to leave the shrine, and await in a neighbouring glade their father's return. Being thus removed from the consecrated spot, in which they were safe at least for the time, they begin to mistrust the goodwill of the king, and think themselves betrayed ; but he reassures them thus :—

" Nay, no long time thy sire will leave thee lorn ;
 And I, all people of the land convening,
 Will the great mass persuade to kindly words ;
 And I will teach thy father what to say.
 Wherefore remain, and ask our country's gods,
 With suppliant prayers, to grant thy soul's desire ;
 And I will go in furtherance of thy wish :
 Sweet Suasion follow us, and Fortune good."

The opening of their new supplication is striking. They appeal to Zeus by his old love for Io, their mother :—

Strophe.

“ O King of kings, and blest
Above all blessed ones,
And power most mighty of the mightiest !
O Zeus, of high estate !
Hear thou and grant our prayer !
Drive thou far off the wantonness of men,
The pride thou hatest sore,
And in the pool of darkling purple hue
Plunge thou the woe that comes in swarthy barque.”

Antistrophe.

“ Look on the women’s cause ;
Recall the ancient tale
Of one whom thou didst love in time of old,
The mother of our race :
Remember it, O thou
Who didst on Io lay thy mystic touch.
We boast that we are come
Of consecrated land the habitants,
And from this land by lineage high descended.”

There follows a description of Io’s life and wanderings, with the same fulness of geographical learning which we have noticed before, and the same revelling in euphonious and romantic names. The origin of the Egyptian settlement is told again ; and the ode ends with another solemn acknowledgment of the greatness of Zeus, such as might almost come from the Book of Psalms itself :—

Strophe.

“ Which of the gods could I with right invoke
 As doing juster deeds ?
 He is our father, author of our life,
 The king whose right hand worketh all his will,
 Our line's great author, in his counsels deep
 Recording things of old,
 Directing all his plans, the great work-master Zeus.”

Antistrophe.

“ For not as subject sitting 'neath the sway
 Of strength above his own,
 Reigns he subordinate to mightier powers ;
 Nor does he pay his homage from below
 While one sits throned in majesty above ;
 Act is for him as speech,
 To hasten what his teeming mind resolves.”

And now Danaus returns to say that the people have decided, and his eager hearers learn with joy that the decree is entirely in their favour. In full assembly, the air rustling with the eager raising of their hands—the sound which the Athenians knew so well in their own popular assemblies—all have unani- mously assented to the reception of the strangers. Full rights and protection are accorded them, and any citizen who should refuse them his assistance, in case of any assault from their enemies, is declared degraded and outlawed. “ All this,” says Danaus, “ the Pelasgians have decreed ; but it all comes from Zeus.” With pious gratitude the successful suppliants chant,—

“ Come, then, come, let us speak for Argives
 Prayers that are good for good deeds done ;

Zeus, who o'er all strangers watches,
May he see with his praise and favour
The praise that comes from the lips of strangers,
And guide in all to a faultless issue."

The prayer that follows must have been, as a poetical and musical masterpiece, the most interesting portion of the play. We can well imagine, remembering the prayers in some of the most beautiful modern operas, what a hush of admiration must have come over the great theatre when its solemn stanzas were chanted. And if, as some suppose, the play had a political character, and was intended to promote goodwill towards Argos, and advocate an alliance with that city, a double interest must have attached to this chorus. "Never may war," such is the burden of the strain, "reap his sad crop in these fields of the merciful and pious; nor ever pestilence nor civil strife strew them with native blood: but let old piety ever dwell here, and the favour of heaven make the earth fruitful with corn and herds; and may songs of joy rise ever here from holy lips."

Strophe.

"And may the rule in which the people share
Keep the State's functions as in perfect peace,
E'en that which sways the crowd,
Which sways the commonwealth
By counsels wise and good;
And to the strangers and the sojourners
May they grant rights that rest on compacts sure,
Ere war is roused to arms
So that no trouble come!"

Antistrophe.

“And the great gods who o’er this country watch,
 May they adore them in the land they guard,
 With rites of sacrifice
 And troops with laurel-boughs,
 As did our sires of old!
 For thus to honour those who gave us life,
 This stands as one of three great laws* on high,
 Written as fixed and firm,
 The laws of right revered.”

When these prayers are ended their father warns them that he has serious tidings to announce, and begs them not to fear. From his high position he can see the ship which brings their pursuers; and as he speaks it becomes more and more clearly visible, till the sails are furled, and the vessel approaches the shore with oars alone. Danaus encourages his daughters to be confident in the protection promised them, and to be sure that the vengeance of heaven will follow their persecutors. In short broken strains the Chorus express their fears and their abhorrence of the sons of Ægyptus, who regard not the gods of sanctuary, and may have recourse to violence before Pelasgus has had time to succour his suppliants. “There is yet time enough,” the father replies, “to rouse the Argives: to anchor in a harbourless country and to get ashore is not the work of a moment, especially when night, as now, is drawing on; and we must not

* The “three great laws” were those ascribed to Triptolemus: To honour parents, to worship the gods with the fruits of the earth, to hurt neither man nor beast.”

distrust the gods, to whom we have appealed." And so he goes away to arouse the city, and the Chorus are left alone. Fain would they find a hiding-place, but there is none. Fain would they be like the smoke that rises up into the clouds of Zeus and vanishes, or like the dust that passes out of sight. Any form of death were welcome, rather than this hateful marriage. "Ah!" they say,—

"Ah! might I find a place in yon high vault
Where the rain-clouds are passing into snow,
Or lonely precipice,
Whose summit none can see,
Rock where the vulture haunts,
Witness for me of my abysmal fall,
Before the marriage that will pierce my heart
Becomes my dreaded doom."

And the answering band replies:—

"I shrink not from the thought of being the prey
Of dogs and birds that haunt the country round,
For death shall make me free
From ills all lamentable;
Yea, let death rather come
Than the worse doom of hated marriage-bed.
What other refuge now remains for me,
That marriage to avert?"

And still they appeal to God, "whose eyes look upon the thing that is equal," without whom nothing comes to the children of men. Their appeal is interrupted by the arrival of a herald who comes on behalf of the sons of Ægyptus, to command the Danaids to

embark immediately in their ship with them. The complaints and prayers of the Chorus are now mingled with the haughty orders of the herald. They refuse ; he threatens force ; they cry, and call upon the gods, and imprecate bitter curses upon their ravishers, but all in vain ; the herald seizes their leader to drag her by her hair towards the ship. At this point the king with his train appears, and indignantly demands an account of this outrage. The herald protests that he is only asserting a legal claim, and is prepared to justify it by war. The king replies, that if he can persuade the maidens to accompany him, he may take them, but that no constraint shall be put upon them. "Here," he says, "the nail is fixed." The decree is unchangeable, and the herald is peremptorily dismissed. "The Greeks," says the king, "will be more than a match for the Nile ; wine and bread are better than barley-beer and byblus-fruit, the food of the Egyptians." Then, turning to the maidens, he offers them safe dwellings in the city—whether they prefer to live among others in the public palaces, or to dwell apart with their attendants ; and they refer the choice to their father, who is now returned with a force of soldiers. His answer is wise and fatherly, but a little reminds us of the somewhat tedious wisdom of Polonius. "Men are apt," he says, "to find fault in foreigners, and young girls especially must beware of the least breath of scandal ; the safer course must be theirs, to dwell apart in maidenly modesty."

And now all the action of the play is ended, and nothing remains but the final ode. Divided into two

bands, the Danaids sing good wishes for their new country. No longer is the Nile to claim their praise,—

“Nay, but the rivers here, that pour calm streams through
our country,
Parents of many a son, making glad the soil of our meadows,
With wide flood rolling on in full and abounding riches.”

Then they are somewhat divided in their words: the one band can only repeat its fears of their hateful pursuers, and finds all love and marriage henceforth odious; while the other half of the Chorus is anxious rather not to disparage the divinity of the Cyprian goddess, and looks forward yet to happy wedlock. Yet both unite in speaking well of Aphrodite:—

Semichorus A.

“Not that our kindly strain does slight to Cypris immortal,
For she, together with Hera, as nearest to Zeus is mighty,
A goddess of subtle thoughts she is honoured in mysteries
solemn.”

Semichorus B.

“Yea, as associates too with that their mother beloved
Are fair Desire and Suasion, whose pleading no man can
gainsay;
Yea, to sweet Concord too Aphrodite’s power is intrusted,
And the whispering paths of the Loves.”

And so, with good hopes for the issue of the trial which yet remains finally to decide their case, the play concludes. This trial probably formed the subject of a succeeding piece.

The motive which predominates in this play is one with which moderns, at least in civilised countries, are not familiar. The claim which any fugitive was supposed to possess on the protection of those to whom he might address himself, naturally ceases to be acknowledged when the improvement and extension of law guarantee safety to all who deserve it, and take out of the hands of private individuals the punishment of those who do not. A suppliant in England nowadays would be at once referred to the law to be protected from wrong or punished for fault. But when law could not do these things, but left the inflicting of punishment in great measure to the offended person, or, in the case of murder, to the relatives of the dead, it was obviously the interest of every man, as well as his duty, to accord to others that protection which he might some day need for himself. Especially in the case of accidental or justifiable homicide the protection of private men was necessary to the slayer, and took the place occupied among the Jews by their cities of refuge. And when the case was such as could be tried at law, it was only by private protection that the accused was preserved from his accuser until the matter could be legally decided. It is clear, then, that in such times the acknowledgment of the suppliant's claim was necessary to society. Being so, it was invested with a religious sanction. The temples of the gods were the natural refuges, since in so holy a spot a man could not be killed without defilement; and hence the gods themselves were believed to befriend the suppliant. And then to fulfil this special function a

special person or a special form of the supreme God was believed to exist, and "Zeus of Supplication" was added to the list of deities. In just the same way "Zeus of Hospitality" enforced the duty, then so important, of receiving those who, in the absence of inns, could find no other resting-place. And how tremendous was the authority of these deities the play before us shows.

But both these duties lose their relative importance as civilisation advances. They were losing it even when Æschylus wrote; and here, as well as elsewhere, we may see him lingering affectionately about the traces of past times and creeds, and investing with picturesque solemnity ruins which he could not restore.

CHAPTER V.

THE PERSIANS.

“THE PERSIANS” was not produced until six or seven years after the events which it celebrates; and this was perhaps an advantage. For no great event can easily be regarded as an entire whole until some time after its occurrence. Details are at first too prominent; personal or local interests have not yet sunk down into their proper relative importance: it is not fully seen, until later, what was the true beginning and source of the main action, nor when it can be rightly said to have ended—in short, the spectator is too close to the object to see it as a whole, and to grasp the principle of its structure. Now it is the very essence of all tragedy that it should present a great action as a whole—in its greatness, not in its complexity; and in Greek tragedy, through its shortness and simplicity, this character is especially marked. Further, we have seen that the Greek dramatist contemplates an action as part of a course of divine providence; sets it, that is, in its true light as a moral result, and traces throughout it the retributive agency of heaven. Clearly this

function cannot be adequately fulfilled until time enough has elapsed to distinguish permanent effects from those which were transient, and to enable the observer, freed from the obstructions of temporary passion, to award praise and blame with justice.

With these considerations before us, we may say that Æschylus could not have produced his drama of "The Persians" earlier, without losing something of unity and certainty, and something of that distance, or half-unreality, which constitutes the characteristic charm of the Athenian tragedy.

Knowing how essential this distance from common life—this "removedness" of the scene and action—is, we shall rather wonder that the poets did not entirely avoid subjects taken from recent history, and confine themselves to

"Presenting Thebes and Pelops' line,
Or the tale of Troy divine."

And in fact the cases in which they did leave the mythological cycle were exceptional, and perhaps not often successful; though the pre-eminent importance of the Persian war made success possible here. An early contemporary of Æschylus, Phrynichus, had many years before made a great mistake by his injudicious choice of such a subject—one connected with this very Persian war itself. The war originated, as the reader will remember, in the feuds between the Persians and the Ionian colonies in Asia Minor, of which Miletus was chief. These cities had attempted to throw off the yoke of the Persians, who had long

assailed their liberties, and in the failure of their attempt Miletus was destroyed. The Athenians, as Ionians themselves, were kinsmen and close allies of these Asiatic Greeks; and the fall of their leading city was a heavy blow to Athens, especially as she had made the Ionian cause her own by that enterprise of almost incredible courage, in which her troops burnt the royal city of Sardis, and so brought upon Greece the two gigantic invasions which were repelled at Marathon and Salamis. It was the fall of Miletus which Phrynichus chose for his subject, and so far as its importance went, it was a truly tragic theme; but it came home too closely to the feelings of the Athenians—they could not bear to see the sufferings of their friends so vividly represented, the sympathy exacted was too painful, the drama too like reality; so they fined Phrynichus a large sum for breaking the rules of his art, and giving pain to his audience. Not unnaturally, when the fall of Miletus had been amply revenged, Phrynichus hastened to atone for his error by representing the triumph. He produced a drama founded on the Persian war, two years after Salamis;—as soon, that is, as it could be safely said that Persia was finally defeated. We may not doubt that on this latter occasion the Athenian audience forgot the violation of an unwritten canon of art, in their exultation at the picture of their successes; but we may be sure, at the same time, that Phrynichus was unable to give to his play the same heroic and ideal greatness which we find in that of Æschylus.

We have said that the paramount importance of the Persian war made it a fit subject for tragedy, and we

need not here enlarge upon the causes and signs of that importance; we will point now to another fact by which its case differed from most other events of contemporary history. This fact is the comparative ignorance of the manners and character of the Persians which still prevailed among the Greeks. The enormous size of their armies, their boundless wealth and luxury, their barbarous tongues and dark faces,—these, exaggerated to still greater proportions in the popular imagination, produced an impression of dim and indefinite greatness, not unlike that in which the mist of time veiled the heroes of mythology. How fully aware the poet was of this is amply shown by his manner of dealing with the subject. He has kept as far as possible from familiar names and places; his hero is not the victorious Greek, but the defeated Persian king; the scene is not the battle-field,—not Marathon, or Thermopylæ, or Salamis,—but the palace of Xerxes, far away in the wonder-land of the east; and all is treated from the Persian side. Instead of the triumph of Israel, he gives us the fears and sorrows of the mother of Sisera and her attendant ladies.

Very much, then, is gained by this treatment. Not only is Xerxes greater in his fall than even Miltiades in his triumph,—as a despot, if great at all, is greater than one leader among many can be in a free people;—but the familiar event is set in a new light, as a Persian calamity instead of a Greek success, and in a light even more flattering to the national pride of Athens.

We have spoken at length on this point, lest it

should be thought that Æschylus makes Xerxes his hero simply because tragedy requires a calamity. A sad ending is not essential to tragedy; greatness and "removedness" are.

But we must hasten to inquire at what point in the series of events the action of the play begins, and what was the knowledge of the preceding history with which the Athenian spectator was prepared. It was in the year 500 B.C., eight-and-twenty years ago, that the Ionian cities rebelled against Darius, and nearly six years later that Miletus was sacked and the revolt suppressed. The next year the Athenians had come to the assistance of their kinsmen in Asia; had accomplished a two months' march from the sea to Sardis, and insulted the Great King almost in his own house. Darius had no sooner put down the rebels in Ionia than he remembered the insolent strangers who had ventured to burn his palace; and in the year 490 B.C. he sent over the great armament under Mardonius which was to bring the Athenians in chains to Persia. Till of late their very name was unknown to him. He is said to have asked contemptuously where Athens was; a question which, in the play before us, is put into the mouth of his wife Atossa. But the unknown little state proved too strong for Mardonius, and Marathon destroyed the hopes of that expedition. This was in 490 B.C., or about eighteen years ago.

Darius bequeathed to his son Xerxes the task of subjugating Greece, and after several years spent in preparations, the young king set forth to lead against these few despised tribes the flower of all the nations

which owned his rule. The incredible numbers which the historians assign to his forces are well known; at the lowest calculation they far exceeded the greatest hosts of modern times. But wealth, when it has given birth to pride, always brings ruin on its possessor. Overweening confidence is, in the Greek creed, an insult to the gods, and cannot fail to call down their wrath. Such was the fate of Xerxes. Checked at Thermopylæ, routed at Salamis, driven home in confusion to his own shores, followed thither by losses and defeat, the Great King became a spectacle to all men of the vanity of greatness when it is not guarded by moderation. Now for five years at least the Persian power has lain prostrate at the feet of Greece, and men have had time to learn the lesson which her misfortunes teach.

Such are perhaps the reflections which pass through the Athenian's mind when he hears it announced that the next play is to be "The Persians."

The curtain rises* on a splendid scene of Eastern magnificence. It is Susa, the Persian capital, the abode of fabulous wealth, though now so humbled. The Chorus enter with the usual stately march, and with more than the usual gorgeousness of dress. They are the state councillors of the Great King, who, under the queen-mother Atossa, guard the dominions of their absent master. As they advance towards the orchestra they sing, in their processional hymn, a strain of anxiety and sad foreboding. No messengers have

* Or, more strictly speaking, "falls." The curtain was removed by winding it round a roller placed below—not, as in our theatres, above.

come from the host of late; the land is empty, all are gone to the war; and a gloomy desolation, not unmixed with apprehension, makes wives and parents

“Count the slow days,
And tremble at the long protracted time.”

The chant contains a catalogue of nobles who are gone;—a list of sounding names, diversified with picturesque circumstances, reminding us of the roll of the fallen angels in Milton, or the lists of dead warriors in Homer:—

“Amistres, Artaphernes, and the might
Of great Astaspes; Megabazes bold . . .
Artembares, that in his fiery horse
Delights: Masistres; and Imœus bold,
Bending with manly strength his stubborn bow;
Pharandaces, and Sosthenes that drives
With military pomp his rapid steeds.”

From sacred Nile and Memphis; Lycians, the sons of luxury; foresters from far inland; troops from Euphrates and golden Babylon; Mysians who wield the javelin; Mardon from Tmolus, and Tharybis and Arcteus—all are gone forth to battle, and Persia is desolate and sad.

Some have found in this opening a burlesque of Persian names intended to amuse the Athenians: we may rather regard it as showing, what we have seen before, how Æschylus shares with Homer and Milton and Scott that power over names, which is one of the surest signs, says Mr Palgrave, of high poetic talent.

When the Chorus have reached the orchestra, their

song begins with a description of the grand departure of the army, and the proud position of Xerxes, himself the most beautiful in person of all that magnificent host.

Strophe.

“ Already o'er the adverse strand
 In arms the monarch's martial squadrons spread ;
 The threat'ning ruin shakes the land,
 And each tall city bows its towered head.
 Bark bound to bark, their wondrous way
 They bridge across the indignant sea ;
 The narrow Hellespont's vexed waves disdain,
 His proud neck taught to bear the chain.
 Now has the peopled Asia's warlike lord,
 By land, by sea, with foot, with horse
 Resistless in his rapid course,
 O'er all their realms his warring thousands poured ;
 Now his intrepid chiefs surveys,
 And glitt'ring like a god his radiant state displays.”

Antistrophe.

