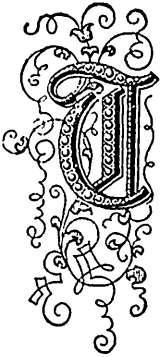


DEMOSTHENES' "DE CORONA."



THE characteristic that pre-eminently distinguishes man from the lower animals is language. Were this to be a disquisition on the faculty of speech, we should have ample food for reflection in the curious theories of the learned as to the origin and development of tongues; but as the aim is merely to call attention for a few fleeting moments to the most finished, the most pathetic, the most magnificent result in oratory ever achieved by a voice simply human, I am fain to put aside all philological discussion.

At a time like this, when the communication of international thought is so widespread; in a country like ours, wherein the tongue and the pen are, indeed, "mightier than the sword"; and in a community that prides itself upon intellectual refinement, there appears, in my humble judgment, no need for an apology in asking you to come with me in spirit up the river of the ages, from this vigorous new world into another world that, comparatively old and decrepit now, was yet in the heyday of its lusty prime, when the thunders of Demosthenes found an echo in all the hills of Hellas.

It may be premised that this great "Oration on the Crown" is a curious monument of the perfection to which the Greek Republics had brought their legislative system, a fact evidenced by the Decrees read and the laws quoted by the orator; it is, too, a wondrous disclosure of the complicated machinery of thought, of the "wheels within wheels" of human motives, of the unchanged and unchangeable but ever capricious passions of what, for want of a better name, we are pleased to call Human Nature; but, more than all, it is an astounding proof of the power of Genius, that divine spark which, at rare intervals falls from God's consuming fire into human hearts.

In these last days of Grecian liberty, when a king of Macedon—one of the outer "barbarians"—was head of the Amphictyonic Council; when the gold of Philip had been as full of harm to Grecian patriotism as his arms had been prodigal of ruin to Grecian freedom on the field of Chæronea; and yet when men had not clarked the fetters of slavery long enough to deaden all sound of the tremendous names of Marathon and Thermopylae, it need not excite surprise that in that memorable year, 330 B.C., the Hall of the Dikasts at Athens was thronged to overflowing by the multitudes that, from all parts of Greece, flocked to hear Æschines impeach Ctesiphon, and, through Ctesiphon, Demosthenes. From this impeachment arose the world-famous "Oration on the Crown."

The unlearned and, be it said with bated breath, possibly even some University graduates who have unwisely put Greek among the optional subjects, may vaguely regard the "*De Coronâ*" as either a panegyric of republican institutions or a diatribe against monarchy. It is neither. It was a speech made by Demosthenes in defence of a quasi-client, Ctesiphon, who had been accused by Æschines and his faction of the crime of "*Paranoma*," a word which cannot, I think, be better defined in English than as "a breach of the Constitution." The accused man, an ordinary citizen of Athens, had proposed a decree that, according to the Athenian usage, the State should bestow a crown of gold on Demosthenes in grateful and loving testimony of his civic virtues.

Taking advantage of an obsolete law that no magistrate or public official should receive such a reward from the State until he had given an account of his stewardship into the hands of the people, and openly expressing doubt as to the patriotism and virtue of Demosthenes, Æschines, the bitter foe of the man whom Ctesiphon proposed to honour, objected to the Decree, and duly registered his protest according to law. But in the ups and downs of that stormy time, and on the shifting sands