

P L A T O.

CHAPTER I.

LIFE OF PLATO.

“Eagle! why soarest thou above that tomb,—
To what sublime and star-y-paven home
Floatest thou?

I am the image of great Plato's spirit,
Ascending heaven; Athens doth inherit
His corpse below.”

—(*Epitaph translated from the Greek by Shelley.*)

PLATO was born at Ægina in B.C. 430—the same year that Pericles died—of a noble family which traced its descent from Codrus, the last hero-king of Attica. Little is told us of his early years beyond some stories of the divinity which hedged him in his childhood, and a dream of Socrates,* in which he saw a cygnet

* Athenæus tells us of another dream, by no means so complimentary to Plato, in which his spirit appeared to Socrates in the form of a crow, which planted its claws firmly in the bald head of the philosopher, and flapped its wings. The interpretation of this dream, according to Socrates (or Athenæus), was, that Plato would tell many lies about him.

fly towards him, nestle in his breast, and then spread its wings and soar upwards, singing most sweetly. The next morning Ariston appeared, leading his son Plato to the philosopher, and Socrates knew that his dream was fulfilled.

It is easy to fill in the meagre outlines of the biography as given us by Diogenes Laertius; for Plato lived in a momentous time, when Athens could not afford to let any of her sons stand aloof from military service, and when every citizen must have been more or less an actor in the history of his times. Plato of course underwent the usual training of an Athenian gentleman, such as he has sketched it himself in the "Protagoras;" first attending the grammar school, where he learnt his letters, and committed to memory long passages from the poets, which he was taught to repeat with proper emphasis and modulation; and the frequent quotations from Homer in his Dialogues prove how thoroughly this part of his mental training was carried out.* Then he was transferred to the Master who was to infuse harmony and rhythm into his soul by means of the lyre and vocal music. Then he learned mathematics, for which subject he showed a special aptitude; and we hear of him

* Several pieces of poetry bearing Plato's name have come down to us; and there is a graceful epitaph on "Stella," ascribed to him, which Shelley has thus translated:—

"Thou wert the morning star among the living,
Till thy fair light had fled;
Now having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving
New splendour to the dead."

wrestling in the palæstra, where his breadth of shoulders stood him in good stead, and winning prizes at the Isthmian games. He also found time to study "the old masters" of philosophy, and (as might be expected) the two whose works attracted him the most were Heraclitus and Pythagoras. The melancholy of the one, and the mysticism of the other, found an echo in his own thoughts.

He was fifteen at the time of the expedition to Sicily, and was probably among the crowd which watched the great fleet sail out of the harbour of Piræus in all the pomp and circumstance of war; and two years afterwards he must have shared in the general despair, when the news came that the fleet and the flower of the army had perished, and with them the hopes of Athens.

Then Declea (only fifteen miles from the city) was fortified by the Spartans, and proved a very thorn in the side of Attica; for flocks and herds were destroyed, slaves fled thither in numbers, and watch had to be kept by the Athenians night and day, to check the continual sallies made from thence by the enemy. Plato was now eighteen, and was enrolled in the list which corresponded to the modern Landwehr, and had to take his share in that harassing garrison duty which fell on rich and poor alike, when the citizens (as Thucydides tells us) slept in their armour on the ramparts, and Athens more resembled a military fort than a city.

Then followed the loss of prestige and the defection of allies; for the subject islands either openly revolted

or intrigued secretly with Sparta ; and Alcibiades, the only Athenian who could have saved Athens, was an exile and a renegade, using Persian gold to levy Spartan troops against his country. Suddenly the Athenians, with the energy of despair, made a prodigious effort to recover the empire of the seas, which was passing from their hands. They melted down their treasures ; they used the reserve fund which Pericles had stored up for such an emergency ; and within thirty days they had equipped a fresh fleet of over a hundred sail. Then followed a general levy of the citizens ; every man who could bear arms was pressed into the service ; freedom was promised to any slave who would volunteer ; and even the Knights (of whom Plato was one) forgot the dignity of their order, hung up their bridles in the Acropolis, and went on board the fleet as marines. There is no reason to suppose that Plato shunned his duty at such a crisis ; and we may therefore conclude that he volunteered with the rest, served with the squadron which relieved Mitylene, and was present at the victory of Arginusæ shortly afterwards.

Soon Alcibiades was recalled, and his genius gave a different character to the war ; but the success of the Athenians was only temporary. Lysander came upon the scene ; and on the fatal shore of *Ægos-Potami* the Athenian fleet was destroyed—almost without a blow being struck. Then followed the blockade of Athens, the consequent famine, and the despair of the citizens, with the foe without and two rival factions within, till at last the city surrendered, and the long walls were pulled down to the sound of Spartan music.