“ Fierce as the dragon scaled in gold
 Through the deep files he darts his glowing eye :
 And pleased their order to behold,
 His juyous standard blazing to the sky,
 Rolls onward his Assyrian car,
 Directs the thunder of the war,
 Bids the winged arrows' iron storm advance
 Against the slow and cumbrous lance.
 What shall withstand the torrent of his sway,
 When dreadful o'er the yielding shores
 The impetuous tide of battle roars,
 And sweeps the weak opposing mounds away ?
 So Persia with resistless might
 Rolls her unnumbered hosts of heroes to the fight.”

Very pleasing to the Athenian is the irony which he traces here ;—the contrast between the hope and the event. Those clouds of arrows only kept the sun from the eyes of the Greeks, while the “slow and cumbrous lance” was active enough to scatter all those “unnumbered hosts of heroes.” Still intenser is the irony in the stanzas that follow—“What mortal,” they sing, “can withstand misfortune and the vengeance of the sky? Flattering at first, she falls with crushing power upon her victim : and so”—mark here the irony—“shall Persia fall upon her foes.” But there is ground for fear too. While all are away in Greece, any invader might find in Persia an easy prey. Then how would her homes be filled with mourning ; with maidens rushing in despair about her streets, lamenting for the guardians of her towers ; with wives deploring the long absence of their loves ! So the song ends with the very same strain of lamentation for a supposed calamity as will soon be raised for a real one ; when the youth, for whom the maidens weep, will be known to be absent for ever, and the matron’s couch for ever desolate.

When this chorus, one of the finest in all Æschylus, is concluded, Atossa, the queen-mother,—“the mother of the Persians’ god,”—comes upon the scene, and is greeted by the elders with the utmost reverence. She comes to seek their advice. Unquiet thoughts have for some time disturbed her, and dreams of ominous import have visited her, but especially in the night that is just past. “Methought,” she says,

"Two women stood before mine eyes
 Gorgeously vested, one in Persian robes
 Adorned, the other in the Doric garb.
 With more than mortal majesty they moved,
 Of peerless beauty; sisters too they seemed,
 Though distant each from each they chanced to dwell,
 In Greece the one, on the barbaric coast
 The other. 'Twixt them soon dissension rose:
 My son then hasted to compose their strife,
 Soothed them to fair accord, beneath his car
 Yokes them, and reins their harnessed necks. The one
 Exulting in her rich array, with pride
 Arching her stately neck, obeyed the reins;
 The other with indignant fury spurned
 The car, and dashed it piecemeal, rent the reins
 And tore the yoke asunder: down my son
 Fell from the seat, and instant at his side
 His father stands, Darius, at his fall
 Impressed with pity: him when Xerxes saw,
 Glowing with grief and shame he rends his robes.
 This was the dreadful vision of the night."

Disturbed by such a dream, the queen had gone to sacrifice to the gods, but there a new omen had presented itself—an eagle defeated by a hawk, and flying for sanctuary to the altar of the Sun. She cannot but interpret these things as portending some misfortune to her son, and she feels that on his success in war his prestige at home, and perhaps his throne, depends. By the advice of the elders, she promises to seek assistance from the gods, and in particular to pray for help to the shade of her dead husband Darius. Meanwhile she asks the old question that had so irritated Athenian pride—
 "Where, in what clime, the towers of Athens rise?"

Chorus. Far in the west, where sets the imperial sun.

Atossa. Send they embattled numbers to the field?

Chor. A force that to the Medes hath wrought much
woe.

Atos. Have they sufficient treasures in their houses?

Chor. Their rich earth yields a copious fount of silver.*

Atos. From the strong bow wing they the barbèd
shaft?

Chor. They grasp the stout spear, and the massy shield.

Atos. What monarch reigns, whose power commands
their ranks?

Chor. Slaves to no lord, they own no kingly power.

Atos. How can they then resist the invading foe?

Chor. As to spread havoc through the numerous host
That round Darius formed their glitt'ring files.

Atos. Thy words strike deep, and wound the parent's
breast,

Whose sons are marched to such a dangerous field."

In this way the queen gains some notion of her son's danger, while, by the way, the Greek spear is again contrasted with the Persian arrow, and the Athenian freedom with the despotic rule of Xerxes. Atossa is made to wonder that a free people can resist nations who are driven into battle with whips and goads, in order that the Athenian may be led to reflect that he owes his independence to his free constitution.

But forebodings are now to be converted into actual lamentation. A messenger arrives with cries of "Woe to Persia!" and briefly tells his tale—"The whole barbaric host has fallen."

* The silver mines of Laurium, in the south of Attica.

“ In heaps the unhappy dead lie on the strand
Of Salamis, and all the neighbouring shores.”

Under the first crushing force of this announcement Atossa is silent. The Chorus are loud in their cries, but the queen speaks no word; and when at last she finds a voice, she dares not utter the question that is nearest to her heart, but asks, Who is not fallen?

“What leader must we wail? What sceptred chief
Dying hath left his troops without a lord?”

The messenger answers her meaning,—

“ Xerxes himself lives, and beholds the light.”

Then comes a list of the fallen; a list as long as, and even more beautiful than, that which the Chorus gave of the chiefs in their hour of pride. It is doubtless imitated from Homer, and has some of those touches of pathos in which Virgil delights on a similar occasion.

“ Amestris, and Amphistreus there
Grasps his war-wearied spear; there prostrate lies
The illustrious Arimardus, long his loss
Shall Sardis weep: the Mysian Sisames,
And Tharybis that o'er the burdened deep
Led five times fifty vessels; Lerna gave
The hero birth, and manly grace adorned
His pleasing form, but low in death he lies,
Unhappy in his fate.”

Our sympathy is roused for the hero of Lerna, just as in the *Æneid* for Rhipeus, or Panthus,—

“Then Rhipheus followed in th’ unequal fight,
 Just of his word, observant of the right,
 Heaven thought not so.”—Virg., *Æn.* i. 426. (Pitt.)

Having mentioned a long list of the dead—yet only a few out of so many—the messenger goes on to describe the circumstances of the defeat. And here we are to have, from an eyewitness, a detailed account of the fight at Salamis. The poet had best be accurate and impartial, for half his audience were present there, and any error will be promptly noticed.

“In numbers, the barbaric fleet
 Was far superior: in ten squadrons, each
 Of thirty ships, Greece ploughed the deep; of these
 One held a distant station. Xerxes led
 A thousand ships; their number well I know;
 Two hundred more and seven, that swept the seas
 With speediest sail: this was their full amount.
 And in the engagement seemed we not secure
 Of victory? But unequal Fortune sunk
 Our scale in fight, discomfiting our hosts.”

And even Atossa is constrained to say;

“The gods preserve the city of Minerva:”

and the messenger replies;—

“The walls of Athens are impregnable,
 Their firmest bulwarks her heroic sons!”

How the Athenian audience must have cheered!

The description which follows gives us a more vivid picture of an ancient sea-fight than is anywhere else to be found. It is the work of a soldier who understood the tactics displayed, as well as of a poet whose eyes

were open to the outward aspect of the scene. It explains to us why there was so little distinction in those times between the soldier and the sailor. The same men who fought on land at Marathon fought on the sea at Salamis, and their naval warfare consisted mainly in hand-to-hand fighting after the ships had grappled one another; the chief aim, besides this, being to disable the enemy's ship by a blow from the armed prow, either crushing in its sides, or passing over and breaking its oars.

The messenger narrates how, by a stratagem of the Greeks, which we know from Herodotus was due to Themistocles, the Persians had been induced to surround the Greek fleet, in the belief that they meditated flight by night. Every passage by which a Greek ship could escape was carefully secured, but the Greeks did not stir. But when the day with its white steeds spread in its beauty over the earth,—

“At once from every Greek with glad acclaim
Burst forth the song of war, whose lofty notes
The echo of the island rocks returned,
Spreading dismay through Persia's hosts thus fallen
From their high hopes: no flight this solemn strain
Portended, but deliberate valour bent
On daring battle; whilst the trumpet's sound
Kindled the flames of war.”

With oars dashing up the waves, the Greeks advance to the attack, their right wing leading, and on every side the voice of exhortation is heard. “Forward, Greeks, for your homes and the temples of your gods, and for your father's tombs: all are at stake to-day!”

A Greek ship is the first to strike, and crushes in by the force of its charge the sculptured prow of a Phœnician : then the engagement rages along the whole line.

“The deep array

Of Persia at the first sustained the encounter ;
 But their thronged numbers, in the narrow seas
 Confined, want room for action ; and, deprived
 Of mutual aid, beaks clash with beaks, and each
 Breaks all the other's oars : with skill disposed
 The Grecian navy circled them around
 With fierce assault.”

The sea is hidden with ships floating keel upwards, and with wrecks and corpses. The shores are covered with the dead. The Persians take to flight, and the Greeks pursue, spearing and striking their drowning foes, “as men spear a shoal of tunnies,” with spars and broken oars ; and over the wide sea wailing is heard and lamentation, until night falls upon the scene of destruction. Worse even than this remains. For on a little island close to Salamis,—a rugged island such as Pan delights in,—Xerxes had set the flower of his nobility, that they might cut down the Greeks who would seek shelter there, or help any Persians in distress ; and all these, the bravest of his hosts, were cut to pieces before the monarch's eyes. “Bitter fruit,” Atossa cries,

“My son hath tasted from his purposed vengeance
 On Athens famed for arms ; the fatal field
 Of Marathon, red with barbaric blood,
 Sufficed not ; that defeat he thought to avenge,
 And pulled this hideous ruin on his head.”

Already the sufferers are attributing their troubles to the wanton rashness of Xerxes, and we shall see that this feeling is more and more clearly expressed as the play goes on, so that Darius, with whom the whole expedition originated, is regarded as having been comparatively cautious and sparing of his people. This is not a true view of the history. Xerxes was rather indolent and reluctant, and required much pressure before he would carry out his father's plans. Whether Æschylus was himself in error on this point, or wished to represent the Persians as forgetting the true state of the case in their distress, we cannot tell: at any rate, it is necessary to the poem that the author of the calamity should suffer by it, so that it was natural to exaggerate the rashness of Xerxes, and to contrast with it the supposed moderation of his father.

But there are more calamities still to tell. In their disordered flight some died of thirst and famine; some perished in the attempt to cross the frozen Strymon, the great river of Thrace, where "such as owned no god till now, awe-struck, with many a prayer, adored the earth and sky." A few "dragged on their toilsome march, and reached their native soil,"—few indeed out of so many.

"My visions," says the unhappy queen, "were too true; it is too late for sacrifices now to change the past, yet I will offer libations to the dead and prayers to the gods, in case there may yet be some better thing in store." Then she departs, begging the Chorus to receive her son with words of comfort.

Sad and majestic music now swells up the crowded theatre, and echoes on the steep rocks of the Acropolis. The Persian councillors begin that chorus of lamentation which was portended by their opening chorus of anxiety.

Strophe.

“Awful sovereign of the skies,
 When now o'er Persia's numerous host
 Thou bad'st the storm with ruin rise,
 All her proud vaunts of glory lost,
 Ecbatana's imperial head
 By thee was wrapped in sorrow's dark'ning shade ;
 Through Susa's palaces with wide lament,
 By their soft hands their veils all rent,
 The copious tear the virgins pour,
 That trickles their bare bosoms o'er.
 From her sweet couch upstarts the widowed bride,
 Her lord's loved image rushing on her soul,
 Throws the rich ornaments of youth aside,
 And gives her griefs to flow without control;
 Her griefs not causeless ; for the mighty slain
 Our melting tears demand, and sorrow-softened strain.”

Antistrophe.

“Now her wailings wide despair
 Pours these exhausted regions o'er ;
 Xerxes, ill-fated, led the war ;
 Xerxes, ill-fated, leads no more :
 Xerxes sent forth the unwise command,
 The crowded ships unpeopled all the land ;
 That land o'er which Darius held his reign,
 Courting the arts of peace, in vain,
 O'er all his grateful realms adored,
 The stately Susa's gentle lord.

Black o'er the waves his burdened vessels sweep,
 For Greece elate the warlike squadrons fly :
 Now crushed, and whelmed beneath the indignant deep,
 The shattered wrecks and lifeless heroes lie ;
 Whilst from the arms of Greece escaped, with toil
 The unsheltered monarch roams o'er Thracia's dreary
 soil."

And they lament for power overthrown, so many nobles and rulers lost, not without implying that the power of Xerxes himself is shaken, and "his regal greatness is no more."

Atossa returns: this time she comes without her queenly train, and bears the offerings which are to call Darius from the dead. The list of them is graceful and pathetic. We may notice here again how *Æschylus* shares with other great poets the power of moving us by these simple things; they are like *Perdita's* flowers, or the offerings "to deck the laureate hearse where *Lycid* lies."

"Delicious milk that foams
 White from the sacred heifer; liquid honey,
 Extract of flowers; and from its virgin fount
 The running crystal: this pure draught, that flowed
 From the ancient vine, of power to bathe the spirits
 In joy; the yellow olive's fragrant fruit,
 That glories in its leaves' unfading verdure;
 With flowers of various hues, earth's fairest offspring,
 Enwreathed."

The Chorus join to hers their prayers to Darius, and entreat the powers that rule the dead, and earth, and heaven, to send up his ghost into the light, that

he may show the future, and the remedy, if there be any. They praise the dead monarch, who "wasted not his subjects' blood," and with repeated cries call him from the tomb. Darius comes. The ghost rises from the ground before his tomb, like the ghost in "Hamlet," in

"That fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried *Persia*
Did sometimes march ;"

and, anxiously startled, asks what troubles are troubling the state. Like the Danish king, Darius, for all his greatness, speaks with awe and reverence of the realms from which he comes: the gods there are stern, and will not easily allow the dead to return; his time is short; the "fearful summons" will soon call him back. He hears the full story of the calamity, and attributes all to the arrogance and rashness of his son, who had dared to chain the sacred Hellespont and divine Bosphorus, and "to rise above the gods and Neptune's might." "Those who urged him on," says the ghost, "to this mad enterprise, have done a deed of ruin such as never yet was done to Persia, and have wasted the grand fabric which so many illustrious kings had raised. Greece must be attacked no more; the very earth fights for her, destroying your troops by famine and disease. The remnant who survive shall not return. In their wanton insolence they have overthrown temples and statues of the gods, and now heaven's anger is upon them. On Plataea's fields they shall lie in heaps, to teach mortals humility."

A tender passage follows, in which the father bids his wife show all gentleness to her offending son. It is not unlike the tenderness with which the ghost in "Hamlet" ends his revelations, bidding the son be gentle to his mother:—

" With gentlest courtesy
Soothe his affliction ; for his duteous ear,
I know, will listen to thy voice alone.
Now to the realms of darkness I descend."

Again the Chorus chant the glories of Darius's reign, and sadly contrast them with the present ruin, while the queen goes away to put on her most gorgeous robes, according to the ghost's command, and meet her son.

" E'en the proud towns, that reared
Sublime along the Ionian coast their towers,
Where wealth her treasures pours,
Peopled from Greece, his prudent reign revered.
With such unconquered might
His hardy warriors shook the embattled field,
Heroes that Persia yields,
And those from distant lands that took their way,
And wedged in close array
Beneath his glittering banners claimed the fight.
But now these glories are no more :
Farewell the big war's plumèd pride,
The gods have crushed this trophied power ;
Sunk are our vanquished arms beneath the indignant tide."

As this chorus ends, Xerxes, in rent robes and with disfigured face, comes lamenting upon the scene, tortured with the thought of his lost heroes, and wishing

that he had died with them. The rest of the play is but one long wail. "I have no voice," the Chorus says,—

"No swelling harmony,
No descant, save these notes of woe,
Harsh and repulsive to the sullen sigh,
Rude strains that unmelodious flow,
To welcome thy return."

They ask after all the chiefs,—after Pharnaces and Dotamas,—

"Psammis in mailed cuirass dressed,
And Susiscanes' glitt'ring crest."

And in every gloomy pause Xerxes replies that they are dead—drowned, or killed in the shock of battle.

The climax of disaster and disgrace is reached in the condition of the king himself.

Cho. Is all thy glory lost?
Xer. Seest thou these poor remains of my rent robes?
Cho. I see, I see.
Xer. And this ill-furnished quiver?
Cho. Wherefore preserved?
Xer. To store my treasured arrows.
Cho. Few, very few.
Xer. And few my friendly aids."

And the irony of the whole, and its bearing on Athenian prowess, is summed up:—

Cho. I thought these Grecians shrank appalled at arms.
Xer. No; they are bold and daring."

And so, with reiterated lamentations, the spectacle concludes.

With the Athenians, whose glory it exhibited so prominently, this play was naturally a favourite ; but it appealed also to a far wider audience. The Persian War had been the means of bringing all Greeks together in union against the common foe ; and accordingly, a play like this could not but be welcomed as an expression of the new national enthusiasm. This explains the fact that it was among those chosen by Hiero, tyrant of Syracuse, while Æschylus was his guest, to be repeated before the Greeks of Sicily ; and this also justifies the poet in leaving for once the old national heroes, Hercules and Agamemnon, to celebrate the event which, for the first time since the Trojan war, was for all Greece a common triumph.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SEVEN CHIEFS AGAINST THEBES.

THE story of Thebes and its sieges was one of the most favourite themes of the Greek poets from the earliest times. The many old chronicles in verse which recorded different parts of the history formed a continuous series, second only in popularity to that Trojan series of which the 'Iliad' was the centre. In the uncritical language of the early Greeks, all these were attributed to Homer, and to a few other names—for they are little more; so that when we are told that Æschylus called his own tragedies only scraps from the great banquet of Homer, it is not to the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' alone, but to this large collection of poetical chronicles, that we must suppose him to refer. But the dramatist cannot deal with the history of whole cities; his subjects are individuals or families. Out of all the noble names which were connected with the Theban story, the fancy of the Greek tragedians dwelt most fondly on the fate of the unhappy house of Œdipus. The terrible story is well known.

Laius the king (so runs the legend) cast out his son

Œdipus that he might die, because an oracle had foretold that the child should kill his father. But Laius did not so avoid his fate, for the child was preserved by a shepherd, and became a man; and meeting Laius one day on a road he slew him unwittingly, and came to Thebes. He saved the city from the ravaging Sphinx by guessing her riddle about the life of man, and so became king of Thebes, and husband of the late king's wife—his own mother. But at last the gods brought it about that all the truth should be revealed to this unhappy king; and when he heard it, he put out his own eyes in his despair. Afterwards his sons Eteocles and Polynices, wishing that so horrible a thing should be forgotten, shut up their father in a prison; and he in his anger cursed them, and prayed that they might divide the kingdom between them by the sword.

So they, fearing lest the gods should fulfil that prayer, determined to reign in turn, each for a year. Eteocles, as the elder, reigned first, and at the end of the time agreed on, Polynices came and asked for the sceptre; but Eteocles refused, and clung resolutely to his throne, and sent him away empty. Then Polynices went away, and came to Argos, and married the daughter of King Adrastus, and persuaded him to help him with an army to recover his kingdom. So Adrastus gave him a great host, and he came against the Thebans. And six other captains led the host with him, and he was the seventh; and each led a division against one of the seven gates.

