

PHASES OF ATHENIAN POLITICS.



FAMOUS Englishman once said there was more to be learnt from a column of the *Times* than from all Thucydides, forgetting how often the column of the *Times* is but the echo of Thucydides (some Periclean ideal, e.g., of plain thinking and high thinking or of high art which yet never degenerates into æsthetic-

cism : φιλοσοφοῦμεν μετὰ εὐτελείας, φιλοκαλοῦμεν ἄνευ μαλακίας), forgetting too that often the most eager reader of the *Times* and of Thucydides is one and the same person, as in the case of the historian Grote. To Grote, Athenian politics were as real as English, and the part which he himself played in the politics of England was the expression of the views which he had formed from studying the politics of Athens : just as conversely, since his day, other scholars have modified their views of Athenian democracy in the light of their fuller experience of democracy in England.

The first figure of surpassing interest in the history of Athenian democracy is Pericles, the idealist and reformer ; whose ideals, whether practicable or not, are in sympathy with the ideals of our own age : he attempted in Athens, under favorable conditions, what democracy is attempting to-day, under conditions which even in America are not more favorable,—the building up of a state in which caste privileges and caste prejudices should disappear ; in which there should be no aristocracy but the aristocracy of merit, and no democracy but the democracy of enlightenment, moderation and liberty ; a levelling up, not a levelling down. It was for this purpose that he attached payment to attendance on the jury panel, parliament and theatres, that the poorest citizen might enjoy the education furnished by law, politics and art. If his system diffused higher education too widely, and created a taste for professional life in excess of the demand for men so educated, his mistake arose only from the generous enthusiasm and boundless hope of the age, which was like the Elizabethan age in England or the age which gave birth to the Revolution in France. The passion for encyclopædic culture was in the air, and every one aspired to be like the sophist Hippias, a universal genius. Pericles' mood was the mood which inspired in Milton the eloquence of the Arespagitian. The idealism in which his thoughts habitually moved can be traced in the Funeral Speech, especially in his reference to the causes of Athenian courage and the consolations of old age.

The next type of Athenian statesman is Nicias : the moderate and respectable conservative, with negative virtues and no extremes, except an extreme and, as it turned out, a fatal piety. In the unscrupulous politics of ancient Greece such a man attracted strong regard and affection, and Nicias, in spite of his recklessness in the matter of Pylos, was venerated in Athens and sent against his will to Sicily, where his weakness and selfishness ruined the Athenian army. As Mirabeau was lost to France on account of his bad character, so Nicias was raised to power in Athens on the strength of personal merits : in either case the confusion of moral with political excellence was fatal to the fortunes of the people who suffered their thoughts to be thus confused.

The next phase of politics worth attention is presented by Cleon, the extreme democrat. By democracy Cleon appears to have understood, not a fair field and no favor, but class government by, and in the interests of, the poor, whom he identified with the people or demus. He was, however, a man of force of character and strong sense, and his description of Athenian inconstancy, of the idealising and unpractical element which was at once the strength and weakness of Athens, remains still the most vivid and effective piece of character-painting to be found in Thucydides. The evil of his influence lay in the jealousy and dislike of education and the educated which began to mark Athenian democracy from his time. The educated began in consequence to abstain from politics or

plot treason ; the politicians became more " practical " and narrow : they called moderate men " purists " ; and the moderate, being debarred from close acquaintance with politics, began to deserve the epithet and became over-fastidious and impracticable. " The Republic," said Robespierre, " does not want chemists " : so Athens began not to want philosophers. " Atheism," said Robespierre, " is wrong, because it is aristocratic : " so Athens exiled or put to death on the charge of aristocratic politics or atheism not only Socrates but also Phidias, Protagoras and Anaxagoras, the remnant of Pericles' circle and of the days when democracy had meant enlightenment. " Put pity into your Republic," said Lamartine, " if you want it to last : " the Athenian Democrats began to count pity and refinement of education an anachronism in practical politicians.

And now appears a new phase and type and the interesting personality of Theramenes. So far as the capitulation to Sparta is concerned, Theramenes cannot be acquitted of treachery : but it is not so clear that his treachery was not palliated to his mind by the purity of his devotion to a political ideal otherwise unattainable. His contemporaries called him a selfish and insincere trickster and a turncoat : and he undeniably deserted both parties in turn. But the motive for his changes of front cannot be explained on the assumption of insincerity and selfishness. On the contrary, he flung away his life without hesitation, although he was in no danger, rather than forego his political ideal. The inference is that he was a zealot for a carefully balanced government, neither aristocratic nor democratic so much as constitutional : an idealist in his way like Pericles—but scientific rather than moral, philosophical rather than philanthropic : what would be called in modern times " an academic liberal "—one who is liberal in sympathy but distrusts the popular judgment and an extended franchise, and would rather work for than through the people. " The independent statesman," said the witty Lord Melbourne, " is the statesman not to be depended upon ; " and Theramenes was the Athenian independent : but perhaps the best judgment of him, and of men like him, is Goldsmith's epitaph on Burke, the English Theramenes :

" Who, too deep for his hearers, still went on refining,
And thought of convincing when they thought of dining ;
The equal to all things, for all things unfit—
Too nice for a statesman, too proud for a wit,
For a patriot too cool, for a drudge disobedient,
And too fond of the right to pursue the expedient—
In short, 'twas his fate unemployed or in place, sir,
To eat mutton cold and cut blocks with a razor."

The fifth phase of politics is connected with the name of Eubulus, the statesman, who governed Athens in her age of decay, when all things both good and evil had shrunk into the shadow of their former selves, when the love of politics had become mere indolent shirking of the forum for gossip, and the love of art mere preference of the theatre to the hardships of the camp. The masses now, not only the classes, abstained from voting, and politics were left to a small caucus. " There is," says Demosthenes, " an orator on each side and a general, and the caucus of three hundred who do the shouting ; the rest of you are a mere make-weight." Plato in the same way divides the state into drones stinging and stingless (the professional politicians and their caucuses), bees whom the drones pillage (the commercial, upper and middle class), and the masses who are indifferent rarely vote for either bees or drones. It was for this Athens of the decadence, with her *fin-de-siècle* tone of mingled levity, luxury and despair, with her frivolous head full of the latest Corinthian cookery, the latest Corinthian flute player, the latest fashionable beauty, Athens when a joke had become the end of life and the end of life a joke, Athens which the apostle, quoting unconsciously from Demosthenes, described as given over to the hearing and the telling of some new thing that Eubulus catered. Naturally he gave his attention only to finance ; life had come to mean amusement,