We have no clue, beyond a casual reference in Xenophon, as to what part Plato took in subsequent events. His own tastes and sympathies lay with the few; and all his intimate friends were among the oligarchs (the "good men and true," as they termed themselves), who, by a *coup d'état*, effected what is known as the Revolution of the Four Hundred. A section of these formed the execrated Thirty Tyrants. Critias, the master-spirit of this body, was Plato's uncle, and probably had considerable influence over him. But be this as it may, we find Plato attracted by the programme in which the oligarchs pledged themselves to reform abuses and to purge the state of evil-doers; and for a time, at all events, he was an avowed partisan of the Thirty. But they soon threw off the mask, and a Reign of Terror followed, which made their name for ever a byword among the Athenians. Plato was probably in the first instance disgusted by the jealous intolerance of this new party, which drove the aged Protagoras into exile, and proscribed philosophical lectures; but when this intolerance was followed by numerous assassinations, he was utterly horrified, and at once withdrew from public life, and from all connection with his former friends.

There was little indeed to tempt a man of Plato's spirit and principles to meddle with the politics of his day. The great statesmen, and with them the bloom and brilliancy of the Periclean age, had passed away; and the very name of Pericles, as De Quincey says, "must have sounded with the same echo from the past as that of Pitt to the young men of our first

Reform Bill." The long war had done its work. Not only had it wellnigh exhausted the revenues and strength of Athens, but it had brought in its train, as necessary consequences, ignoble passions, a selfish party spirit, a confusion of moral sentiments, and an audacious scepticism, which were going far to undermine the foundations of right and wrong. One revolution had followed another so rapidly that public confidence in the constitution was fast disappearing; and the worst symptom of a declining nation had already shown itself, in that men of genius and honour were beginning to despair of their country and to withdraw from public life. We can well believe that the picture which Plato draws of the Philosopher in his "Republic" was no fancy sketch:—

Those who belong to this small class have tasted how sweet and blessed a possession philosophy is, and have also seen and been satisfied of the madness of the multitude, and known that there is no one who ever acts honestly in the administration of states, nor any helper who will save any one who maintains the cause of the just. Such a saviour would be like a man who has fallen among wild beasts, unable to join in the wickedness of his friends, and would have to throw away his life before he had done any good to himself or others. And he reflects upon all this, and holds his peace, and does his own business. He is like one who retires under the shelter of a wall in the storm of dust and sleet which the driving wind hurries along; and when he sees the rest of mankind full of wickedness, he is content if only he can live his own life, and be pure from evil or unrighteousness, and depart in peace and goodwill, with bright hopes.*

* Republic, iv. (Jowett.)

The next twelve years must have been the period of Plato's greatest intimacy with Socrates; and he was the great philosopher's constant companion until the day of his death. He had now no ties to bind him to Athens—perhaps, indeed, he did not feel secure there—and he went to live at Megara with his friend Euclid. Then he set out upon those travels of which we hear so much and know so little; “and” (says an old historian), “whilst studious youth were crowding to Athens from every quarter in search of Plato for their master, that philosopher was wandering along the banks of Nile or the vast plains of a barbarous country, himself a disciple of the old men of Egypt.” * After storing his mind with the wisdom of the Egyptians, Plato is said to have gone on to Palestine and Phœnicia—to have reached China disguised as an oil merchant—to have had the “Unknown God” revealed to him by Jewish rabbis—and to have learned the secrets of the stars from Chaldæan astronomers. But these extended travels are probably a fiction.

His visit to Sicily, however, rests on better evidence. He made a journey thither in the year 387 B.C., with the object of witnessing an eruption of Mount Etna—already fatal to one philosopher, Empedocles. On his way he stayed at Tarentum with his friend Archytas, the great mathematician, and a member of the Pythagorean brotherhood. This order—which, like the Jesuits, was exclusive, ascetic, and ambitious—had formerly had its representatives in every city of Magna

* Valerius Maximus, quoted in Lewes's *Hist. of Philos.*, i. 200.