In the besieged city the scene is now laid. Before us rises the citadel, and the citizens—among whom

enters Eteocles himself—are gathering in the square beneath. Here is a picturesque scene to begin with. Such openings are favourites in our own operas ; and the reader will remember how effective they are rendered by variety of dresses, and the signs of different trades—by rapid motion, and the hum of many voices. These gay pictures are fit introductions to a modern opera ; but the serious tragedy of Athens requires a more solemn opening. Moreover, the square of a Greek city would not supply so highly coloured, so harlequin-like a scene ; nor would the taste of a Greek audience appreciate it. They prefer the beautiful to the picturesque. Our Theban citizens come in with more order, and less animation ; their dresses are graceful in their folds, and rich in their simple colours ; and their grouping on the stage is formal and systematic, instead of studiously disordered. We are to remember that they represent the dignity of a great people, and are there not to amuse or excite us, but to enact a solemn scene in the history of a very serious world.

The Athenian audience is always interested in a crowd. Every citizen is a politician, and delights in comparing other constitutions with his own ; so that when a popular assembly in any shape comes before his eyes he is eagerly on the watch for indications of the degree of freedom which they possess, and for illustrations of his own political theories. This curiosity is consulted in the opening words of Eteocles, who begins by stating the necessity of watchfulness on the part of a ruler, the helmsman of the state, since his position is both responsible and thankless. Prosperity, he

says, is attributed to the gods, while for disasters the king is always held guilty. Much the same sentiment is expressed by an English writer :—

“Among misfortunes that dissension brings
This not the least is, that belongs to kings :
If wars go well, each to a part lays claim ;
If ill, then kings, not subjects, bear the blame.”

Only the Englishman says nothing about the gods. However, it is ill-omened to speak of disaster, so Eteocles goes on to pray that all such calamity may be kept from Thebes by Zeus the Averter. We, who are in the poet's secret, know that the ill omen is not to be so lightly put aside. The king calls on all, young and old, to come to the aid of the state, and pay to their native earth the debt due to her for their nurture. This claim of the mother-land is very touchingly urged. “Defend,” he says,

“This land, your common parent,
And dearest nurse, who on her fost'ring soil
Upheld with bounteous care your infant steps,
And trained you to this service, that your hands
For her defence might lift the faithful shield.”*

This childlike attachment to the native soil, the simplest basis of patriotism, has been generally exchanged among civilised nations for love of one's countrymen, or loyalty to the king—or has been supplanted by philosophical theories about nationality ; but even now it is curious to notice how, when a nation is strongly and deeply moved, the old simple

* The translations throughout this play are from Potter.

ideas crop up again, and we see theory and loyalty comparatively weak motives by the side of love for the waters of the Rhine, or the sacred soil of France. The old world-worn nation becomes a child again in the violence of its passion. Cicero appeals—half poetically it is true, but very beautifully—to the same feelings, when he is claiming for the state the services of its members in peace as well as war. “Our country has not given us birth and reared us without expecting from us in return some ‘nurture-fee’; she did not mean only to make herself the slave of our convenience, and furnish us with a safe shelter to be idle in, a quiet spot for our repose: she gave us birth and nurture that she might engage our best energies and talents in her own service, allowing us to use for our own private ends so much, and so much only, as might not be needed for her own.” And so says Ben Jonson;

“She is our common mother, and doth claim
The prime part of us.”

With the Thebans now the call of patriotism is most pressing. Blind Tiresias, the wise augur, has announced that this night a great assault upon the town may be expected, and against this danger every precaution must be taken. Scouts have been sent out to reconnoitre; and, even while the king is speaking, one of them arrives. He brings tidings that the prophecy of the augur is being already fulfilled. Seven great chiefs are arming, and have sworn a solemn oath over the body of a bull slain on a black-orbed shield, dipping their hands in the blood—

“From their firm base to rend
These walls, and lay their ramparts in the dust ;
Or, dying, with their warm blood steep this earth.”

And they were casting lots, when he left, for their several stations. He urges on Eteocles, as “prudent helmsman”* of the state, the duty of guarding the towers, for already

“All in arms the Argive host comes on,
Involved in dust, and from the snorting steeds
The thick foam falls, and whitens all the fields.
Even now the waves of war roar o’er the plain.”

The scout returns to his post ; and after a brief appeal to the protection of the gods, the king also leaves the scene to attend to the defences, and the stage is for a moment empty. Then the Chorus enters—a band of Theban maidens, who are going in solemn procession to offer their supplications at the altars of the gods. They enter the orchestra at once, and deploy the ranks of their little battalions, like the Egyptian Suppliants in a former play. Their song presents a wonderful intermingling of the various

* The reader will notice how constantly metaphors from naval life occur in the poets of the seafaring Athenians. The figure before us has become a commonplace in modern poetry. So Scott says of Pitt :—

“With Palinure’s unaltered mood,
Firm at his dangerous post he stood ;
Each call for needful rest repelled,
With dying hand the rudder held,
Till in his fall, with fateful sway,
The steerage of the realm gave way.”

tones which befit the inhabitants of a besieged and panic-stricken city. Fear is the predominant emotion; but from time to time martial chords break out through the uncertain strain, as they describe the sound and aspect of the attacking force; and from time to time the music sinks into the tenderest notes of pathos, as the maidens call for help on each god and goddess in turn. First they call on Mars, as god of war, to look upon his own city, which once he held so dear, on all the gods who love Thebes—

“And all ye powers whose guardian care
Protects these walls, this favoured land,
O hear these pious, suppliant strains;
Propitious aid us, aid a virgin band,
And save us from the victor's chains!”

Then they appeal to Zeus, in whose hands are all events, and to his warlike offspring, Pallas, and great Poseidon, lord of the horse and the ocean, and Venus, the mother of their race. They cry to Apollo, and Artemis the goddess of the dreadful bow, and queenly Juno; beseeching them in turn, by the crash of shields, and the noise of crested warriors, and clang of bits ringing out slaughter—by the seven champions at the gates—by the heavy rumbling of chariots, and the showers of stones that rage against the battlements—to rout these alien hosts and save the sacred city.

But the prayers of maidens, beautiful as they are, are not thought the best means for nerving the energy of the citizens and promoting the defence. Eteocles, returning, rebukes them in no measured terms; and,

as a man might who was hampered by the weakness of women in the moment of emergency, he launches out into stern condemnation of the sex—

“Nor in misfortune, nor in dear success,
Be woman my associate ; if her power
Bears sway, her insolence exceeds all bounds ;
But if she fears, woe to that house and city.

· · · · ·
War is no female province, but the scene
For men : hence ; home, nor spread your mischiefs here !”

The Greek had not that chivalrous respect for women which would insure the condemnation, by a modern audience, of such a sentiment ; and, on the other hand, their sense of proportion was offended by anything approaching to forwardness on a woman's part, or any interference with the offices of men. Their estimate of “women's work” is best expressed by the words which Thucydides puts into the mouth of Pericles : “That woman is most laudable whose name is least heard among men either for praise or blame.” In the last lines, however, Eteocles goes beyond the general Greek sentiment and practice. Both Homer and Virgil represent the matrons of a beleaguered town as going in procession to the temples, to entreat for their countrymen the protection of the gods ; and in all civilised countries the rule has to some extent been recognised, that “men must work and women must weep.” And the king soon modifies his prohibition. He orders the women to leave the shrines, but to continue their prayers in quiet by

themselves, where the sound of their grief may not increase the panic.

“My charge shall be at our seven gates to fix
Six of our bravest youth, myself the seventh,
In dreadful opposition to the foe.”

In obedience to the king's command, the band of maidens begin their prayers afresh. The first tones are soft and feminine, and exhibit, in their expressions of fear, that delicate perception of a particular phase of emotion and wonderful command of words for its description, which, even in this early period, distinguishes the Greek writers. “Care and fear,” the maiden says, “keep all rest from my heart; pressing on my inmost soul comes a crowd of anxieties, that kindles there a burning dread.”

“And as the trembling dove, whose fears
Keep watch in her uneasy bow'r,
Thinks in each rustling leaf she hears
The serpent gliding to devour,
I tremble at each sullen sound
Of clashing arms, that roars around :
With all their troops, with all their powers,
Fierce they advance to storm our towers ;
Now hurtling in the darkened sky
What does my cruel fate prepare !
Rude batt'ring stones incessant fly,
And all the missive storm of war.”

Half familiarly they argue with the gods. “Where will ye find,” they say, “a better home?” If the city is taken, it will be because the gods have left it,

as the king said earlier in the play. "The gods, 'tis said, desert a conquered town." Then they must go forth—these gods who have dwelt so long in Thebes, and gotten their shrines and favourite haunts there—they must go out to seek some other resting-place, some vacant spot unoccupied by deities, desolate, and cherished by no devoted worshippers. Gods, like men, have homes which they get to love; they cling to the people who have been kind to them, and feel uneasy in a strange abode.

"Ah, to what fairer, richer plain,
 Your radiant presence will you deign,
 These fields abandoned to the foes,
 Through whose crisped shades and smiling meads,
 Jocundly warbling as she goes,
 Dirce her liquid treasures leads,
 And boasts that Tethys never gave,
 Nor all her nymphs, a purer wave!"

Then they plead the antiquity of their city. It would be sad for so venerable a city to be cast down to Hades, and for its daughters to be dragged like horses, by their hair, through the streets, with their robes torn from about them. The cruel outrages offered to women are the most prominent feature in ancient descriptions of the sufferings of a captured town. The other features are vividly described:—

"From house to house, from street to street,
 The crashing flames roar round and meet;
 Each way the fiery deluge preys,
 And girds us with the circling blaze.

The brave that 'midst these dire alarms
For their lost country greatly dare,
And fired with vengeance rush to arms,
Fall victims to the blood-stained spear.
The bleeding babe, with innocent cries,
Drops from his mother's breast, and dies.
See rapine rushes, bent on prey,
His hasty step brooks no delay ;
The spoiler, loaded with his store,
Envious the loaded spoiler views ;
Disdains another should have more,
And his insatiate toil renews.
Thick on the earth the rich spoil lies ;
For the rude plunderers' restless-rolling tide,
Their worthless numbers waving wide,
Drop in their wild haste many a glitt'ring prize."

The chorus is brought to an end by the return of the messenger, who is now able to give a full account of the seven champions who are leading the attack. The portion of the play which follows is occupied entirely with the description of the combatants who are to meet at each gate. It combines three elements—an epic, a tragic, and a scenic.

It is a grand epic muster-roll : heroes and arms and warlike challenges are described with the pomp and circumstance of the Homeric story ; as graphic as Scott, as solemn as Milton.

The tragic element is twofold. First, through all the messenger's description of arms and shields, runs the idea of the moral conflict that is to be waged at the same time between moderation and boastfulness, between patriotism and fury ; a part and type of the

conflict which the Greek and the artist are always waging against the Oriental and the savage. Secondly,—and this is its main purpose in the play,—the description of the several champions of the foe, each in turn calling for a Theban to oppose him, leads up gradually to the last pair, when Polynices, the brother of the king, and most daring of the assailants, can be opposed by none but by the king himself. As one chief after another is named, we tremble to feel that it will soon come to this ill-fated pair, and we know what the issue will be,—

“How each will slay his brother at a blow,”—

and how their fall will “leave the land accurst,” a legacy of new troubles for the unhappy house of *Œdipus*.

Besides these, the passage has a scenic element. It is a remarkable instance of that stately regularity which we have noticed before. The messenger and the king stand together on the stage, and the Chorus is arrayed in the orchestra. The messenger describes an Argive champion; the king, in reply, describes the Theban whom he will send against him; the Chorus utters a short prayer for the success of the native champion. This is repeated seven times; the seventh being distinguished by the addition of some discussion between the three speakers, and ending in a much longer choric ode. Each of the Argive heroes is known by the cognisance on his shield, like the knights of medieval chivalry.

The first foe is *Tydeus*.

"Already near the Præcian gate in arms
 Stands Tydeus raging ; for the prophet's voice
 Forbids his foot to pass Ismenus' stream,
 The victims not propitious : at the pass
 Furious, and eager for the fight, the chief,
 Fierce as the dragon when the mid-day sun
 Calls forth his glowing terrors, raves aloud,
 Reviles the sage as forming tim'rous league
 With war and fate. Frowning he speaks, and shakes
 The dark crest streaming o'er his shaded helm
 In triple wave ; whilst dreadful ring around
 The brazen bosses of his shield, impressed
 With this proud argument. A sable sky
 Burning with stars ; and in the midst, full-orbed,
 A silver moon, the eye of night, o'er all
 Awful in beauty pours her peerless light.
 Clad in these proud habiliments, he stands
 Close to the river's margin, and with shouts
 Demands the war, like an impatient steed,
 That pants upon the foaming curb, and waits
 With fiery expectation the known signal,
 Swift at the trumpet's sound to burst away.
 What equal chief wilt thou appoint against him ?"

So speaks the soldier, and Eteocles replies :—

"This military pride, it moves not me.
 The gorgeous blazonry of arms, the crest
 High waving o'er the helm, the roaring boss,
 Harmless without the spear, imprint no wound.
 The sable night, spangled with golden stars,
 On his proud shield impressed, perchance may prove
 A gloomy presage. Should the shade of night
 Fall on his dying eyes, the boastful charge
 May to the bearer be deemed ominous,

And be the prophet of his own destruction.
Against his rage the son of Astacus,
That breathes deliberate valour, at that gate
Will I appoint commander ; bent on deeds
Of glory, but a votary at the shrine
Of modesty, he scorns the arrogant vaunt
As base, but bids brave actions speak his worth.
The flower of that bold stem, which from the ground
Rose armed, and fell not in the deathful fight,
Is Menalippus ; him his parent earth
Claims as her own, and in her natural right
Calls him to guard her from the hostile spear :
But the brave deed the die of war decides.”

Then the Chorus follows, with its prayer :—

“ Go then, my guardian hero, go ;
And may each fav’ring god with bright success
Thy gen’rous valour bless ;
For at thy country’s dear command
Thou arm’st thy righteous hand,
To pour her vengeance on the foe.
Yet my sad heart must sigh,
When on the blood-empurpled ground,
Gored with many a gaping wound,
I see my dearest friends expiring lie.”

At the Electra gates stands Capaneus, the impious, who openly defies both gods and men. He laughs at the thunderbolts of heaven, and will take the city, he says, “ whether Zeus will or no.” His cognisance is a flaming torch, and his motto, “ I will burn the city.” Against him is set the fiery Polyphontes ; and the Chorus prays that the heaven’s lightning which he defies may fall and blast him ; as, indeed, it did.

To the gates of Neis comes Eteoclus, who bears on his shield an armed man climbing a scaling-ladder, and round is written, "Not Mars himself shall beat me from the towers." Against him Megareus, son of Creon, is matched with little fear.

The giant Hippomedon attacks the gates of Pallas. Upon his vast shield appears a Typhon breathing out fire and smoke; and like one of the frenzied followers of Bacchus, he rushes shouting to the war. To face this foe Eteocles has two champions. First, Pallas herself, who,

"Holding near the gates

Her hallowed state, abhors his furious rage;"—

and, of mortal combatants, the bold Hyperbius, whose shield is a good omen of his success. For, as Hippomedon displays the Typhon, so

"Hyperbius bears

The majesty of Jove securely throned,
Grasping his flaming bolt, and who e'er saw
The Thund'rer vanquished? In the fellowship
Of friendly gods, the conquerors are with us,
They with the conquered; and with like event
These warriors shall engage. As Jove in fight
Subdued the fell Typhœus, so his form
Emblazoned on the shield shall guard Hyperbius."

Fifth, at the northern gates, a soft-cheeked youth is set—the girl-faced Parthenopæus, who has, none the less, the soul of a hero. His cognisance is no good omen for Thebes. It is the hateful Sphinx—the old enemy of the city—and she is represented as carrying a Theban in her clutches, and holding him up as a

mark for the enemy's arrows. Against him goes Actor, who will not boast, but do; "and I doubt not," says the king, "that he will keep the hateful monster outside the city, only to draw a more furious attack upon the man who carries her."

The sixth chief is Amphiaraus, the prophet, who knew from the first the fate that awaited the expedition. Even now he is rebuking Polynices bitterly for leading foreign arms against his native land.

"How grateful to the gods must this deed be,
Glorious to hear, and in the roll of fame
Shining to distant ages, thus to lead
These foreign arms to waste thy bleeding country,
To raze those princely mansions where thy fathers,
Heroes and demigods, once held their seats!"

And for himself he says:—

"Prescient of fate I shall enrich this soil
Sunk in the hostile plain. But let us fight.
One thing at least is mine; I will not find
A vulgar or dishonourable death."

The warrior-prophet alone bears no device upon his broad shield, for he

"Wishes to be, not to appear, the best."*

Eteocles enlarges on the misery of the fate that makes a righteous man a companion of the wicked, and exposes him to a share in their punishment.

* When the play was produced at Athens this line was recognised as a description of Aristides, the actor turning towards him as he sat in the theatre, and the whole audience applauding the application.

Amphiaraus, the king thinks, will not engage at all; yet the veteran hero Lasthenes is sent out to face him.

And now comes the terrible part of the messenger's announcement:—

“The seventh bold chief—forgive me that I name
Thy brother, and relate the horrible vows,
The imprecations which his rage pours forth
Against the city; on fire to mount the walls,
And from their turrets to this land proclaim,
Rending its echoes with the song of war,
Captivity: to meet thee sword to sword,
Kill thee, then die upon thee.”

His shield bears a golden figure of Justice, and the scroll—

“Yet once more to his country, and once more
To his paternal throne I will restore him.”

Eteocles recognises the fulfilment of the imprecations uttered by Œdipus himself against his sons, but he determines unflinchingly to face the issue. Never was Justice, virgin child of Zeus, a teacher or friend of Polynices, and so his arrogant motto will not restore him.

“In this confiding I will meet his arms
In armèd opposition: who more fit?
Chief shall engage with chief, brother with brother,
And foe with foe. Haste, arm me for the fight;
Bring forth my greaves, my hauberk, my strong spear!”

The Theban maidens beg their king not to incur the inextinguishable guilt of fratricide. Let Theban fight with Theban; that blood can be washed away,—

“ But death of brothers by each other slain,
That stain no expiation can atone.”

To their entreaties the king opposes the claims of honour, and he faces the curse with the courage of despair.

“ No ; since the god impels me, I will on.
And let the race by Laius, let them all
Abhorred of Phœbus, in this storm of fate
Sink down to deep Cocytus' dreary flood.”

The Chorus think that in calmer moments Eteocles will give up so wild a resolution ; but his choice is deliberate, he sees the certain ruin, and goes out unhesitatingly to meet it.

The ode which follows strikes the key-note of the piece. The issue of the war is being determined at the seven gates, and meanwhile the Chorus express the anxiety of the spectators, and show how fully the past history of the royal house justifies the gloomiest apprehensions. We give the whole ode, as a good instance of the function of the Chorus in explaining the true moral significance of an event :—

“ She comes, the fierce tremendous power,
And harrows up my soul with dread ;
No gentle goddess, prompt to shower
Her blessings on some favoured head.
I know her now, the prophetess of ill,
And vengeance ratifies each word,
The votive fury, fiend abhorred,
The father's curses to fulfil.
Dreadful she comes, and with her brings
The brood of fate, that laps the blood of kings.

