TALES FROM THE ISLES OF GREECE.*

We have just been reading a book which gives special pleasure in two ways—first, it is so delightfully fresh and novel in its scenery, its social life, and turns of thought, and at the same time it bears witness to the eternal truth that human nature, however varied its pattern, is of the same texture all the world over.

This book is a collection of Greek stories by a Greek author. It is one of the few books dealing with their own peasant life that the Greeks of to-day have given us, and with its translator we can only wonder and regret that there are so few books of the kind, considering that the material is plentiful, and of interest both for its own country and for all the world. But possibly we need not wonder much. For this Greek peasant-life is still vital in Greece—and especially in the Isles of Greece, and it is chiefly as such social states begin to fail and fade that the recording angels come, in the quaint guise of author, artist, or photographer. Men scarcely remember that "passing away" is written on that which still is, and always has been. They have the reality, and it seems to them that they will always have it, and so, gazing on Nature herself, they neglect to hold up her mirror of art.

The translator, in his "introduction" to these tales, shows that he knows and loves Greece. He knows how poor Greek peasants will freely offer hospitality—"gentle" in the highest degree by their own dignified recognition of human brotherhood. He knows the curious little ruined shrines, which meet one in the country places—ay, and not far out of Athens—and he thinks that some of them may be the actual spots where Pan was worshipped, though in the interval they have passed under the name of some Christian saint. He knows about the little votive offerings—shapes of leg or arm or head—which grateful convalescents hang up in the churches where they prayed for cure. He has assisted in their festivals, when

"The whole village will be assembled at the Church. Outside the gates donkeys and mules are tethered, hucksters drive a trade: within the gates, men stand bareheaded, and women veiled, the church full, the yard thronged with the residue; the priest says his prayers, and an acolyte carries the censer to wave in and out among the crowd; the offerings of first-fruits are blessed, and baskets of bread and grapes are brought out, each person taking a piece. Till then the pious have eaten none of the grapes in their vineyards. They worship, they go about their day's work, and in the evening down to the sea-shore, where music and dancing make them happy till nightfall or even (should there be a moon) far into the night. . . . A Greek will always be dancing, even as an Englishman when he is happy will sing a comic song."

Yes, but the Greek dances are as different in their nature as in their beautiful and simple surroundings, from the heated ball-room "performances" which we call dancing in Britain. But for the stories themselves. Our resumé must be brief, for we wish to incite a taste and not to satisfy it. Few who have travelled in Greece have failed to come across more than one such as the heroes of "After Many Years," "The Shepherd Boy," and "First Love." These are the concentrated tragedies of lives lived on two different levels. And here is a bit of Greek landscape from the story of "Pappa Sophronios," the priest who was cursed by the fulfilment of his own curse.

"In that country, the most delightful part of the day was not the dawn, when the hills smiled as the sun looked upon them; not mid-day, when the cicala dinned us deaf; not the evening hour, when we came down to the strand and watched the fish that leaped flashing into the air as though the sea could not hold them. No, but there the sweetest of all was night, to sit in the garden around the tower, under the cherry trees by the side of the spring, the ever-babbling spring; where the croaking frogs, the bells of the flocks ringing and ringing around, the whispering ripple of sea on shore, made the sweetest music that ever was heard by man. And I had almost forgotten the choicest note of all—the chirp of grasshoppers in the grass, incessant as the cicala, but not so bold; a modest melody, tender, peaceful as those serene nights. Yet a little, and the breeze would begin to blow back off the land—'the valley drew it down,' as we used to say. . . . The first to announce this change in the wind were the poplars about the spring, with an angry and deep roar."

Some of the stories are wonderful presentments of the pathos which dignifies simple practical lives. Others admit us to the ways of happy Greek households, or to domestic tragedies, common enough to all countries, but full of Greek local colour and Greek intensity and responsiveness to emotion. Among the most remarkable of the sketches are some of the briefest, which, while plainly drawn from life, are so clearly cut and so telling, that they have all the suggestive force of parables. We may mention "The Buried Treasure," "The Boat," "Fire," and "Diamanto." Nor can we pass over the three last stories of the collection, dealing as they do with the days of the War of Independence. "Aunt Yannoula," with her "great bright eyes, like two withered pansies," will surely help us to realise many a wronged woman now left to haunt the ruined villages of Armenia. "Panayis Kaloyannis" may aid us to understand the men who are now fighting for their "Constantine," while "Ibrahim" may teach us a sorrowful pity for those who sell their souls for the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life.

Some of us know that Mr. Rouse, the translator of these exquisite stories, speaks truly when he says, "the charm of these sunny lands, and their people so merry and light-hearted, attracts the thoughts ever to them again. We long to climb the rugged hill paths once more, to see the partridges fly whirring from under our feet, or the eagle sail among the rocks; to lie in the evening beneath the cloudless sky and hear . . . the moan of the sea on the not distant shores . . . all around so untouched by what is ugly in modern life."

Yet those of us who may never be able to go back, and those who may never have been there, may catch something of Greek sunshine and gaiety from these pages. We hope that their Greek writer, Argyris Ephtaliotis, has done much more work, and that we shall soon find more of it, translated as sympathetically as in the present instance. The volume is enriched with a life-study of an aged Greek peasant, on whose noble features we seem to see traced the tragedy of his national history, and the genial shrewdness of his race.

* "Tales from the Isles of Greece," being sketches of modern Greek peasant life. Translated from the Greek of Argyris Ephtaliotis by W. H. D. Rouse. London: J. M. Dent and Co., Aldine House.