Græcia, and had influenced their political history accordingly. Even then their traditions and mystic ritual, as well as the ability shown by individual members, daily attracted new converts. Among these was Dion, the young brother-in-law of Dionysius, Tyrant of Syracuse. Dion was introduced by the Pythagoreans to Plato, and their acquaintance soon warmed into a friendship which has become historical. There was much on both sides that was attractive. In Plato, Dion found the friend who never flattered, the teacher who never dogmatised, the companion who was never wearisome. The gracious eloquence, the charm of manner, the knowledge of life, and, above all, the generous and noble thoughts so frankly expressed by Plato, must have had the same effect upon him as the conversation of Socrates had upon Alcibiades. His heart was touched, his enthusiasm was kindled, and he became a new man. There dawned upon him the conception of another Syracuse,—freed from slavery, and from the oppressive presence of foreign guards—self-governed, and with contented and industrious citizens—and Dion himself, the author of her liberties and the founder of her laws, idolised by a grateful people.

These day-dreams had a strong effect on Dion ; and Plato partly shared in his enthusiasm. As in his own model Republic, all might be accomplished “if philosophers were kings.” Even as things were, if Dionysius would but look with a favourable eye upon Plato and his teaching, much might be done in the way of easing the yoke of tyranny which pressed so heavily upon the wretched Syracusans.

Accordingly, Plato visited Syracuse in company with Dion, and was formally presented at court. But the results were unsatisfactory. It was not, indeed, likely that the philosopher, who was the sworn foe of Tyranny in the abstract, and who looked upon the Tyrant as the incarnation of all that was evil in human nature, would, either by flattery or plain speaking, convince Dionysius of the error of his ways. Plato had several interviews with Dionysius; and we are told that he enlarged upon his favourite doctrine of the happiness of the virtuous and the inevitable misery of the wicked, till all who heard him were charmed by his eloquence, except the despot himself, who in a rage ordered him to be taken down to the market-place there and then, and to be sold as a slave to the highest bidder; that so he might put his own philosophy to a practical test, and judge for himself if the virtuous man was still happy in chains or in prison. Plato was accordingly sold, and was "bought in" by his friends for twenty minæ. Another account is, that he was put on board a trireme and landed at Ægina on the way home, where he was sold, and bought by a generous stranger, who set him at liberty and restored him to Athens. In any case, Plato might consider himself fortunate in escaping from such a lion's den as the court of the savage Dionysius; and he had learnt a salutary lesson, that theoretical politics are not so easily put into practice as men think, and that caution and discretion are necessary in dealing with the powers that be.

On his return to Athens, weary of politics, and wishing to escape from the turmoil and distractions

of the town, he retired to a house and garden which he had purchased (or inherited, for the accounts differ) at Colonus. There, or in the famous "olive grove" of the Academy close by, he gave lectures to, or held discussions with, a distinguished and constantly increasing body of pupils. Sauntering among the tall plane-trees, or pacing those historical colonnades, might be found all the wit and genius of the day,—men of science and men of letters—artists, poets, and, in greater numbers than all, would-be philosophers. The pupils of Plato, unlike the poor crushed followers of Socrates, are described by one comic poet as dandies with curled hair, elegant dress, and affected walk; and we are told by another how the master's broad shoulders towered above the rest, and how he charmed them with his sweet speech, "melodious as the song of the cicadas in the trees above his head." No one must suppose, however, that the subjects of discussion in the Academy were trivial or frivolous. Over the gates was to be seen the formidable inscription—"Let none but Geometricians enter here;"* and, according to Aristotle, the lectures were on the Supreme Good—*i.e.*, the One, as contrasted with the Infinite.

Twenty years thus passed, and Plato's eloquence was daily attracting to the Academy fresh students from all parts of Greece, when he received a second summons to visit Sicily from his old friend and pupil Dion, with whom he had kept up a constant correspondence. Dionysius I. was dead, and his empire, "fastened"

* Sir W. Hamilton considers this tradition "at least six centuries too late."—*Essays*, p. 27, note.

(as he expressed it) "by chains of adamant," had passed to his son—a young, vain, and inexperienced prince, who had not inherited either the ability or energy of his father. Dion still retained his position as minister and family adviser, and there seemed to be at last an opening under the new *régime* for carrying out his favourite scheme of restoring liberty to the Syracusans. Accordingly he spared no pains to impress the young prince with the wisdom and eloquence of Plato; and so successfully did he work upon his better feelings, that Dionysius, says Plutarch, "was seized with a keen and frantic desire to hear and converse with the philosopher." He accordingly sent a pressing invitation to Plato, and this was coupled with a touching appeal from Archytas and other Pythagoreans, who looked eagerly forward to a regeneration of Syracuse. Plato (though reluctant to leave his work at the Academy) felt constrained to revisit Sicily—"less with the hope of succeeding in the intended conversion of Dionysius, than from the fear of hearing both himself and his philosophy taunted with confessed impotence, as fit only for the discussion of the school, and shrinking from all application to practice."*