The rude barbarian, from the mines
 Of Scythia, o'er the lots presides ;
 Ruthless to each his share assigns,
 And the contested realm divides.
 To each allots no wider a domain,
 Than on the cold earth, as they lie,
 Their breathless bodies occupy,
 Regardless of an ampler reign.
 Such narrow compass does the sword,
 A cruel umpire, their high claims afford.

Conflicting thus in furious mood,
 Should each by other's hand be slain,
 Should the black fountain of their blood
 Spout forth and drench the thirsty plain ;
 Who shall the solemn expiation pay?
 Who with pure lavers cleanse the dead?
 Miseries to miseries thus succeed,
 And vengeance marks this house her prey,
 Swift to chastise the first ill deed ;
 And the sons' sons in her deep fury bleed.

The first ill deed from Laius sprung ;
 Thrice from his shrine these words of fate
 Awful the Pythian Phœbus sung,
 ' Die childless, wouldst thou save the state.'
 Urged by his friends, as round the free wine flows,
 To Love's forbidden rites he flies.
 By the son's hand the father dies,
 He in the chaste ground, whence he rose,
 Was bold to implant the deadly root,
 And madness reared each baleful spreading shoot.

Wide o'er misfortune's surging tide
 Billows succeeding billows spread ;

Should one, its fury spent, subside,
Another lifts its boist'rous head,
And foams around the city's shattered prow.
But should the rough tempestuous wave
Force through our walls, too slight to save,
And lay the thin partition low,
Will not the flood's resistless sway
Sweep kings and people, town and realms away?

The dreadful curse pronounced of old
To vengeance rouses ruthless hate;
And slaughter, ranging uncontrolled,
Pursues the hideous work of fate.
Wrecked in the storm, the great, the brave, the wise,
Are sunk beneath the roaring tide.
Such was the chief, this city's pride,
Dear to each god in yon bright skies,
Whose prudence took our dead away,
The ravening monster gorged with human prey.

Where now the chief? his glories where?
Fallen, fallen. From the polluted bed
Indignant madness, wild despair,
And agonising grief succeed.
The light of heaven, himself, his sons, abhorred,
Darkling he feeds his gloomy rage,
Bids them, with many a curse, engage
And part their empire with the sword.
That curse now holds its unmoved state,
The furious fiend charged with the work of fate."

The messenger returns. The city has escaped the yoke of slavery; the boasts of the mighty are fallen; and the vessel of the state having sprung no leak under all the assaults of the wave, now rides in calm

water. But sorrow is mingled with the general joy, for the royal brothers have fulfilled their father's curse; each has slain his brother, and with them is fallen the whole race of Laius.

This sorrow far outweighs the joy, at least with us, whose interest is mainly in the family of *Cædipus*. The rest of the play, accordingly, is full of lamentation till close upon the end, when *Antigone*, the sister of the dead brothers, claims our admiration; but even she, in announcing her heroic resolution, reminds us that there are still more woes in store for this devoted house. The Chorus chant a dirge, and while we listen to its music, a long procession of Theban citizens enters across the whole front of the stage, bearing the bodies of *Eteocles* and *Polynices*; after them come *Antigone* and *Ismene* her sister, with a long train of women wailing and lamenting. As the first mourners pass, the Chorus beat their breasts and heads with regular stroke in time to the music, which here assumes for a moment, without losing its sadness, the character of those strains by which the time was set for the rowers in an Athenian galley. They are echoing the beat of the oars in that ship of gloomy sanctity,

“Built in the eclipse, and rigged with curses dark,”

which is moving now over the waves of *Acheron* to the unseen land. Then the music changes to a distinct march, as *Antigone* and *Ismene* come with their procession of women, and take their places, as the men had done, upon the stage. The corpses of the two brothers are placed in front, and the women are grouped

behind them in robes of mourning, and behind these again stand the multitude of Theban citizens. As we contemplate this grand *tableau* of sorrow, the Chorus, divided into two bands, express the general feeling. The varied music gives interest and beauty to words which in themselves are dull and monotonous. Repetition is characteristic of lamentation. The mourner has only one feeling to express, and cares little to find new words to express it; he gets little further than, "O my son, Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!" But the song ends with words of rest, though it is the rest of the exhausted storm.

" It falls, the royal house, it falls;
 Ruin lords it o'er the walls,—
 And the Furies howl around,
 Notes of shrill, soul-piercing sound.
 Slaughter reeking yet with gore,
 Raises high each gate before,
 Where they fought, and where they bled,
 Trophies of the mighty dead;
 And, the rival chief subdued,
 Ceases from her work of blood."

Then Antigone and Ismene come forward, and take up their places, Antigone by the corpse of Polynices, and Ismene by that of Eteocles; and there, in short answering cries, lament for their dead brothers. Here we see the systematic wailing of those mourning women, "the women and the minstrels making a noise," whose services were and still are constantly employed in the East. The words are nothing—it is the series of sudden piercing cries that so forcibly expresses grief.

Here the actual subject of the play could end ; but we are not only to be satiated with calamity, but to expect more ; and, what is better, the weakness of all this wailing is to be relieved by the heroism of Antigone. A herald comes upon the scene, bringing the decree of the elders of the city with regard to the burial of the two brothers. Eteocles is to be carried to the tomb with all honour, as a hero and patriot ; but Polynices, as an enemy of his country, is to be cast out, unburied, to the birds and to the dogs. Such is the decree of the Theban rulers. Antigone replies :—

“ And to the Theban rulers I declare,
 If none besides dare bury him, myself
 Will do that office, heedless of the danger,
 And think no shame to disobey the state,
 Paying the last sad duties to a brother.
 Nature has tender ties, and strangely joins
 The offspring of the same unhappy mother
 And the same wretched father. In this task
 Shrink not, my soul, to share the ills he suffered,
 Involuntary ills ; and while life warms
 This breast be bold to show a sister’s love
 To a dead brother ! Shall the famished wolves
 Fatten on him ? Away with such a thought ! ”

In spite of the state’s repeated prohibition she persists in her resolve, and goes out at once to perform it. This is the closing scene. The two corpses are carried out separately, Antigone and half the Chorus following that of Polynices ; the other half, with Ismene, that of Eteocles.

“ To those that wait the fate of Polynices
Let the state act its pleasure. We will go
Attend his funeral rites, and aid his sister
To place him in the earth. Such sorrows move
The common feelings of humanity ;
And when the deed is just the state approves it.”

Such are the words of Antigone and her friends. The other train reply :—

“ And we with him, as justice and the state
Concur to call us. Next th’ immortal gods
And Jove’s high power this valiant youth came forth
The guardian of his country, and repelled
Th’ assault of foreign foes, whose raging force
Rushed like a torrent threatening to o’erwhelm us.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE STORY OF ORESTES.

FROM the story of Thebes we pass now to Pelops' line, to contemplate there again the terrible course of divine displeasure once provoked against a family. Atreus, the son of Pelops, being wronged by his brother Thyestes, revenged himself by an act of treachery and impiety. He invited Thyestes to a banquet, in which the flesh of his own children was set before the unconscious father. The sun turned back in his course to avoid a sight so horrible, and from this time calamity never departed from that house, till an expiator was found in the person of Orestes. Agamemnon, who led the Greeks to Troy to revenge the injury of his brother Menelaus, was son of this impious Atreus. While he was waging war for ten years in Asia, his wife, Clytemnestra, was unfaithful to him, and admitted into his palace one Ægisthus, the son of the outraged Thyestes, who was destined bitterly to avenge his father's wrong upon the house of Atreus. The guilty pair determined to murder Agamemnon on his return, for both were afraid to

face him ; and Clytemnestra had, besides, this charge against him, that he had sacrificed her daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis, whose wrath had kept the whole Grecian fleet becalmed at Aulis. Moreover, Agamemnon too was found unfaithful, for he brought with him Cassandra, the inspired daughter of Priam, to be his concubine. And so Agamemnon died, and Clytemnestra and Ægisthus reigned in Argos ; but Orestes, son of Agamemnon, when he became a man, was charged by Apollo to avenge the murder of his father. And he obeyed, and killed both Ægisthus and his mother. Then the dark deities who pursue impious murderers drove the matricide in misery from land to land, until at last his cause was tried, and Apollo pleaded for him before the high court of Areopagus at Athens, and Minerva, the patron goddess of the city, gave the casting-vote that set him free. And so at last the curse was put away, and the Furies, who had been cruel powers, became beneficent, and a temple was assigned to them in Athens, and they were called the Kind Ones.

Such are the outlines of the story. In the "Agamemnon" is represented the death of the king ; in the "Choe-phori," the vengeance of Orestes ; in the "Eumenides," his trial and deliverance ; the three plays thus forming one connected whole, or Trilogv. Since this Trilogv is universally regarded as one of the greatest works of human art, while some perhaps would admit no rival to it, we must try at the outset to show in what direction the features of its greatness are to be looked for.

Perhaps we do not sufficiently remember how real a person Agamemnon was to the Athenian audience. In Homer's verses, which were constantly in their mouths, he lived and moved as a familiar figure; they never doubted that he was all that Homer made him, chosen captain of the whole Grecian hosts, the first man in Greece (and Greece was the world), "the king of men." And here we are to see him in the hour of his triumph, the representative of Greece victorious over the barbarian world. And as the actors, from the first, are heroes great from their fame and position, so, as the play goes on, the action is caught up into the hands of the gods themselves, and we are admitted to see and hear Apollo, and Minerva, and the Furies. But this greatness of fame and position is something merely outward,—it serves to create a prejudice in favour of the persons, to insure attention to all they do or say; but their real greatness lies, of course, in their characters as depicted by the poet. In this direction we shall have to look for one of the chief elements of sublimity: in the force of intellect exhibited by the actors; the intensity—not violence, but restrained intensity—of the emotions expressed; and the strength of the wills which are shown conflicting. But even more than in the characters we must look for greatness in the action. There again there is an outer and an inner side. The mere death of Agamemnon is a tremendous event. "Kill a king, said'st thou?" A king in the old heroic days, when a real divinity hedged him round? The king of men himself? —

“ The cease of Majesty
Dies not alone ; but like a gulf, doth draw
What’s near it with it ; it is a massy wheel
Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortised and adjoined ; which when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
Did the king sigh, but with a general groan.” *

And the death of Clytemnestra and Ægisthus is a tremendous act of vengeance. A similar act forms the plot of one of Shakespeare’s greatest plays ; for Orestes is a Greek Hamlet, as Clytemnestra is the Greek Lady Macbeth. And in the last of the three plays the actions are important indeed. The solemn foundation of the Areopagus to be for ever a high court in Athens, the establishment of the Eumenides as guardians of the city, and the conducting of them with solemn pomp to their temple, were events, at least to an Athenian, of overpowering interest. But this is only the outside. The real plot consists in the course of divine providence, the working out of moral laws ; and the unity of the whole Trilogy is best seen when we trace this plot throughout it. The veil is drawn aside which hides the dark forms of Erinnys and Atè from men’s eyes as they scowl upon the sinner and dog his steps ; as they stir up the powers that punish, or in their anger rear the fell brood of arrogance and impiety in their victim’s home. And we are admitted, too, to see the conflict

* “Hamlet,” Act iii. sc. 3.

between the bright gods of day and the powers of darkness; we are taught why men suffer, and how they may be healed. In the inner moral significance of the plot, then, we must look for the chief element of greatness. Nor is it fanciful to regard the play in this way, as if we were seeking for allegory or mystical interpretations; for the poet clearly treated his subject so, and meant his audience to receive it. The moral meaning of events is traced continuously, and openly expressed.

The reader will be able to judge for himself of the value of the answer which Æschylus gives to the great question of the origin of evil. How far does his solution fail in the several points which it attempts? Does it correspond with the facts? Does it justify God? Does it cheer man? Out of the depth of heathen darkness, from among the idols and the impure rites of pagan Greece, there comes up a gleam of light—light of explanation, light of reproof, light of encouragement. What is it worth? Does it seem to be a faint remnant of some old revelation, diluted, refracted, discoloured, but still a remnant of the truth? Or is it a spark of promise—a beginning which is to burst into fuller light some day? This question is surely most important. If we consider how much modern Europe owes to these Greeks who applauded Æschylus, we cannot but inquire with the deepest interest into the degree and character of their moral enlightenment. And on this point no information is more valuable than that which the tragedians give us; and this Trilogy is, of all tragedies, the most instructive.

Once more, to consider the main drift of these plays.

We are so much accustomed to regard each man as responsible for his own sins, and these only, that we are inclined to forget how much is to be said for a different view—to forget that children bear the iniquity of their parents. Now here is a nation full of the joy of life, and full also of careful and wondering reflection—just like a child, in fact, in both; and this nation gives us—or one of its greatest minds gives us—as its experience, that a man is not entirely responsible for his own deeds, but is impelled by temptation which comes on him in punishment of his father's crimes. The moral unit, so to speak, is a house, not a man. A family sins, and a family is punished. The gods then are just, though their course of action presses hardly on the individual. But where is the hope? The Prometheus and the Eumenides seem to give it. On the one hand, suffering at last expiates, and vengeance can be satisfied; on the other hand, a constant and conscientious pursuit of duty may obtain remission. These two points are shown thus. When Orestes is set free, not only has the house of Pelops suffered enough to satisfy the justice of the gods, but Orestes, by his careful execution of all divine commands, has been the means of carrying out the divine will, and restoring, as it were, the moral balance. He has awarded to each his exact due, whether of punishment or respect; he has given to piety and to vengeance their right proportion; and when the balance is restored, nothing is wanting except certain ceremonies to complete his expiation.

Now we may think what we will about the right-

ness or wrongness of this view of morals, but we are compelled to notice, with respect as well as pity, that the Greeks, our teachers, once thought thus; and to consider how dismal was the state of a man who ever feared that some Fury, resistless and malignant, was urging him to a ruin which he could not but rush into. How little hope the individual could draw from his confidence that in the end all would come right, seeing that, although the race might be restored, the individual was to perish by the way!

But the sadder all this is the fitter it is for tragedy; and if we have in any degree realised it, we shall the better see the terrible grandeur of the powers which Æschylus shows us at work in Clytemnestra and Agamemnon.

But let us go into the theatre and see it all for ourselves. First comes the "Agamemnon"—the "Macbeth of antiquity," as Milman calls it; "as noble a tragedy," says Professor Wilson, "as ever went sweeping by across the floor of a stage."

The busy conversation of the crowd is hushed, the curtain is removed, and the play begins. A stately palace, built of vast stones, such as were

" Piled by the hands of giants
For godlike kings of old,"

forms the background of the scene; and upon a lonely tower on its outer wall a watchman lies, resting on his arm, and "looking forth into the night." For ten long years he has watched there, with his eyes towards Troy; for Agamemnon had promised, when he went

away, to send, as soon as Troy should fall, a message of beacon-fires to tell the good news to his wife in Argos. The watchman has hardly spoken before we feel, from his weariness, how long the war has lasted, and how long Clytemnestra's faithfulness has been tried. Night after night he has watched the stars, and passed the damp cold hours in sleepless weariness, striving at times to beguile his loneliness with song; but at all such times gaiety has been driven away—by what?

“Still, as I strive to guile the unquiet night—
Sad remedy!—with song or carol gay,
I can but weep and mourn this fatal house,
Not as of old with righteous wisdom ruled.”*

While he is speaking, far away out on the right of the stage a bright flame shoots up: it is the beacon's blaze. “All hail,” the watchman cries,—

“All hail, thou glory of the night! that blazest
With noon-day splendour, wakening Argos up
To dance and song for this thrice-blest event!”

He will go to tell the queen of the good news,—good news, and yet,—

“But peace! no more! the seal is on my lips!
The palace' self, could it but find a voice,
Would speak from its dark walls! To the understanding
I speak; to those who understand not—nothing.”

Already we begin to fear that some storm is coming.

* The translations throughout the “Agamemnon” are by Dean Milman.

The watchman is gone, and the Chorus, twelve old Argive senators, troop in and take their place. No sounds of all that we have heard in the preceding plays seem to equal the grandeur of this half-triumphant, half-desponding song. The Greek fleet sail forth proudly, led by the "twin-throned, twin-sceptred pair," Menelaus and Agamemnon,—

"And loud and fierce their battle-clang,
Like screams of angry vultures rang,"

as they go, heaven-sent, to punish Paris, and bring alike on Greece and Troy

"Many a wild and wearying strife,
With failing knees bowed to the dust,
And lances shivering in their onward thrust."

Then the sad prophetic note is struck again:—

"But be the issue as it may,
Eternal fate will hold its way;
Nor lips that pray, nor eyes that weep,
Nor cups that rich libations steep,
Soothe those dark Powers' relentless ire,
Whose altars never flame with hallowed fire."

And now the whole city is seen ablaze with the fires of sacrifice, and the Chorus guesses that Clytemnestra has received the long-wished-for tidings. While they wait, eager to hear if this be so, their song takes up the story of the journey of the fleet to Troy.

An awful portent had appeared on the way to the two monarchs. Two eagles, while the host was starting, were seen close by the palace, preying on a hare,

the favourite of Artemis. And Calchas, the seer, read the omen thus: "Troy will fall before the sons of Atreus, but a shade hangs over their proud array, for Artemis is angry at the eagles' feast;" and though the prophet prayed that the omen might be averted, yet the gloomy burden peals out startlingly:—

"Ring out the dolorous hymn, yet triumph still the good!"

Calchas prayed that the injured goddess might not in anger delay the fleet, and force upon the chiefs

"That other sacrifice—

That darker sacrifice, unblest

By music or by jocund feast:

Whence sad domestic strife shall rise,

And, dreadless of her lord, fierce woman's hate;

Whose child-avenging wrath in sullen state

Broods, wily housewife, in her chamber's gloom,

Over that unforgotten doom.

Such were the words that Calchas clanged abroad,
When crossed those ominous birds the onward road

Of that twice royal brotherhood:

A mingled doom

Of glory and of gloom.

Ring out the dolorous hymn, yet triumph still the good!"

Ominous, indeed, is the starting; and the mind, oppressed with apprehension, turns to think of the holy powers that govern all these things. Zeus it is who rules unrivalled. Two dynasties of gods have fallen before him; and still his lesson to mortals is, "Learning through Sorrow." Dark and sad it all seems

now, and wisdom when it comes will be the wisdom of remorse.

The fears of Calchas were too well founded. On Chalcis' coast, by Aulis' rock-bound shore, winds came that kept the fleet in unwelcome rest, and famine and weariness wasted the strength of Greece. At last the seer spoke out in the name of Artemis, and called for a virgin's blood, the blood of Iphigenia. It was a hard choice for Agamemnon,—

“Dire doom ! to disobey the Gods' commands !
More dire, my child, mine house's pride, to slay,
Dabbling in virgin blood a father's hands.”

But necessity is overpowering,—

“So he endured to be the priest
In that child-slaughtering rite unblest,
The first-fruit offering of that host
In fatal war for a bad woman lost.
The prayers, the mute appeal to her hard sire,
Her youth, her virgin beauty,
Nought heeded they, the Chiefs for war on fire.
So to the ministers of that dire duty
(First having prayed) the father gave the sign,
Like some soft kid, to lift her to the shrine.

