

GOETHE'S FAUST.



AMONG the distinguished writers of modern times there is none, perhaps, whose works have met with such varying criticisms as those of Goethe, in his own country as well as abroad. In Germany, however, the opposition has never numbered men of the foremost rank, and consequently the battle has long been decided in his favor. France has almost from the start ranged herself among his enthusiastic admirers. England has longest held aloof, and despite the efforts of Carlyle and Matthew Arnold, neither her general reading public nor the critical world have, as yet, been gained over to an unqualified admission of his worth. But, however conflicting the views of men may have been concerning the general character of Goethe's poetry, with regard to his *Faust* the verdict is almost unanimous, that it is one of the grandest creations of the genius of man.

The historical basis of the *Faust*-legend has long been a matter of dispute, some critics going so far as to pronounce it entirely mythical, arguing, that the wild vagaries of sorcery and necromancy with which the original story is intermingled admits of no other interpretation. But the investigation which the publication of Goethe's drama set on foot, produced sufficient documentary evidence to place the historical character of Doctor Faustus beyond all doubt. This mysterious personage, who lived about the end of the 15th century, besides being a physician of great celebrity, seems to have acquired even greater fame as a grand-master of the occult arts, which occupied so large a space in the interest of those credulous ages, and attracted many of the most cultured and daring minds of the time. Their adepts were especially numerous among those who had caught the spirit of innovation that floated in the air, and were prone to throw off the time-honored restraints which religion and social custom had placed upon human conduct.

Faust, who belonged to this latter class,

gained special notoriety by the extraordinary claim he put forth of having obtained control over one of the denizens of the spirit world, who, under the name of Mephistopheles, accompanied him on his erratic course, ministering to his every whim and fancy, and even supplying him the means for satisfying his low, sensual propensities. It was through his agency that Faust was enabled to conjure up, from the realms below, the shade of Helen, of Trojan fame, who—it was seriously asserted by his contemporaries—appeared to him in a tangible, substantial form, clothed with that matchless beauty of old, and lived with him in unhallowed wedlock until the expiration of his career upon earth. For, in accordance with a compact made with Mephistopheles, the incarnate spirit of evil, Faust's earthly course was to run towards an awful consummation. For twenty-five years, he was to enjoy all that can please the heart and delight the fancy. Every command of his was to be obeyed, every desire to be satisfied by the ministrations of the Evil One. But at the end of that period the Prince of Darkness was to arise before him, no longer his slave but his master, and on the strength of a contract signed with Faust's own blood, he was to take possession of his soul and drag it to everlasting perdition. And this latter catastrophe, the story tells us, did actually take place on the summit of Mount Broken, the traditional pandemonium of German folklore. Thither, amid the weird surroundings of a wild and rugged nature, rendered still more horrible by a full attendance of its uncanny inhabitants, Faust, in the agony of despair, is dragged by his dread foe, at the solemn hour of midnight, and amid the shouts of derision of the fiendish host about him, his soul descends to its fearful doom.

That the idea embodied in the *Faust*-legend is a highly poetical one, is evidenced by the fact that it has been treated with varied success, by different writers in almost every European tongue, both before and after Goethe. The most notable productions, however, beside that of the German poet, are the musical