He was received at Syracuse with every mark of honour and respect. Dionysius himself came in his chariot to meet him on landing, and a public sacrifice was offered as a thanksgiving for his arrival. And at first all things went well. There was a reformation in the manners of the court. The royal banquets were

* Grote, Hist. of Greece, vii. 517.

curtailed; the conversation grew intellectual; and geometry became so much the fashion that nothing was to be seen in the palace but triangles and figures traced in the sand. Many of the foreign soldiers were dismissed; and at an anniversary sacrifice, when the herald made the usual prayer—"May the gods long preserve the Tyranny, and may the Tyrant live for ever,"—Dionysius is said to have stopped him with the words—"Imprecate no such curse on me or mine." So deeply was he impressed by Plato's earnest pleading in behalf of liberty and toleration, that he was even prepared, we are told, to establish a limited monarchy in place of the existing despotism, and to restore free government to those Greek cities in Sicily which had been enslaved by his father. But Plato discountenanced any such immediate action; his pupil must go through the prescribed training, must reform himself, and be imbued with the true philosophical spirit, before he could be allowed to put his principles into practice. And thus, like other visionary schemes of reform, the golden opportunity passed away for ever. The ascendancy of "the Sophist from Athens" (as Plato was contemptuously termed) roused the jealousy of the old Sicilian courtiers, and their slanders poisoned the mind of Dionysius, whose enthusiasm had already cooled. He grew suspicious of the designs of Dion, and, without giving him a chance of defending himself against his accusers, had him put on board a vessel and sent to Italy as an exile. Plato himself was detained a state prisoner in the palace, flattered and caressed by Dionysius, who appears to have had a

sincere admiration and regard for him, but at the same time to have found the Platonic discipline too severe a trial for his own weak and luxurious nature. At last he was allowed to depart, after giving a conditional promise to return, in the event of Dion being recalled from exile. It is said that, as he was embarking, Dionysius said to him—"When thou art in the Academy with thy philosophers, thou wilt speak ill of me." "God forbid," was Plato's answer, "that we should have so much time to waste in the Academy as to speak of Dionysius at all."

Ten years later Plato is induced—for the third and last time—by the earnest appeal of Dionysius to revisit Syracuse; and a condition of his coming was to be the recall of Dion. As before, he is affectionately welcomed, and is treated as an honoured guest; but so far from Dion being recalled, his property is confiscated by Dionysius, and his wife given in marriage to another man; and Plato (who only obtains leave to depart through the intercession of Archytas) is himself the bearer of the unwelcome news to Dion, whom he meets at the Olympic games on his way home. Dion (as we may easily imagine) is bitterly incensed at this last insult, and immediately sets about levying an army to assert his rights and procure his return by force. At Olympia he parts company from Plato, and the two friends never meet again. The remainder of Dion's eventful career (more romantic, perhaps, than that of any other hero of antiquity) has been well sketched by Mr Grote, who records his triumphant entry into Syracuse, his short-lived popularity, the intrigues and

conspiracy of Heraclides, whose life he had spared, and his base assassination by his friend Callippus.

Once more restored to Athens, Plato continued his lectures in the Academy, and also employed himself in composing those philosophical Dialogues which bear his name, and of which some thirty have come down to us. Several reasons probably contributed to make Plato throw his thoughts into this form. First, it was the only way in which he could give a just idea of the Socratic method, and of the persistent examination through which Socrates was wont to put all comers; again, he wished to show the chain of argument gradually unwinding itself, and by using the milder form of discussion and inquiry, to avoid even the appearance of dogmatism, especially as he must have often felt that he was treading on dangerous ground. Prolix and wearisome as some of these Dialogues may often seem to modern ears, we must remember that they were the first specimens of their kind; that they were written when the world was still young, when there was little writing of any sort, and when romances, essays, or "light literature" were unknown; while at the same time there was a clever, highly-educated, and sympathetic "public" ready then as now to devour, to admire, and to criticise. After the barren wastes of the old philosophy, with its texts and axioms, its quotations from the poets, and crude abstractions from nature, these Dialogues must have burst upon the Athenian world as an unexpected oasis upon weary travellers in the desert; and they must have hailed with delight these fresh springs of truth, and these