There lay she prone,
Her graceful garments round her thrown ;
But first her beauteous mouth around
Their violent bonds they wound,
Lest her dread curse the fated house should smite
With their rude inarticulate might.
But she her saffron robe to earth let fall :
The shaft of pity from her eye

Transpierced that awful priesthood—one and all.

Lovely as in a picture stood she by
As she would speak. Thus at her father's feasts
The virgin, 'mid the revelling guests,
Was wont with her chaste voice to supplicate
For her dear father an auspicious fate."

At the end of this sad story the Chorus cease. This omen was but too true; yet it is no gain, they say, to know the future—it is only antedating sorrow. Yet may better days come now.

Such hopes are little better than forebodings.

That beautiful picture of the death of Iphigenia has been the theme of many poets. Euripides has a tragedy upon it—the "Iphigenia in Aulis;" and among the Romans, Lucretius has described it finely, translating and almost improving the two tragedians, as an instance of the evils to which religion has prompted men; and Tennyson has drawn the whole in a few lines with intense vividness, in his "Dream of Fair Women."

"With the sound of these prophetic strains yet in their ears, the Chorus sees the approach of—Clytemnestra. Their strain has prepared us for something dreadful in the face and figure of the avenging Queen,—

'For ne'er was mortal sound so full of woe.'

She comes—and then we have such a description as makes the glow-worm light of modern poetry

'Pale its ineffectual fires.'

She comes rejoicingly, exultingly—floating on stately and beautiful in her revenge—of which the passion, about to

be satiated and appeased, breaks out into a glorious burst, that shows how sin and wickedness can make a Poetess of the Highest Order.

She tells the Chorus that Troy has been taken, and they ask, 'How long ago? When was the city sacked?' She replies, 'Twas in the night that bore this rising light.' The Chorus, incredulous, asks again, 'But how? What messenger could come so fast?' And this is her glorious reply :—*

“The Fire-God, kindling his bright light on Ida!
 Beacon to beacon fast and forward flashed,
 An estafette of fire, on to the rocks
 Of Hermes-hallowed Lemnos : from that isle
 Caught, thirdly, Jove-crowned Athos the red light,
 That broader, skimming o'er the shimmering sea,
 Went travelling in its strength. For our delight
 The pine-torch, golden-glittering like the sun,
 Spoke to the watchman on Macistus' height.
 Nor he delaying, nor by careless sleep
 Subdued, sent on the fiery messenger:
 Far o'er Euripus' tide the beacon-blaze
 Signalled to the Messapian sentinels.
 Light answering light, they sent the tidings on,
 Kindling into a blaze the old dry heath ;
 And mightier still, and waning not a whit,
 The light leaped o'er Asopus' plain, most like
 The crescent moon, on to Cithæron's peak,
 And woke again another missive fire.
 Nor did the guard disdain the far-seen light,
 But kindled up at once a mightier flame.

* From Professor Wilson's critique on the "Agamemnon," appended to his 'Homer and his Translators.' W. Blackwood & Sons.

O'er the Gorgopian lake it flashed like lightning
 On the sea-beaten cliffs of Megaris ;
 Woke up the watchman not to spare his fire,
 And, gathering in its unexhausted strength,
 The long-waving bearded flame from off the cliffs
 That overlook the deep Saronian gulf,
 As from a mirror streamed. On flashed it ; reached
 Arachne, our close neighbouring height, and there,
 Not unbegotten of that bright fire on Ida,
 On sprang it to Atrides' palace-roof.
 Such were the laws of those swift beacon-fires :
 So flash the torches on from hand to hand
 In the holy rite, brightest the first and last.
 Such is the proof and sign of victory
 Sent by my husband from now captured Troy."

The reader will recognise here the original of Macaulay's "Armada." Indeed that poem gives, better than any translation, the spirit and dash and picturesqueness of the passage ; from the kindling of the first beacon on Mount Edgecombe's height,—

"Till Belvoir's lordly terraces the sign to Lincoln sent,
 And Lincoln sped the message on o'er the wide vale of
 Trent ;
 Till Skiddaw saw the fire that burned on Gaunt's embattled pile,
 And the red glare on Skiddaw roused the burghers of
 Carlisle."

Then Clytemnestra describes what she imagines to be the scene in Troy, where the cries of the vanquished, as wives and children weep over the bodies of the slain, are mingled in discord with the shouts of the plunder-

ing conquerors. No longer forced to sleep on the damp ground, the victors take their ease in the Trojan palaces ; but even in their success there is danger of that pride which brings reverses. All is not safe yet ; the dangers of return are to be encountered, and even then, if any new offence should be committed, Troy may yet be avenged.

The irony is scarcely concealed.

Now comes a new choric song, a prayer to Zeus, whose judgments cannot fail ; who against Paris “bent his bow and made it ready,”—decreed and it was done ; who “marks that race from son to son” that dares too much, and grows insolent in over-great prosperity. In moderation is the only safety. Then is described the curse that Paris brought on Troy when Helen came :—

Strophe.

“ Bequeathing the wild fray to her own nation
 Of clashing spears, and the embattled fleet,
 Bearing to Troy her dowry—desolation,
 She glided through the gate with noiseless feet,
 Daring the undareable ! But in their grief
 Deep groaned the prophets of that ancient race :
 ‘ Woe to the palace ! woe to its proud Chief,
 The bed warm with the husband’s fond embrace ! ’
 Silent there she stood,
 Too false to honour, too fair to revile ;
 For her, far off over the ocean flood,
 Yet still most lovely in her parting smile,
 A spectre queens it in that haunted spot.
 Odious, in living beauty’s place,
 Is the cold statue’s fine-wrought grace.
 Where speaking eyes are wanting, love is not.”

Antistrophe.

"And phantasms, from his deep distress unfolding,
 Are ever present with their idle charms.
 And when that beauteous form he seems beholding,
 It slides away from out his clasping arms.
 The vision ! in an instant it is gone,
 On light wing down the silent paths of sleep !
 Around that widowed heart, so mute, so lone.
 Such are the griefs, and griefs than these more deep
 To all from Greece that part
 For the dread warfare : Patient in her gloom,
 Sits Sorrow, guardian god of each sad home,
 And many woes pierce rankling every heart.
 Oh, well each knew the strong, the brave, the just,
 Whom they sent forth on the horrid track
 Of battle ; and what now comes back ?
 Their vacant armour, and a little dust !"

And the sorrow for friends thus lost rises in an ominous murmur against the sons of Atreus, who led the flower of Greece to die in a strange land, in a woman's quarrel. The heavy burden of a people's curse suggests fears that may not be spoken. And again and again in new words the old burden is repeated :—when men are highest in pride, then Erinnys comes, and heaven's thunder bursts first on the overglorious :—

" Mine be the unenvied fate,
 Not too wealthy, not too great.
 I covet not, not I, the bad renown
 To be the sacker of another's town,
 Or see, a wretched slave, the sacking of mine own."

All doubts that remain about the truth of the beacon-message are now dispelled by the arrival of a herald, who comes from the army itself. He is the forerunner of Agamemnon, and all that he says is intended to enhance the greatness of the king's arrival. He salutes, in touching words, his country and her gods, and the palace of Agamemnon, which now shines its best to welcome its monarch, who comes like dawn out of darkness.

“Greet, greet him nobly. Is't not well to greet
Him who the firm foundations of old Troy
Dug up with the avenging spade of Jove,
Searching the soil down to its deepest roots?
The altars and the temples of their Gods
Are all in shapeless ruin; all the seed
Utterly withered from the blasted land.
Such is the yoke, that o'er the towers of Troy
Hath thrown that elder chieftain, Atreus' son.

Blest above mortals, lo, he comes! Of men
Now living, who so worthy of all honour?”

The leader of the Chorus tells the herald how the army has been ruined, and speaks of some undefined fear. And the herald says, “All suffer in turn, but it is well at last.” He describes most graphically the sufferings of the besieging host:—

“Our beds were strewn under the hostile walls;
And from the skies, and from the fenny land,
Came dripping the chill dews, rotting our clothes,
Matting our hair, like hides of shaggy beasts.
Our winters shall I tell, when the bleak cold
Intolerable, down from Ida's snows

Came rushing; even the birds fell dead around us.
Or summer heats, when on his mid-day couch
Heavily fell the waveless sea, no breath
Stirring the sultry air. Why grieve we now?
All is gone by! the toils all o'er! the dead!
No thought have they of rising from their graves.
Why count the suffrages of those who have fallen?
The living only, fickle fortune's wrath
Afflicts with grief. I to calamity
Have bid a long farewell. Of the Argive host
To us, the few survivors, our rich gains
Weigh down in the scale our poor uncounted losses.
In the face of the noon-day sun we make our boast,
Flying abroad over the sea and land,
That now the Argive host hath taken Troy;
And in the ancestral temples of their Gods
Hath nailed the spoils for our eternal glory."

Clytemnestra now comes forward with expressions of exuberant delight; but she never quite hides from us, who are in the secret, the true purpose of her relentless heart. "What day," she cries, "so bright, so blessed, as when the wife greets her returning husband! Throw wide the gates of welcome; go and meet him, and tell him that his wife is waiting for him, unchanged and unchangeable! No pleasure have I known but the thought of him, and have watched, like a faithful guardian, over his treasures and his honours." She retires. All has now been done to raise our expectation for the arrival of the king. He is to come at the height of his triumph, and his wife will greet him with enthusiastic welcome. So now the undertone of sorrow is heard again. The herald tells of storms that have harassed

the army on its return, and of the many warriors who can never regain their homes. But with good hopes he goes away, and again the choral song peals in our ears. Again it is of Helen, "the fated to destroy," whose very name meant "ruin."

"To Iliion in beauty came
 The wedded mischief! of her name
 The wrath of the great Gods on high
 Fulfilled the awful augury;
 The hoarded vengeance long preparing
 For that deed of guilty daring:
 Dishonour of the stranger-welcoming board,
 And Jove, the Hospitable God and lord.
 The brothers of the house, that princely throng,
 With the glad hymenean song,
 Hymned the eve of that bright wedding-day.
 That hymn unlearned, a sadder lay
 Shall Priam's ancient city chant anon—
 The many-voicèd wail and moan,
 In evil hour o'er Paris led
 To that disastrous bridal-bed:
 Foredoomed t' endure the flood
 For years poured wasteful of her citizens' blood."

So a man cherishes a lion's cub, and it is gentle at first and loving, the children's toy, the old man's pleasure; but ere long the lion-nature shows itself, and it proves a priest of Atè, and spreads blood and ruin through the house. So Helen

"Too soon in Troy, her coming seemed to be
 Like gentle calm over the waveless sea;
 She stood, an image of bright wealth untold.

Oblique from her soft eye the dart
 Preyed sweetly on the inmost heart,
 Making love's flower its tenderest bloom unfold.
 So changing with the changing hours
 That wedlock brought her to a bitter end,
 A cruel sister, and a cruel friend,
 To Priam's daughters in their chamber bowers :
 By Hospitable Jove sent in his ire,
 No tender bride, rather a Fury dark and dire."

And still the burden is repeated. Wealth brings a misery that never dies, but breeds a brood of evils ever growing. Beneath the quiet cottage-roof dwells Justice, and "decent life flows peaceful on ;" but over the gilded palace is spread the funeral pall of Atè.

Agamemnon enters.

Earthly greatness and triumph are at their height, as the chief returns, with chariots and retinue, to his palace. The Chorus welcome him as he deserves :—

"Hail, king of Atreus' race renowned,
 Who Troy hast levelled with the ground !
 How to address thee—how adore ;"

but they are anxious to observe a safe moderation in their congratulations ;—

"Nor with exceeding praise run o'er,
 Nor turning short, pass by too light
 The mark and standard of thy might."

They confess that at first his enterprise seemed rash, but now success has justified his daring. Time always reveals true wisdom.

The welcome is, after all, not so enthusiastic as it might be.

The king greets his native land and his country's gods, and describes the state of the defeated city. He is grand as he stands there, a true representative of the heroic age, and tells us how Atè's hurricane howls through the smoking town, and how the Greek nobles leapt forth from the fatal horse.

“The roaring lion rampant o'er the towers
Sprang, glutting his fierce maw with kingly blood.”

But still the king of men remembers the dangers of prosperity, and tempers his exultation with regret for the calamities of many of his friends. He is just about to go modestly into his palace without pomp, when the traitress, gorgeously decked out to meet her husband, enters on the scene.

“According to the simplicity,” says Potter, “of ancient manners, Clytemnestra should have waited to receive her husband in the house ; but her affected fondness led her to disregard decorum. Nothing can be conceived more artful than her speech ; but that shows that her heart had little share in it ; her pretended sufferings during his absence are touched with great delicacy and tenderness ; but had they been real, she would not have stopped him with the querulous recital ; the joy for his return, had she felt that joy, would have broke out first ; this is deferred to the latter part of her address ; then, indeed, she has amassed every image expressive of emotion ; but her solicitude to assemble these leads her beyond nature, which expresses her strong passions in broken sentences, and with a nervous brevity, not with the cold formality of a set harangue. Her last

words are another instance of the double sense which expresses reverence to her husband, but intends the bloody design with which her soul was agitated." *

“Men ! citizens ! Elders of Argos’ state !
 I blush not in your presence to pour forth
 All a wife’s fondness for her lord beloved ;
 For timorous bashfulness soon dies away
 Before familiar faces. Not from others
 Learning, but only from mine own sad knowledge
 Will I describe my solitary life,
 While he was far away under Troy’s walls.”

She describes at great length how she suffered from rumours of her lord’s death ; how she had three times tried to hang herself ; how her eyes had been dried up with weeping, and her short sleep broken by miserable dreams. As Dean Milman says,

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

Then she addresses the king in terms of over-artful panegyric :—

“Thou, watchdog of the unattainted fold !
 The main-stay that secures the straining ship !
 The firm-based pillar, bearing the lofty roof !
 The only son to childless father born !
 Land by the lost despairing sailor seen !
 Day beaming beautiful after fierce storms !
 Cool fountain to the thirsty traveller !”

But she will lead him to the pitch of pride, that his fall may be complete : she will make him impious that the gods may be against him.

* Quoted by Professor Wilson, *loc. cit.*

“ Stay, nor set
 On the bare earth, O King, thy hallowed foot ;
 That which hath trampled upon ruined Troy.
 Why tarry ye, my damsels ? ’Tis your office
 To strew the path with gorgeous carpetings ;
 Like purple pavement rich be all his way ;
 That justice to his house may lead him in—
 The house he little dreamed of. All the rest
 Leave to my care, that may not sleep. So please
 The Gods, what’s justly destined shall be done.”

Irony cannot be carried further.

Agamemnon, however, is not easily flattered to his ruin, and he refuses an honour fit only for the gods.

“ Treat me not like a soft and delicate woman,
 Nor, gazing open-mouthed, grovelling on earth
 Like a barbarian, raise discordant cry :
 Nor, strewing with bright tapestries my way,
 Make me an envy to all-jealous Heaven.
 These are the proud prerogatives of the Gods ;
 That mortal thus should walk on rich embroideries
 Beseems not : do it I cannot without awe.
 As a man, honour me, not as a God !
 Though she wipe not her feet on carpetings,
 Nor variegated garments fine, Fame lifts
 High her clear voice. To be of humble mind
 Is God’s best gift. Blessed is only he
 Who in unbroken happiness ends his days.
 Still may I prosper, thus not overbold.”

But at last he is persuaded to tread the purple, though he insists on removing his sandals for the sake of humility. He steps upon the carpet : we feel that he is doomed. One more touch has to be added ; the

one thing that might justly provoke the queen is to be done. He leads forth Cassandra, and with kind considerate words recommends her to Clytemnestra's care.

“ But thou this stranger-maid
Lead in with courteous welcome. The high Gods
On him who rules his slaves with gentleness
Look gracious : for to bear the yoke of slavery
Is a sore trial to the struggling will.
And she, of our rich spoils the chosen flower,
The army's precious gift, follows me here.
And since to yield to thee I am compelled,
Walking on purple, enter I the palace.”

The queen does not notice this request. She repeats her protestations that no profusion could be too great to welcome such a prince, or to express her joy; and then she joins exultingly in the procession which leads him in. And her parting words are these :—

“ Jove ! Jove ! that all things perfectest, my prayers
Bring to perfection ! to perfection bring
What thou hast yet to do ! Be this thy care.”

The grand procession here enters the palace, and the stage is left vacant, except that Cassandra is still there, sitting silent in her chariot. But the notes of melancholy music call our eyes from the stage to the orchestra, where the Chorus is moving in mysterious figures about the altar, where it stands down beneath us on the floor of the theatre. Fear—resistless inexplicable fear—is now the burden of their song ; so that, though their own eyes have seen the safe return of the

army, yet a sense of danger and calamities to come still overpowers them—an apprehension connected in some way with that dread of excessive wealth which they have expressed so often. Cassandra is not inattentive to their forebodings: her gestures show that she shares them. But now Clytemnestra comes out again. She bids the captive prophetess, sternly but not insultingly, to accept her lot, and enter the palace as a slave. For a long time Cassandra listens in silence to the queen's command and the advice of the Chorus, her look growing every moment wilder, and her gestures more excited. At last she speaks, and cries again and again to Apollo, the author of her unhappy inspiration, of her sad prophecies that have been always disregarded, and with each repetition her ravings portend more clearly the dreadful deed that is to come. She looks round in horror at the palace-gates, and cries,—

“ Dwelling accurst of God !

Dark home of murder and infanticide !

The lord lies slaughtered in that drear abode,

And the dank floor with bloody dew is dyed.”

She calls to mind the impious feast of Thyestes, and speaks not dimly of another crime to come. Her beautiful face is disfigured with passion; her hair “streams like a meteor on the troubled air,” as the vision forces itself more and more vividly on her reluctant soul. She sees the murderess raise her hand; she sees the bath in which the deed is done, and the Furies punishing the guilty queen. And her own fate, too, is before her:—

“ Alas ! alas ! for myself I fear
 Mine own death-hour of agony !
 Oh, wherefore do ye lead me here ?
 Oh, wherefore, but with him to die ? ”

Each wild utterance of Cassandra is followed by a short song from the orchestra in comment on her words. “ Why,” asks the Chorus,—

“ Why heaven-struck, heaping ill on ill,
 Pour'st thou thy frantic sorrows vain ?
 Why shrieks thy voice, ill-omened still,
 Its awful burthen in awakening strain ?
 Why roams thy sad prophetic song
 Only the paths of grief along ? ”

Again she is tortured with visions of the past scenes of horror that have defiled the house of Pelops. The murdered children of Thyestes pass before her eyes, with the same terrible distinctness with which the children and the eight kings force themselves on the fancy of Macbeth:—

“ See, see ye not upon yon palace-roofs,
 Like shapes in dreams, they stand and jibber there,
 The children murdered by their nearest kin ?
 Lo, there they are, in their full-laden hands
 Entrails and bowels, horrible food, on which
 Their fathers have been feasting.”

Vengeance is coming for these things upon the house of Atreus ; and though the she-wolf welcomes her lord with flattering words, yet death is certainly prepared for him. There is no longer any concealment. Cassandra foretells in plain words the crime of Clytem-

nestra, and the excuse she will allege ; and at last she tears the prophet-garlands from her head, and dashes down her wand in the dust, hating her unhappy task of uttering warnings that are fated to be disbelieved. Yet she will not die unavenged, for even now she sees the long-exiled son Orestes return, and claim satisfaction for his father's death.

Suddenly, while speaking for a moment more calmly to the Chorus, Cassandra starts back in horror. "Foh !" she cries,—

"Foh ! how the house smells with the reek of blood !"

Fluttered like a bird with terror, she yet restrains herself to utter one last prayer for vengeance, one last reflection on the fickleness of fortune, and then goes into the palace to meet her death.

For a minute we are left to consider this wonderful scene of madness ; to reflect on its strange medley of emotions, where Ophelia's tenderness and Lear's frenzy are gathered into one, and joined with the agony of foresight of Lochiel's Seer ; while the Chorus moralises still over the danger of prosperity. Suddenly a cry is heard within,—

"Woe's me, I'm stabbed ! stabbed with a mortal blow !"

Again and again it is repeated, as the majestic voice of Agamemnon, that so often rose above the din of battle, sounds fainter and fainter in the agony of death. The deed is done.

In the orchestra utter confusion prevails, for each member of the Chorus has some different advice to

urge, and they start up and rush to and fro in restless excitement. But in a moment all is hushed into the silence of awe.

The back of the stage opens, and the very scene of the murder is brought forth to view. Terrible in her triumph, the bloody axe still in her hands, Clytemnestra is seen standing over her husband's corpse. For all her wickedness still a queen, she stands up boldly and dares to defend her deed:—

“ This is no unpremeditated strife :

Over this ancient feud I have brooded long,
That the slow time at length hath brought to pass.
Here stand I, as I smote. 'Twas I that slew him !
Thus, thus I did it ! Nought will I deny !
That he could not defend himself, nor 'scape.
As round the fish the inextricable net
Closes, in his rich garments' fatal wealth
I wrapt him. Then once, twice, I smote him home.
Twice groaned he, then stretched out his failing limbs ;
And as he lay I added a third blow ;
And unto Hades, the dark god below,
Warden of the dead, made my thanksgiving vow.
So, fallen thus, he breathed out his proud life,
And spouted forth such a quick rush of blood,
It splashed me o'er with its black gory dew.
Yet not the less rejoiced I, than the flower
Within the pregnant folds of its sweet cup
Rejoices in the dropping dews of heaven.
Being as it is, ye Argive elders all,
If that ye too feel joy, rejoice with me,
And I protest that were it meet to make
Libations for the dead, 'tis I would make them :
For all that's done is just—is more than just.

He that hath filled the chalice of this house
 With cursing and with woe, on his return
 Himself should drink it to the very dregs."

The Chorus, the elders of her people, condemn her straightway to be outcast and abhorred; but she still defends herself and defies them, relying on the help of Ægisthus, her accomplice.

"And now hear ye my stern, my solemn oath:—
 By Justice, the avenger of my child;
 By Atè, by Erinnyes, at whose shrine
 I have offered up this man, slain by mine hand!
 I look not in the house of fear to dwell,
 So long as on my hearth kindles his fire
 Ægisthus, as of old my constant friend:
 He to my daring is no slender shield.
 Low lies the man who hath done shameful wrong
 To me his wife; he, once the dear delight
 Of the fair Chryseid, 'neath the walls of Troy;
 And her his captive, her his prophetess,
 The sharer of his bed, his soothsayer,
 His faithful consort on his couch of sleep,
 And on the deck, under the groaning masts.
 For this these two have paid the rightful price—
 He as ye see him; she, like the sweet swan,
 Singing her farewell song, her own sad dirge,
 Lies here, his paramour, the delicate morsel,
 Intruded here, where I should feast alone."

The Ruin which the gods, in their mysterious will, sent down upon the race of Pelops stands before us visible in Clytemnestra. Looked at from the human side, she is an incarnation of consummate wickedness,

triumphant and unashamed ; from the divine side she is a messenger of Atè and Erinny's, filled full with their terrible displeasure, the most awful object that could meet the eyes of bewildered and despairing mortals. Through a long series of short answering chants her consciousness of this dread mission is contrasted with the timid horror of the Chorus. After attributing the whole line of sorrows to Helen, and wailing over Cassandra's death, the Chorus calls upon the Alastor, the unforgetting fury,—

“That Dæmon dread,
Whose wrath hangs heavy o'er the head
Of each of that predestined line ;
A name, the omen and the sign
Of endless and insatiate misery.”

And Clytemnestra takes up the strain :—

“ Say not 'twas Agamemnon's wife
That so cut short his fated life,
It was the Alastor, whose dread mien
Took up the likeness of the queen.
Of that dark house 'twas he, 'twas he,
The curse and awful Destiny ;
(Where, father of that race unblest,
Old Atreus held his cannibal feast ;)
Wreaking for that dread crime the vengeance due,
The full-grown man for those poor babes he slew.”

But the Chorus will not admit her defence, and mourn in indignation for the kingly head laid low by such foul treachery. Still the queen asserts the justice of her deed :—

"It was not so ; that man of pride !
 By no unseemly death he died.
 Who first into our household brought
 Dark Atè's snares ? who earliest taught
 That fateful lesson of deceit,
 Decoying forth that child of many tears,
 Iphigenia, in her tender years ?
 Evil he did, evil is vengeance meet !
 He will not make his insolent boast in Hell ;
 For with the sword he smote, and by the sword he fell."

And ever the Chorus returns to its wailings and accusations :—

"Woe, woe ! earth, earth ! wilt thou not swallow me
 Ere I am forced my kingly lord to see
 Within that bath, with silver walled,
 On his low bed unhonoured and unpalled ?
 Oh, who will bury him ?
 Oh, who will mourn for him ?
 Wilt thou, wilt thou, thou daring one, presume—
 Thou, thine own husband's bloody murderess !—
 To stand and wail as mourner by his tomb ?
 With graceless grace, unholy holiness,
 For noble funeral rites the unblest offerings bless."

And still the murderess "keeps her fixed unaltered mood."

This is in the true spirit of Athenian tragedy. Lady Macbeth, before her crime, is a very Clytemnestra ; she welcomes Duncan with the same exaggerated courtesy, and is as resolute in her purpose ; but afterwards she trembles and turns pale. Shakespeare is painting human nature, weak and fickle even in the

strongest ; Æschylus is showing us the wrath of gods, which is simple, direct, and unrepenting.

At length, in the end of the play, Ægisthus himself appears, and he exhibits the character of a violent and cowardly tyrant. He congratulates himself shamelessly on his success, and shows how his father Thyestes is avenged. "Now," he says,—

"Now, 'twere a glorious thing for me to die,
Seeing him caught in justice' iron toils."

The Chorus threaten him with the curse of the people and with stoning ; but Ægisthus despises the elders of his city, and confidently asserts his ill-gotten power. Violence is on the point of being used, when Clytemnestra interposes. She pacifies Ægisthus with tenderest words—"purring," says Professor Wilson, "like a satiated tigress round her prey ;" and while the Chorus threaten them with the possible return of Orestes, she leads her accomplice in "to set in order all things in that ancient kingly house." Truly they are sadly out of order at present.

The first part of the great threefold drama is over, and while we sit waiting for the next, there can be no want of reflections to occupy our minds. The conversation which ordinarily fills up such intervals in the performance can hardly find place now, for all minds have been oppressed with a weight of awe which does not easily pass away. A confused mass of giant forms and deeds of blood is before our eyes, and mingled tones

of triumph and despair are still ringing in our ears. But gradually, as we gaze, the several parts sink back into due proportion, and gradually there comes out into distinctness the supremely great figure of Clytemnestra. It grows up before us more and more vividly as we recall one grand speech after another,—as we remember how she exulted at the thought of her husband's return; how great she was in the defiant extravagance with which she spread his path; how fearfully wicked in her unflinching hypocrisy; how she despised Ægisthus, for whom she had done it all. And then, by her side, we begin to see clearly the noble stature of Agamemnon, and pity, which was suppressed awhile in awe at Clytemnestra, possesses us again.

Is all that villany to triumph, and all that nobleness to perish unavenged? But as we go over in memory the closing scenes, the thought arises of Orestes. What is he doing now? Growing up to manhood in a distant land, and meditating vengeance. He goes to sacred Delphi and consults Apollo, and is bidden to hasten to Argos and kill his mother and her guilty lover. And how are affairs in Argos? The palace is full of Trojan captives; Electra herself, Agamemnon's daughter, is little better than a slave; while hatred has been gradually growing against Ægisthus and the queen, till there are many, who long, hardly in secret, to see the face of the avenger.

But the herald's voice proclaims that the next play is to begin, and the curtain falls for the "Choephoroi, or Libation-bearers." Still the scene is the royal palace

of Argos, but in front of it now is seen the tomb of Agamemnon. We seem to breathe a lighter, freer atmosphere than that which echoed to the dread choruses of the Argive elders or the shriek of the dying king. A brighter, more beautiful vision is before us. Orestes comes upon the scene in his pride of youth, which sadness cannot obscure. His face and his dress may betoken mourning, but in his whole person shines out the symmetry and the brilliance of white skin and lustrous hair which is seen in the young Greek in the wrestling-schools of Athens. He comes forward to his father's tomb, and solemnly offers there two locks of his hair,—the first to Inachus, the river-god of his home, a sign of gratitude for life and nurture; the second to his dead father, as an offering of love, instead of that which he was not allowed to pay at the time of his funeral. This done, he stands apart, and with him Pylades, his faithful companion, who all this time has remained in silence at his side. They stand apart to watch, for the palace-gates are opened, and a train of black-robed women comes out, led by Electra. They are bearing urns with mixed meal and oil and honey, to be poured as libations, or drink-offerings, on the tomb. Orestes at once recognises his sister, and guesses the object of their coming.

Electra remains upon the stage close by the tomb; while the Chorus, these captive women, walk down the broad steps which lead from the stage into the orchestra, and take their stations there to sing. They remain, however, so near the stage as to be at all times

close, like Electra, to the tomb. And thus their chant begins :—

“ Sent from the palace, forth I tread,
 With hands shrill-clapped, a doleful train,—
 Libations bearing to the dead.
 Marred is my cheek with many a stain,
 Nail-ploughed the furrows bleed,
 The while on cries of pain
 My heart doth feed.
 Rending my flaxen-tissued vest,
 With smileless passion, uncontrolled,
 Grief doth my sorrow-stricken breast
 Dismantle of the garment's decent fold.

For shrill, hair-bristling Fear,
 Of Atreus' home dream-prompting seer,
 Breathing forth rage in sleep,—at dead of night,
 From the recesses of these royal halls,
 Rang out a cry of wild affright
 That heavy on the women's chambers falls.
 And dream-interpreters, in Heaven's high name
 To faithful utt'rance pledged, proclaim
 That unavenged 'neath earth, the slain
 Against their slayers wrathfully complain.” *

This is the key-note of the earlier part of the play : this is the fear which hangs over our minds. This fear has led the queen to send forth this mourning procession, as if she might so appease the wrath of her murdered lord. But blood, says the Chorus, cannot be washed out ; Atè will exact her penalty without mercy.

* For the translations throughout this and the following play the writer is indebted to Miss Swanwick's "Trilogy of Æschylus."

Then Electra speaks to the Chorus. How, she asks, can I fulfil my task, and offer these libations to my father? I cannot say, "These are a loving wife's gifts to her husband." Shall I pray that she who sent them may be requited?

"Or, with no mark of honour, silently,
For so my father perished, shall I pour
These vain oblations to the thirsty earth,
Then, tossing o'er my head the lustral urn,
(As one who loathèd refuse forth has cast,)
With eyes averted, back retrace my steps?"

The Chorus bids her accompany the offerings with good wishes for the righteous—for herself, that is, and all who hate Ægisthus—and for Orestes her exiled brother, and pray that on the guilty some god or mortal may come in vengeance. All this is dimly and gradually suggested, and then Electra prays. In perfect beauty she stands before us, sorrow mingled with righteous anger, and prays to the gods below and mother Earth, and to her father's spirit, that they may pity her slavish lot and bring home Orestes from his exile, and that her father's murderess may be justly slain. Then solemnly she ascends the steps of the tomb and pours out the libation, while the Chorus sings a short hymn of grief for the lost warrior. Suddenly Electra's white arm is raised, the dark folds of her dress falling off from it, for she has found upon the tomb her brother's votive lock, and now holds it up in wonder to show it to the Chorus. They cannot guess from whom it comes, but the truth quickly

dawns upon the sister's mind. The hair is like her own in colour; Orestes is the only friend who could be so lamenting Agamemnon; footsteps, too, are to be seen leading to the tomb, which in length and shape tally exactly with her own. While she is disturbed and uncertain, hoping but hardly daring to believe, Orestes comes forward and addresses her. She does not know him, and even when he tells her who he is, thinks he is mocking. But when at last she is convinced, her gladness overflows; he shows the very cloak which her hands had wrought; she falls upon his neck, and thus addresses him:—

“ Oh ! cherished darling of thy father's house,
 Hope of our race, thou precious seed, long wept,
 Trusting in thy strong arm, thou shalt regain
 Thy natal home. O fondly loved, in whom
 Centre four dear affections ; for perforce
 Thee must I hail as father, and on thee
 Love for my mother, justly hated, falls ;
 And for my sister, pitilessly slain.
 My faithful brother hast thou ever been,
 My pride, my awe ;—only may Justice, Strength,
 With Zeus supreme, third Saviour, aid thy cause.”

Orestes joins in her prayers, and explains how Apollo himself has sent him to execute this purpose, recounting the calamities which would fall on him if he should refuse the service: how Atè would pursue him; how every share in festal cup or sacred rite would be denied him, till, friendless and dishonoured, he must die with all the burden of his guilt upon him. Such oracles he cannot disobey. The avenger has

announced his resolve, and the Chorus solemnly approves it. "Doer of wrong must suffer,"—this is the grand old law.

The course of the action being so clearly marked out, it is now to be still further sanctioned by appeals to Heaven, and our interest in it heightened by hearing it dwelt upon, with every variety of treatment, by the two persons engaged upon it. Orestes stands on one side of the tomb, Electra on the other, and just below the Chorus is grouped, to bear part in their alternate song:—

Ores. What can I, Sire unblest,
Prayerfully sing,
Thee from thy couch of rest
Hither to wing?
Lo! in that drear confine,
Darkness is day!
Vainly to Atreus' line
Honours we pay!

Cho. My son, the wasting jaws of fire
Quell not the spirit of the dead,
Full late he manifests his ire.—
When mourned, is he whose blood is shed,
The slayer is revealed. In time,
For slaughtered parents, righteous wail
Poured forth unceasing, doth avail
To track the crime.

Elec. In turn, my tearful strain,
O Father, hear!
Hark how thy children twain
Chant anthems drear!

Exiles beside thy tomb,
 Sad, suppliant pair ;—
 No hope relieves our gloom,
 Triumphs despair.

Cho. And yet, if so the gods ordain,
 Hereafter, gladder notes shall sound ;—
 Instead of dirge, joy's rapturous strain
 Back to these halls shall lead again
 The dear one newly found."

So many times they answer one another, grief by turns taking the place of hope ; the tone sinking sometimes almost to despair, sometimes rising to prophetic exultation ; and throughout it all they call their father, as the Persians called Darius, to come forth from his tomb, and help them to revenge. Gradually the tones grow calmer and more determined ; till they settle down, when the resolve is fully ratified, into the sober language of the ordinary dialogue. Then the Chorus says,—

“ Unblamed in sooth have ye your speech prolonged,
 Due to his tomb, and unlamented fate.
 But since to action now thy soul is braced,
 To work forthwith ! and in the god confide.”

Yet even now the fixed resolve is to be strengthened by an omen of success. “ Why,” asks Orestes, “ has the queen sent these offerings to the tomb, seeing that she cannot hope by any sacrifice to wash out the stain of murder ?—for, as the saying runs, not all the world, poured out in one libation, could atone for one man's blood.”

The Chorus answers him. It is a dream that has made her anxious. She dreamt that she gave birth to a dragon, who fed with his savage jaws at her own breast. She sprang up in terror, and could not rest till these libations had been sent to her husband's tomb. Even to Clytemnestra remorse has come at last, and conscience makes her connect every terror with her crime. She could not know what this dragon meant, but Orestes accepts it as a type of himself :—

“ For if the snake, quitting the self-same womb,
Was girded straightway with my swathing-clothes,
And, gaping round the breast that nourished me,
Sucked with my nurture-milk the clotted blood,
While she in terror, at the portent shrieked ;—
Needs must it be, that she who reared the pest
A forceful death must die. I, dragon-like,
Myself shall slay her, as her dream declares.”

No more is needed to strengthen his resolution or to sanction it, and now he unfolds the details of his plot. With the faithful Pylades, who has never left his side, he is to present himself as a stranger at the gates of the palace, and so to gain admission to the presence of *Ægisthus*. Then, so soon as he sees the usurper, he will kill him. Such is his plan. Of his mother he says not a word. That intention is too dreadful to be spoken of : though unhesitating in his determination, he will not utter it, even to his friends. Surely there is something very touching and dreadful in this silence.

Orestes and Pylades go away into the fields, to

reappear in their new character, and Electra enters the palace. The time of vengeance is close at hand : who does not tremble ? The Chorus gives expression to the universal apprehension in a fine and simple ode. They sing of the terrible extremes to which human guilt, especially woman's, at times has reached.

“ *Cho.* Full many a horror drear
 And ghastly, Earth doth rear ;—
 With direful monsters teems encircling Ocean ;
 Meteors, with threatening sheen,
 Hang heaven and earth between ;—
 The tempest's wrath still raves with wild commotion ;
 These, and dire wingèd things, and things that crawl,
 Thou mayst describe them all.

Strophe. But man's audacious might
 What words can paint aright,
 Or woman's daring spirit who may tell ?
 Her passion's frenzied throes,
 Co-mates of mortal woes ?
 For love unlovely, when its evil spell
 'Mong brutes or men the feebler sex befools,
 Conjugal bands o'errules.”

Then they recite the past crimes of women—Althæa's, who burnt the brand on which her son Meleager's life depended ; and Scylla, who for a golden necklace sold her father's life ; and, worse than all, of the Lemnian women who slew their husbands, and made the name of Lemnos a byword for atrocity. But justice, they cry, is unerring in her aim, and her throne is immovable.

“ Firm based is Justice ; Fate of yore
 Forged weapon for the blow ;
 Deep-souled Erinnys doth restore
 Th’ avenger to his home, and, lo !
 He pays the bloody score.”

And now the conspirators are come, Orestes and Pylades, with attendants. Orestes walks straight up to the great palace-gates, and knocks repeatedly. A servant at length appears, and goes into the house to fetch some one to hear the stranger’s application. Orestes had said,—

“ Let one in trust, a woman bearing rule,
 Come forth ; yet more decorous were a man.
 For when by bashfulness the tongue is swayed
 Darkened is speech ;—boldly man speaks to man,
 And tells his message forth without reserve.”