new pastures for thought and feeling. As a new phase of literature, we may well believe that they were received with the same interest and surprise as the appearance of the 'Spectator' in the last century, or the 'Waverley Novels' at the beginning of our own. They were, in fact, the *causeries de Lundi* of their age. Plato assuredly knew well the lively and versatile character of those for whom he was writing. The grave and didactic tone of a modern treatise on philosophy would have fallen very flat on the ears of an Athenian audience, accustomed to see their gods, statesmen, and philosophers brought upon the stage in a grotesque medley, and unsparingly caricatured. But not Momus himself (as a Greek would have said) could have turned these Dialogues into ridicule; and their very faults—their want of method and general discursiveness—must have been a relief after the formal commonplaces of the Sophists. Plato himself makes no pretence of following any rules or system. "Whither the argument blows, we will follow it," he says in the "Republic," and he is fond of telling us that a philosopher has plenty of time on his hands. But the vivacity and variety, the subtle humour—which can never be exactly reproduced in a translation—the charming scenes which serve as a framework to the discussion, and, above all, the purity and sweetness of the language, which earned for the writer the title of "The Attic Bee,"—all these were reasons for the popularity which these Dialogues undoubtedly enjoyed.

There is no means of fixing the order in which they were written, but they probably all belong to the last

forty years of his life. A story is indeed extant to the effect that Socrates heard the "Lysis" read to him, and exclaimed—"Good heavens! what a heap of falsehoods this young man tells about me!" but Socrates had in all probability died some years before the "Lysis" was published. The speakers in these Dialogues are no more historical than the characters in Shakspeare's plays, and Plato was (perhaps purposely) careless of dates and names. But the personages thus introduced serve their purpose. They give a life and a reality to the scenes and conversations which is wanting in Berkeley's Dialogues, and in all modern imitations, and their tempers and peculiarities are touched by a master-hand. But there is one character which Plato never paints, and that is—his own. Except in two casual allusions, he never directly or indirectly introduces himself; and no one can argue, from the internal evidence of his writings, as to what he was or was not. Like Shakspeare, he deserves Coleridge's epithet of "myriad-minded," for he appears to us in all shapes and characters. He was "sceptic, dogmatist, religious mystic and inquisitor, mathematical philosopher, artist, poet—all in one, or at least all in succession, during the fifty years of his philosophical life." *

There is one pervading feature of similarity in all the Dialogues, and that is, the style.† If Jove had spoken Greek (it was said of old), he would have

* Grote's Plato, i. 214.

† Sir Arthur Helps, himself a writer of purest English, has given us in 'Realmah' his ideas of what a perfect style should be. Every word in his description would closely apply to Plato,

spoken it like Plato ; and Quintilian—no mean critic—declared that his language soared so far at times above the ordinary prose, that it seemed as if the writer was inspired by the Delphic Oracle. But these very sentences which seem to us to flow so easily, and which we think must have been written *currente calamo*, were really elaborate in their simplicity ; and the anecdote of thirteen different versions of the opening sentence in the “ Republic ” having been found in the author’s handwriting is probably based upon fact.

Up to the age of eighty-one, Plato continued his literary work—“ combing, and curling, and weaving, and unweaving his writings after a variety of fashions ; ” * and death, so Cicero tells us, came upon him as he was seated at his desk, pen in hand. He was buried among the olive-trees in his own garden ; and his disciples celebrated a yearly festival in his memory.

As might be expected, such a man did not escape satire and detraction even in his own day. To say that he was ridiculed by the comic poets, is merely to say that he paid the penalty common to all eminence at Athens ; but he was accused of vanity, plagiarism, and what not, by writers such as Antisthenes and Aristoxenus, whose philosophy might have taught

especially the concluding lines ; . . . “ and withal there must be a sense of felicity about it, declaring it to be the product of a happy moment, so that you feel it will not happen again to that man who writes the sentence, nor to any other of the sons of men, to say the like thing so choicely, tersely, mellifluously, and completely.”—*Realma*, i. 175.

* Dionysius of Halicarnassus, quoted in Sewell’s *Dialogues of Plato*, p. 55.

them better. Athenæus, with whom no reputation is sacred, devotes six successive chapters to a merciless attack on his personal character ; and besides retailing some paltry anecdotes as to his being fond of figs, and inventing a musical water-clock which chimed the hours at night, he accuses him of jealousy and malevolence towards his brother philosophers, and tells a story to show his arrogance, and the dislike with which his companions regarded him. On the same evening that Socrates died (so says Athenæus), the select few who had been with him in the prison, met together at supper. All were sad and silent, and had not the heart to eat or drink. But Plato filled a cup with wine, and bade them be of good cheer, for he would worthily fill their master's place ; and he invited Apollodorus to drink his health, and passed him the cup. But Apollodorus refused it with indignation, and said, "I would rather have pledged Socrates in his hemlock, than pledge you in this wine."