It is a woman who comes out to answer, and no less a woman than Clytemnestra. With the same unhesitating courage, the same exultant wickedness, with which long ago she boasted of her crime as she stood over her husband’s corpse, unchanged she comes out now, and behind her comes Electra. The queen receives the messenger with queenly courtesy. He tells his tale shortly and simply, using the Phocian dialect :—

“ *Orest.* From Phocis I, a Daulian, stranger here.—
 What time my home I left, for Argos bound,
 Starting on foot, with baggage self-equipped,
 A man to me unknown, as I to him,
 Met me, inquired my route and told me his.
 Strophius, the Phocian, as in talk I learned.

‘Stranger,’ he said, ‘since Argos is thy goal,
 Say to the parents,’—strictly mark my words,—
 ‘Dead is Orestes ;—grave it on thy mind ;—
 Whether the counsel of his friends prevail
 To bring him home, or give him sepulture,
 Alien for aye ;—bear thou their mandates back ;
 For now the brazen urn doth shroud from sight
 The ashes of the hero duly wept.’
 Such words I heard, and tell thee ;—if to those
 Who here bear rule I speak, kin to the dead,
 I know not ;—but ’tis meet his sire should know.”

“Tis meet his sire should know” !—did Orestes hope to “wring his mother’s heart” ? It was not “made of penetrable stuff.” She says nothing about the dead father, who indeed knows well enough, and in his ghostly power is furthering all this act of retribution ; but although the messenger’s tidings are, as she pretends to think, not good, yet she admits him with welcome to the house, and goes herself away to tell the news to Ægisthus. Has she some suspicion ? Does she go to seek for men to help against any violence which the strangers may intend ?

Again there is a moment of suspense, during which the Chorus sing a chant of eager expectation :—

“*Cho.*—Dear handmaidens ! Sisters dear !
 When, oh when, full-voiced and clear,
 Shall we, for Orestes’ sake,
 Loud the joyous pæan wake ?”

The hour is come, they say ; now must Persuasion lead the guilty ones to offer themselves to the ruin which Erinnyis is preparing. As this chorus ends, there

comes out of the palace Cilissa, the old nurse of Orestes ; and for some time we are interested and half amused with her garrulous lamentations. It is one of the very few passages where a Greek tragedian has touched that deepest chord of pathos which is struck when we smile at the weakness of human nature, and yet grieve the more for its sufferings ; the chord which Shakespeare strikes in Lear and Ophelia, in many of the songs of his clowns, and in the story of Falstaff's death-bed. This old nurse, like her in Juliet, runs on with trifling reminiscences of Orestes' childhood, most unworthy of the occasion, except from this point of view. Still the old woman is made to assist in the execution of the plot. Clytemnestra has sent her to summon Ægisthus, and bid him bring his body-guard with him. This latter message the Chorus bids her not to give, and so it is contrived that the usurper shall offer himself unprotected to Orestes' sword. And so, half guessing from the hints of the Chorus that there is something good going forward, Cilissa goes her way.

Once more the stage is empty, and the loud prayers of the Chorus are heard, as they confidently pray to Zeus for his assistance, and call on Orestes to consummate the deed. Soon Ægisthus comes, half doubting the news, which he pretends to call unwelcome ; and he asks the Chorus whether it is true. The Chorus reply :—

“ We have but heard ; go thou thyself within,
Question these strangers ;—second-hand reports
Avail not as to hear the tale one's self.”

And he replies:—

“Fain would I see the messenger and learn
Whether himself was present at the death,
Or if from blind report this tale he heard;
A wakeful mind he will not soon deceive.”

He goes into the palace. Suspense is at its height.

“*Cho.* Zeus, great Zeus, how frame my cry
Thine aid to win?
How, invoking thee on high,
My strain begin?

For anon with murderous blow,
Either shall the gory blade
Atreus' royal house o'erthrow,—
Prone in dust for ever laid,—
Or in Freedom's sacred name,
Kindling fire and holy light,
Shall the rightful heir reclaim
Wealth and crown,—his twofold right.

Sole against the tyrant pair,
To such deadly grapple hies
Agamemnon's godlike heir;—
None to follow if he dies!
Crown, oh crown, the great emprise!”

A cry is heard; again and again it sounds; and before we have time to doubt, a servant rushes in crying that Ægisthus is slain; and, battering at the door of the women's part of the palace, he calls loudly for Clytemnestra.

She comes hastily forth, knowing instinctively that the hour of her retribution is arrived ; but, calling for an axe—the weapon with which she killed Agamemnon—is determined to defend herself to the last. But when Orestes appears, she assumes the guise of tenderness. The avenger says:—

“Dost love this man? With him, in the same tomb,
Then shalt thou lie;—still faithful found in death.”

“Hold! hold! my son;” she cries:—

“Revere, my child, this breast
From which, a sleeping infant, thou full oft,
With toothless gums, thy nurture-milk hast sucked.”

For one moment Orestes wavers and turns to Pylades, but his friend reminds him of Apollo's command and his own vows, and bids him “choose all for foemen rather than the gods.” His momentary hesitation is dispelled. He gives short replies to his mother's pretences of affection, and rejects her excuse with the most solemn answer. She pleads that Fate compelled her to her crime ; and Fate, he replies, now ordains her death. He is at least as much the instrument of heaven as she was. Then he drags her into the palace.

While the terrible deed is being done, according to the decorous taste of the Greek theatre, out of sight, the Chorus sings a hymn of unmixed exultation:—

“ Reft was I of the sun whose sudden ray
 Did with new joy illumine
 These halls, long sunk in gloom ;
 It gleamed,—then died away.

Anon, the cheering light,
 New-kindled, in these halls shall shine once more,
 What time, with lustral rite,
 From the polluted hearth is purged the gore,
 And Atè put to flight. With form benign,
 Fortune, long time an alien, comes to claim
 Her home, redeemed from shame.
 Clearly the light doth shine !”

No cries are heard this time. The agonies of a mother slain by her own son are too horrible to be even heard. We know the deed is done, and this silence makes the act of solemn justice still more tremendous.

It is done, and the scene is opened ; and as we saw Clytemnestra standing in her wicked triumph over the body of her husband, holding in her hand the bloody axe, and pointing to the robe in which her victim had been entangled to be slain,—so now we see Orestes, unhappy but not guilty, standing over his mother’s corpse, with his drawn sword in his hand, and pointing to the same robe of Agamemnon in testimony of her guilt. Servants grouped behind him display the long folds of the fatal garment, while Orestes, inspired by the divine justice of which he has been the agent, speaks these solemn words:—

“ Behold the tyrants of this land, the twain
 My sire who murdered, and this palace reaved.

“As charioteer
 With steeds ungoverned, from the course I swerve;
 Thoughts past control are whirling me along,
 Their captive slave; while terror in my heart
 Her pæan and her frenzied dance prepares.”

But while Reason yet holds her seat he asserts his righteousness, and pleads the injunction of Apollo. Taking in his hands a suppliant's olive-branch with its festoons of white wool, he turns to go to Delphi, an exile and a wanderer, to seek there the protection of the god he has obeyed. And now he sees the Furies. They rise in the background:—

“Gorgon-like they come,
 Vested with sable stoles, their locks entwined
 With clustering snakes. No longer may I bide.”

And though the Chorus cannot see them, they press round him more closely and more hideous; his frenzy grows, and covering his face with his hands he rushes in madness from the place.

The Chorus still bless him, and pray that he may obtain protection, and march back up the steps across the stage, and through the palace-gates, chanting this song:—

“Thrice the Atridan storm hath burst
 O'er Mycenæ's halls.
 Child-devouring horror first
 Brooded o'er these walls.
 Next a king's disaster came,
 When the chief who led
 Hellas' warriors, known to fame,
 In the bath lay dead.

Now, behold a third is come,—
Saviour, shall I say, or doom?
From what quarter sped?
Full-accomplished, when shall Fate,
Lulled to rest, her stormy ire abate?"

In our sympathy for Orestes thus suffering for his piety, we cannot but look forward with eager expectation to the next Play, in which we are to see him delivered from the Furies. But there is another reason, even more powerful, to make the Athenian citizen wait impatiently for the "Eumenides." A rumour has got abroad that Æschylus is going to use all the interest which his great Trilogy must awaken to support a political cause. The leaders of the popular party, Pericles and Ephialtes, are proposing to reform, if not to abolish, the high court of Areopagus. This venerable court has been hitherto in the hands mainly of the nobility, and wields an authority all the more extensive because it is undefined; it is the highest tribunal in cases of murder and sacrilege, and a peculiar sanctity is attached to its decisions. Some, however, of the citizens think, it seems, that it is old-fashioned and unwieldy; and perhaps even that it may become the stronghold of a selfish nobility, who, by straining to the utmost its undefined prerogatives, may make it the means of a formidable opposition to the system of reform which is in progress. Others regard it with the reverence which they conceive to be due to an institution founded by the gods, and intimately con-

nected with the greatness of the city; and among these, we need hardly say, is Æschylus. He intends, by representing the court of Areopagus as the scene of the trial and liberation of Orestes, and as having been founded at that time by Pallas—and not only for that occasion, but for ever—to enlist the sympathy of every pious Athenian on the side of the ancient assembly, and against Ephialtes and Pericles, and the democratic movement which they represent.

Such is the expectation which makes our neighbours in the theatre particularly impatient for the “Eumenides”; though little can be needed to heighten the enthusiasm with which the climax of so deeply interesting a Trilogy will be received. We have seen the crime committed against the father of Orestes, we have seen his solemn act of vengeance, and we have seen that even the righteousness of his cause could not deliver him from the Furies of a mother slain. These Furies have pursued him through many lands, and made his life a misery, until at last he has reached Apollo’s shrine in Delphi, and even thither his torturers have pursued him.

But suspense is at an end: the curtain falls, and we are in Delphi, the centre of the world, the very home and source of sanctity and truth. Before us rises the high temple-front, and outside it stand statues of all those Powers which, according to old mythology, have held sway in turn in this most holy place. In prayer before these statues is seen the priestess of the temple;—she whose utterances are oracles; she who awards to the whole Grecian world—yes, and to barbarians too—all

that they have of revelation. First in her prayer is mentioned Earth, the primeval prophetess; then Themis, who next held the sacred seat; then Phœbe, another daughter of Earth, who gave to Phœbus Apollo his office and his name. Having done due honour to the local deities, the priestess calls on Pallas, and Bacchus, and Poseidon, and on Zeus, and then enters to take her seat upon the inspiring tripod, that she may give responses to any who may consult the god. And so she goes through the great folding-doors into the temple. Very few of mankind have entered that sacred chapel: there hang the offerings of great kings and sages, who have, during ages past, gained answers from Apollo; there the bright god himself vouchsafes his special presence; there is the Omphalos, or navel-stone, which is believed to be the very centre of the earth.

But the priestess rushes forth again in an agony of terror. She has seen a portentous sight, for at the Omphalos itself a man is sitting in suppliant guise;

“ His hands still dripping gore,
His sword new-drawn, his lofty olive-branch
With ample fillets piously enwreathed,
White bands of wool;”

and behind him is a wondrous company of women sleeping—or rather, women they cannot be called, for no gorgons nor harpies are so hideous. The sound of their breathing, the loathsome aspect of their faces, and the filthiness of their dress, all combine to make their very presence a pollution to a temple, or even to the

roofs of men. As soon as the terrified priestess has described all this, the scene opens and we see it for ourselves. In the inner sanctuary of the temple is Orestes sitting on the Omphalos, and by him stands Apollo; while behind them, in a semicircle, the Furies are asleep, and quite in the background stands Mercury or Hermes, the escorter of the dead. Apollo speaks:—

“ Never will I betray thee: to the end
 I guard thee, standing near, or far aloof ;
 Nor will be gracious ever to thy foes.
 And captured now this maddened crew thou seest.
 By sleep the loathsome virgins are o’erpowered,
 Hoary primeval progeny,—with whom
 Nor god, nor man, nor beast, will e’er consort.
 For Evil’s sake brought forth, in evil gloom
 Of subterranean Tartarus they dwell,
 Abhorred of men and of the Olympian gods.
 But hie thee hence, nor e’er relax thy speed,
 For as thou tread’st the wand’rer-trampled earth,
 They’ll track thee o’er the ample continent,
 O’er the wide ocean and the citted isles ;
 And thou, faint not too early, o’er thy grief
 Brooding alone ; but haste to Pallas’ walls,
 And suppliant, her ancient image clasp.
 There judges we shall have to try this cause,
 And soothing words : so means we shall devise
 For evermore to free thee from these toils ;
 For at my bidding was thy mother slain.”

Orestes prays his patron to hold to his promise; and Apollo bids him not to fear, and intrusts him to Hermes to be escorted to Athens, the city of Pallas.

The victim is gone, and the pursuers are still asleep,

for indeed in the halls of Apollo such angry powers cannot easily be awake. But are they to remain indifferent? Is a mother slain to lose the satisfaction which her murderer owes? Rather than this, she comes herself to stir up the executors of her vengeance. From the inner part of the temple, clad in dark robes, with her bare neck still showing the wound that her son inflicted, arises the ghost of Clytemnestra; and with bitter reproaches she urges the Furies, by gratitude for the gifts she has offered them, by their own honour lost if he escape, to pursue the matricide. Her words are not unheard. They wake slowly with hideous groans and mutterings; and at length, crying like hounds to one another, the savage note running round the semicircle, they rouse them gradually to their task. As they awake, the ghost again and constantly repeats her exhortations, till, when they are thoroughly excited to renew their chase, she vanishes away. Thus it is that the energy of these cruel powers may always, by the will of those on whose behalf they act, be quickened against the guilty or the representative of a guilty race; just as conscience, ever and anon calling up remembrance of a crime, stirs in a sinner's breast the tortures of remorse. At last, each waking her neighbour, they all start up, and, ranging themselves in chorus-fashion on the stage, utter their angry expressions of baffled rage and disappointment; especially complaining of the arrogance of Apollo, who has dared, an upstart god, to trample on their ancient prerogatives. But Apollo stands up, wrathful and beautiful, his silver bow bent in his hand, as when he slew the Python,

and bids them, as they fear his arrows, carry their detested presence from his hallowed temple.

They rejoin with accusations of Apollo, for that he is the sole cause of all the trouble, having urged Orestes to the act of matricide and promised him protection; while they plead the righteousness of their own position as the appointed pursuers of all who have done such deeds. When it is shown that the mother, whom Orestes killed, was herself the murderess of her husband, the Furies answer that that guilt is less, because a husband's blood is not the blood of kindred. The god replies that by such a theory all marriage right is set aside; Jove and Juno, the wedded king and queen of heaven, are dishonoured; and the goddess of love is set at nought. But they cannot be convinced, and the pursuers and the protector part with mutual defiance.

A short interval ensues, during which the scene is changed. Instead of the Delphian sanctuary of Apollo, the high front of Minerva's temple on the Acropolis forms the background. We are in Athens itself at last: no less a city can be the place for the great consummation. Claspings the sacred image of the goddess, Orestes sits and calls on her to grant him her protection, since the pollution of his crime, if such it be, has been worn off by many sacrifices and many prayers, and now with clean hands, at Apollo's bidding, he comes to abide at her decision the issue of his cause. But his foes are close upon his track. They enter now from beneath the stage in front, and rank themselves in the orches-

tra ; and as they come, looking about for their victim, their leader says,—

“Tis well ; sure token this, the man is here.
 Follow the leading of this voiceless guide ;
 For still we track, as hound the wounded fawn,
 By blood and reeking drops, our destined prey ;
 With many a toilsome man-outwearing gasp
 Pant my deep vitals, for on every spot
 Of the wide earth my charge I shepherded,
 And now, in hot pursuit, with wingless flight,
 Swift as swift galley o'er the sea I course ;
 Here in some nook ensconced the game must lie ;
 With keenest joy I snuff the scent of blood.”

Then in lyric strains they exhort one another to the search, and when they see the suppliant at the goddess's side, they repeat their threats of vengeance. Again Orestes speaks, and a noble calmness and confidence pervades his words. “Pale now,” he says,—

“Pale now, and dim, the blood-mark on my hand ;
 Washed clean away the matricidal stain ;”

and now with pure lips I pray to Pallas to come from her distant dwelling by the Lybian Lake of Triton, or from whatever spot may hold her, “and be my saviour from those miseries.” The Chorus of Furies defy his prayers. He is their victim, and no god shall save him, and they sing their Binding Hymn which will make him fully theirs. Anything more terrible than the intense malignity of this ode it is difficult to imagine. The witches in Macbeth around the fatal cal-

dron are awful from their weird grotesqueness ; these Furies, as they dance with every gesture of greedy hatred, are even more awful in their solemn determination.

Choral Hymn.

“Haste we now the dance to wind,
 Since beseems in dread refrain,
 To utter how our bodeful train
 Deal the lots to mortal kind.
 Loyal are we to the Right,—
 Hence clean hands whoso extendeth,
 Scathless still through life he wendeth,
 Nor on him our wrath may light.
 But who guilty hands doth hide,
 Stained with blood,—as yonder wight,—
 Lurketh ever at his side,
 Witness true, this Brood of Night.
 Blood-avengers we appear,
 Stern-purposed to achieve our doom severe.

Full Chorus.

Oh mother, hear me, Mother Night,
 Who brought me forth, a living dread,
 To scare the living and the dead,
 Latona's son does me despite ;—
 Stealing away my trembling prey,
 Destined a mother's murder to requite.

Now o'er the victim lift the dread refrain,
 The Furies' death-hymn, madness-fraught ;—
 Torch of the brain, from Hades brought,—
 Soul-binding, lyreless, mortal-blighting strain.

Antistrophe.

For Fate supreme ordains that we
 This office hold for evermore :—
 Mortals imbrued with kindred gore
 We scathe, till under earth they flee ;
 And when in death
 They yield their breath,
 In Hades still our thralls they be.

Now o'er the victim lift the dread refrain,
 The Furies' death-hymn, madness-fraught ;—
 Torch of the brain, from Hades brought,—
 Soul-binding, lyreless, mortal-blighting strain."

In answering stanzas they acknowledge and exult in the hatefulness of their office, asserting it with a diabolical confidence which reminds one—if human malice can so nearly approach the hate of deities—of Shylock's deliberate atrocity. And if they remind us of the Jew, so the pure bright being who now appears must remind us of the merciful wisdom, gentle yet determined, of Portia. Minerva comes, like Portia, to defend the righteous man from the apparently legal claims of his cruel enemies. She comes in her warlike beauty, and alights from her chariot, and, holding the long spear in her hand, as the sailor sees her from the far point of Sunium shining in the sunlight on the summit of her temple, stands in the front and speaks :—

“ A voice I heard from far Scamander's banks
 Invoking me.”

And now what do I see? Who are ye, whose forms are not like mortals nor yet like goddesses? and who

is the man who sits as suppliant at my image? The Chorus explain their titles and office; the goddess listens to them all with marked respect, but condemns their unfair attempt to deny Orestes his defence. At last they leave the issue in her hands, and she turns to the defendant:—

“What wilt answer in thy turn,
O stranger? Tell thy country and thy race,
And thy misfortunes, then ward off this blame;
If, trusting in the right, thou thus dost sit
Clasping mine image, near my sacred shrine,
Ixion-like, a suppliant revered,
To all of these make answer clear to me.”

His answer is dignified and clear:—

“Athena, queen! matter of grave import
First will I from thy words last-uttered purge.
Not blood-polluted am I, nor doth stain
Cleave to thine image from thy suppliant's hand.
Sure proof of this I will adduce;—'tis law
That voiceless lives the man defiled by blood,
Till purifier's hand hath him besprent
With victim's blood, slain in life's budding prime.
Long since at other shrines have been performed,
With victims and with streams, these lustral rites.
Thus then this care, as cancelled, I dismiss.
My lineage, what it is, thou soon shalt hear.
Argive am I, my sire thou knewest well,
Marshal of naval heroes, Agamemnon,
In league with whom thou madest Ilion,
Troya's proud city, an uncitied waste.
The hero home returned, and basely fell;
For him, entangled in a subtle net,

My mother, black of soul, did reave of life ;
 The bath bore witness to the deed of blood.
 Myself, long time an exile, coming home,
 Slew her who bare me,—I deny it not,—
 Avenging my dear father, blood for blood.
 But Loxias* is sharer in my guilt
 Who goads of anguish to my heart announced,
 Unless the guilty found from me their due.
 My deed, or just, or unjust, do thou judge ;—
 Whate'er thy verdict, I shall be content."

Minerva shrinks from taking on herself the weight of the decision, fearing to enrage the Furies against her land if she reject their suit, fearing to wrong a suppliant if she grant their claim ; and so she founds a court :—

" But since this weighty cause hath lighted here,
 Judges of murder, bound by oath, I'll choose,
 Solemn tribunal for all future time.
 But for yourselves call witnesses and proofs,—
 Sworn evidence collect to aid your suit ;
 Myself the noblest of my citizens,
 To whom is dear the sanctity of oaths,
 Will cull ; then hither come to judge this cause."

The Chorus now renew their chant, and set forth at length the evils that will ensue if in this case their victim escapes. No crime will then be restrained ; then men will call in vain on Justice or Erinnyes, the only powers who can keep men guiltless and happy. If Awe dwells in the heart, the man may live well, safe from excesses ; but he who is careless and knows not

* Apollo—so named from the ambiguity of his oracles.

Fear will spurn with atheist foot the altar of Justice,
and meet with certain retribution.

Strophe.

“ But who unforced, with spirit free
Dares to be just, is ne'er unblest ;
Whelmed utterly he cannot be :
But for the wretch with lawless breast,
Bold seizer of promiscuous prey,—
I warn you,—he, perforce, his sail
Shall strike amid the conquering gale,
When shrouds and yards dismasted own its sway.”

Antistrophe.

“ He cries, but 'mid the whirlpool's roar
None heeds him ; for the gods deride
Eyeing the boaster, proud no more,
Struggling amid the surging tide ;
Shorn of his strength he yields to Fate ;—
The cape he weathers not, but thrown
On Justice' reef, with precious freight,
He perisheth for aye, unwept, unknown.”

As this ode is ended the scene is changed again, and we are on Mars Hill, the Areopagus itself; and Pallas enters at the head of twelve Athenian citizens, the judges of the new tribunal. In that vacant space upon the floor of the theatre, in the centre of which the altar stands, these Areopagites take their places, sitting in semicircle just inside that lowest range of the spectators' seats on which are the magistrates of Athens. They are not separated far from the spectators; for in this grand final scene the whole Athenian

people are to be taken into the action, and act as judges with the Areopagites. Before them is the altar, on which two urns now stand to receive their votes, and between the altar and the stage the Chorus of Furies is drawn up. Pallas stands on the stage, and by her side a herald; and just as the trumpet's note, when "the king drinks to Hamlet," quickens our senses for the Shakespearian catastrophe, so now the trumpet rings through the Theatre of Bacchus, and summons all, spectators as well as actors, to take their share in the trial of Orestes. The goddess cries,—

“Herald, proclaim! Hold back the multitude,
Let Tuscan trumpet, filled with mortal breath.
Piercing the welkin with sonorous blast,
Ring out its brazen summons to the crowd:
For, this tribunal seated, it befits
Silence should reign; so this assembled town
Shall learn the laws I sanction for all time,
So may this stranger's cause be fairly judged.”

So now Apollo enters, and the pleading begins. The Furies examine Orestes closely, and he admits the crime, but justifies it, and ends by calling on Apollo. The god pleads his suppliant's cause, and shows, in answer to the Chorus, that the tie which binds a man to his father is even closer than the mother's, since a child can be born without a mother, as Pallas was herself, who sprang full-armed from the head of Olympian Zeus. Before the votes are given Pallas charges the court, and her words are meant for the assembled citizens of Athens:—

"Hear ye my statute, men of Attica,—
 Ye who of bloodshed judge this primal cause ;
 Nay, and in future aye shall Ægeus' host
 Revere this great tribunal. This the hill
 Of Ares, seat of Amazons, their tent,
 What time 'gainst Theseus, breathing hate, they came,
 Waging fierce battle, and their towers upreared,
 A counter-fortress to Acropolis ;—
 To Ares they did sacrifice, and hence
 This rock is titled Areopagus.
 Here then shall sacred Awe, to Fear allied,
 By day and night my lieges hold from wrong,
 Save if themselves do innovate my laws.
 If thou with mud, or influx base, bedim
 The sparkling water, nought thou'lt find to drink.
 Nor Anarchy, nor Tyrant's lawless rule
 Commend I to my people's reverence ;—
 Nor let them banish from their city Fear ;
 For who 'mong men, uncurbed by Fear, is just ?
 Thus holding Awe in seemly reverence,
 A bulwark for your state shall ye possess,
 A safeguard to protect your city-walls,
 Such as no mortals elsewhere can boast,
 Neither in Scythia nor in Pelops' realm.
 Behold ! This court august, untouched by bribes,
 Sharp to avenge, wakeful for those who sleep,
 Establish I, a bulwark to this land.
 These warnings to my lieges I address,
 To unborn ages reaching. Judges, rise,
 Assume the pebbles, and decide the cause,
 Your oath revering. All hath now been said."

Now one by one the judges rise and drop their votes
 alternately into each urn, while between each Apollo
 and the Chorus utter in turn two lines of warning and

appeal. When the last judge has resumed his seat, Pallas herself, still standing on the stage, holds up a voting-pebble and speaks thus :—

“ With me it rests to give the casting-vote,
 And to Orestes I my suffrage pledge.
 For to no mother do I owe my birth ;
 But I, in all save wedlock, praise the male.
 In very truth I am my father’s child,
 Nor care I to avenge a woman’s death
 Who slew her husband, guardian of the house.
 Orestes, judged by equal votes, prevails,
 The pebbles now pour quickly from the urns,
 Judges, to whom this office is assigned.”

While the votes are counted Orestes and the Chorus express in turn their anxiety and suspense. At last the goddess thus declares the verdict :—

“ Orestes has escaped the doom of blood,
 For equal are the numbers of the votes.”*

With eager eloquence Orestes pours out his thanks to Pallas, and promises the eternal friendship of his city to Athens. He promises this not only in the fiction of the play, but in real earnest, to Athens, here gathered in the theatre ; for just now, when this play is being presented, an alliance has been contracted between Argos and Athens. Loud, therefore, is the applause with which his words are greeted :—

* She thus gives her casting-vote, and establishes that principle of Athenian law by which, when the votes were equal, the decision was always declared in favour of acquittal. The casting-vote thus given on the side of mercy was called the “*Calculus Minervæ*,” or “*Minerva’s pebble*.”

“ Now homeward I depart,
 Pledged to thy country and thy lieges here
 By oath, to be revered for evermore,
 That never helmsman of the Argive State
 Shall hither bear the well-appointed spear.
 For we, ourselves, though couching in the grave,
 On those who violate these present oaths
 By sore perplexities will work, and send
 Distressful marches, and, with omens dire,
 Crossings of streams, till they repent their toil.
 But unto those who keep this pledge, and honour
 Athena’s city with confederate spear,
 To them we will be gracious evermore.
 Hail, goddess, and these city-wardens, hail !
 Still may your gripe be fatal to your foes,
 While victory and safety crown your spear.”

With this Orestes departs, and the main action of the play is over. The curse is removed, and the house of Pelops is free. But just as we have seen that each sad catastrophe is accompanied with intimations of fresh trouble to come, so this happy ending brings with it a train of blessings.

The Chorus are at first furious with indignation that their ancient power is thus trampled under foot by the younger deities, but gradually, by the mild eloquence of Pallas, they are appeased, and consent to accept a temple and worship in her city ; and instead of the curses with which they were threatening the land, to shed forth upon it every blessing. The goddess bids them send good gifts :—

“ Such as, with gracious influence, from earth,
 From dew of ocean, and from heaven, attend

On conquest not ignoble. That soft gales,
 With sunshine blowing, wander o'er the land ;
 That earth's fair fruit, rich increase of the flocks
 Fail not my citizens for evermore,
 With safety of the precious human seed ;—
 But, for the impious,—weed them promptly out,
 For I, like one who tendeth plants, do love
 This race of righteous men, by grief unscathed :—
 Such be thy charge. Be mine not to endure
 That, among mortals, in war's mighty game,
 Athena's city be not conquest-crowned."

And in a new strain they sing :—

" Pallas, thy chosen seat be henceforth mine !
 No more the city I despise
 Which Zeus omnipotent and Ares prize,
 Altar of refuge, glorious shrine,
 Stronghold of Grecian deities,
 For which, propitious, now I pray,
 Pouring my sacred lay ;
 Springing to light from earth's dark womb,
 May life's fair germs prolific bloom,
 Lured by the solar ray.

Here may no tree-destroying mildew sweep,—
 (So show I forth my grace,)
 May no fierce heat within these bounds alight,
 Blasting the tender buds ; no sterile blight,
 Disastrous, onward creep.
 But in due season here may flocks of worth
 Twin yeanelings bear ; and may this race,
 Enriched with treasures of the earth,
 Honour the Heaven-sent grace !"

Converted thus into kind deities,* Eumenides henceforth instead of Furies, they are led forth in cheerful procession to their temples under the Acropolis. Pallas goes in front to show them to their dwelling; behind them the twelve judges follow, and last a train of women march with blazing torches. Up the broad steps that lead from the orchestra to the stage, along the whole front of the theatre, the stately procession moves, and passes slowly out of sight to go to the crypts in whose gloomy sanctity these daughters of the night are worshipped. And as they go, the escort-hymn is sung:—

Chorus of the Escort.

“ Night’s hoary children, venerable train,
With friendly escort leave the hallowed fane.

All. Rustics, glad shouts of triumph raise.

Cho. In ancient crypts remote from light,
Victims await you and the hallowed rite.

All. People, ring out your notes of praise.

Cho. With promise to this land of blessings rare,
Down the steep path ye awful beings wend,
Rejoicing in the torch light’s dazzling glare.

All. Your cries of jubilee ring out amain.

* The title is really due to that dislike of the Greeks to calling unpleasant things by their true names, which made them call the Black Sea the Euxine, or “ Hospitable Sea.”

Cho. Let torch-lights and libations close the rear.
Thus Zeus, all-seeing, and the Fates descend,
To bless these citizens to Pallas dear.

All. Your cry of jubilee ring out amain."

And so it is all over. Very dimly and scantily the scenes have been represented here: we have had but half the play, even in this meagre English; and we have lost altogether the beauty of colouring, the grandeur of the music, and, above all, the sympathy of assembled Athens. But even thus we can hardly wonder if the consent of posterity has given the palm for artistic greatness to the Trilogy of Orestes.

Let us look back for a moment at the scenes that have passed before us, from the watchman on his tower in the lonely darkness, to the blaze of torches that has just parted from our gaze. Let us see Agamemnon coming home in pride, Cassandra in the storm of her wild emotion, Clytemnestra defying the elders of her country; watch, again, Electra with her train of captives bringing their offerings to the dead hero's tomb; Orestes in his unswerving course of vengeance — not Hamlet-like, pondering and regretting, but going straight though sadly to his task; see him driven in madness forth; recall Apollo standing angry with his bow, the hideous Furies chanting their Binding Hymn, bright Pallas holding up the acquitting pebble, Orestes going forth freed and rejoicing;—

has it been so dry and lifeless after all, this Greek story ?

And if we could see it as they saw it, under the Athenian sky, and feel as they felt then, to whom its religious meaning was a creed, to whom the Argive alliance was a real interest, and the Areopagus a cause to fight for, should we have needed any apology for *Æschylus* ?

END OF *ÆSCHYLUS.*

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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.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAP. I. INTRODUCTION,	1
" II. ŒDIPUS THE KING,	20
" III. ŒDIPUS AT COLONUS,	45
" IV. ANTIGONE,	70
" V. THE DEATH OF AJAX,	98
" VI. THE MAIDENS OF TRACHIS,	123
" VII. PHILOCTETES,	136
" VIII. ELECTRA,	162

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 Cephissus, 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 Panæus 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; Croesus 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 malgré 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 incessamment l'entraîne ;
 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 *Cædipus* 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 diadème.”

—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 be-
 friend.

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 ;
 Hurl’d 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 disentangle-
 ment of the plot, in which Sophocles was thought espe-
 cially 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 (Edipus 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 malgré 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

“Trode 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 deciding 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 deposes 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 grand-child (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 Ædipus, 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 Ducus, 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 Thorian 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), “*cælo tegitur qui non habet urnam.*”

Thebes after the death of *Ædipus*, 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 *Mencœus*, 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 mitzuhassen, 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 pryncedom’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 carcasses 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 dew 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 Eriboëa, 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, II. 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 oftentimes 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.

‡ Præd'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 fatherland!” 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 baldrick 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 Eury-saces 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 Cæta, 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 overwhelm old Cadmus' son,
 Rush redoubled labours on,
 Thick as round the Cretan shore
 The swollen 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 Cæta 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 Ceta, 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 Ceta ; 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 an 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 herogod 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 adamant 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 condolment 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 CEnomaus, and was bribed by Pelops to take out the lynch-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."*

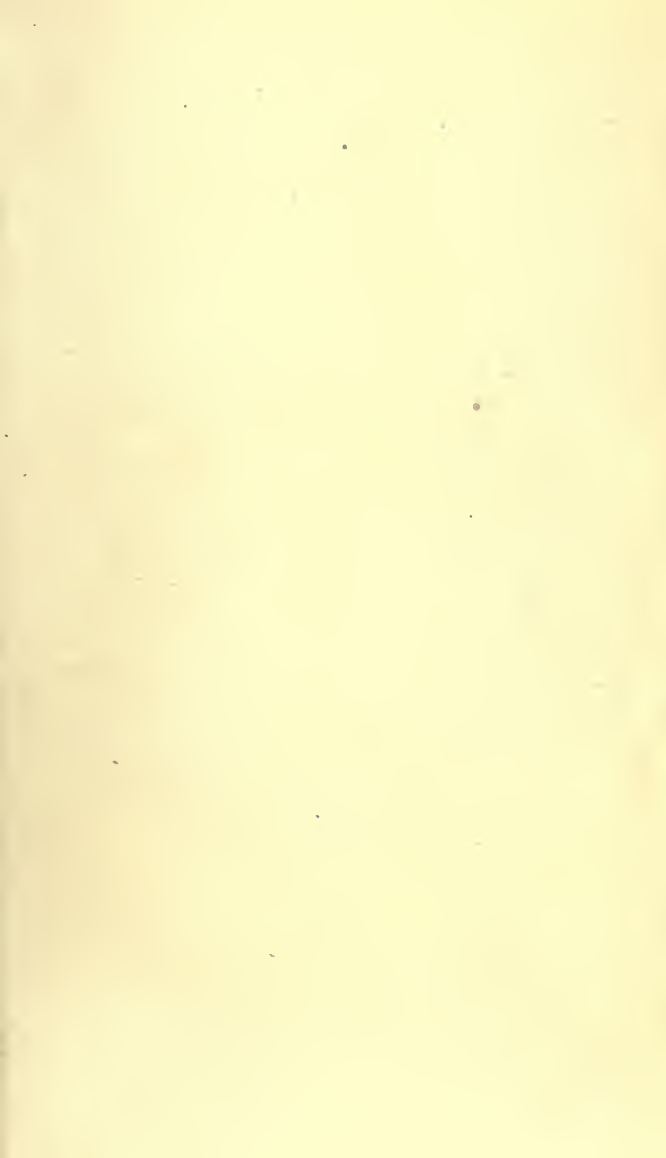
In an ancient epigram, a statue of Bacchus (the patron god of the drama) is supposed to shadow and protect the tomb of Sophocles. This statue holds in its hands a mask, representing a woman's face of perfect beauty. "Whose face is that?" asks a passer-by. "The face of Antigone," is the answer; "or, if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

* Lord Lytton's Athens, ii. 568.

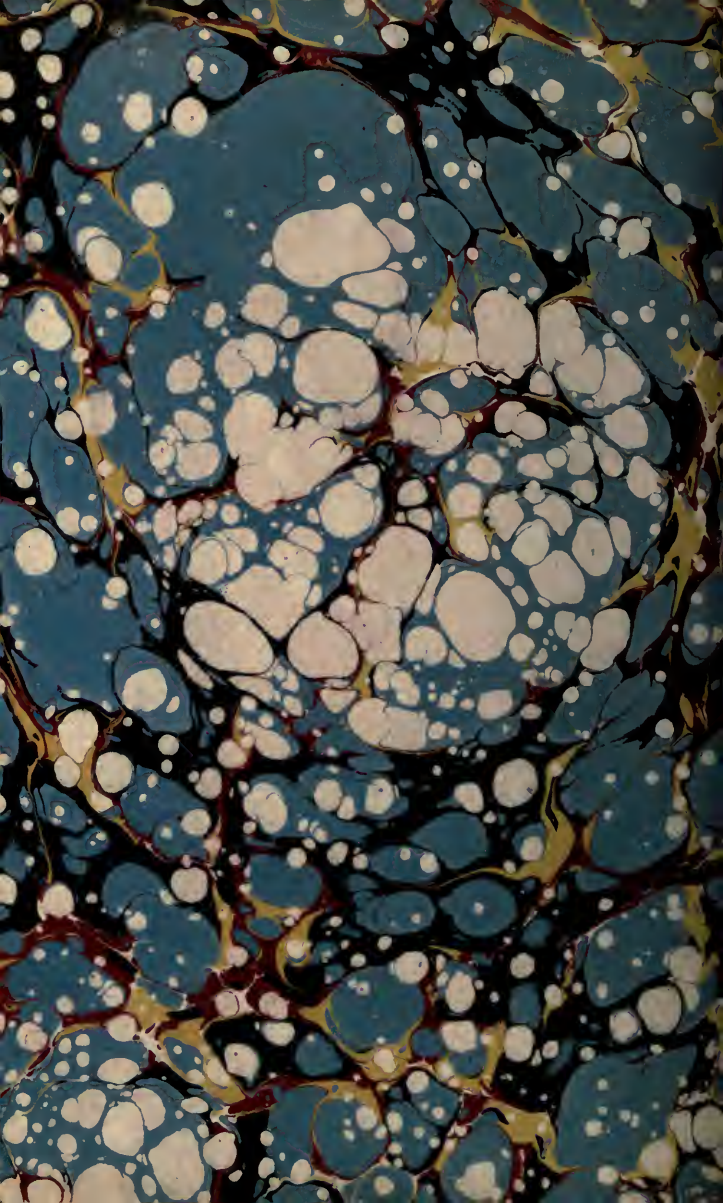
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