

FROM THE SPHYNX.

THE EPICUREAN; A TALE.
BY THOMAS MOORE.

This is unquestionably a volume of surpassing grace and beauty; the work of a brilliant imagination, a highly cultivated intellect—elaborated with all the refinement of the most consummate art, and all the treasures of the most varied knowledge, but mellowed and harmonized by exquisite taste into a whole of almost unrivalled purity & simplicity. Mr. Moore, in the Tale before us, has revived a species of writing which was once highly popular, and of which Johnson and H. W. Keatsworth have furnished the most beautiful specimens in our language. But, without aiming at the sententious morality of "Rasselas," or "Almorán and Hamet," our highly-gifted poet has given to us, and to all future times, a Tale as powerful as either of these celebrated productions, but of a very distinct and peculiar character. The incidents of the "Epicurean" are startling and mysterious, but they are entirely independent of any superhuman agency; the lessons of morality are deep and impressive, but they are not paraded with any didactic pretension; and the manners and scenery which are depicted are of a brilliant and imposing nature,—yet they are not vague and undefined sketches, but grounded upon the most careful and extensive research. In this latter quality of collecting all the fragments of picturesque knowledge, (if we may use the expression,) scattered up and down among travellers and chroniclers, to convert them into the most precious ornaments, by the rich alchemy of his splendid fancy, Mr. Moore is quite unrivalled. He lays all the wide wilderness of fact under tribute to his empire of imagination, and gathers his "barbaric pearls and gold," from the most apparently sterile and desolate regions. This heaping up of intellectual riches was at once a merit and a fault in "Lalla Rookh;"—the beauty of the vesture was almost hidden by the gorgeousness of its embroidery; or rather the whole garment was so encumbered with gems, that in some degree, it dimmed and destroyed the loveliness of the form which it clothed. To this objection the tale of the "Epicurean" is scarcely at all obnoxious. There is the same diligent research, but the labour is more carefully concealed; and the narrative sweeps along, like a mild and glassy river, winding through banks of the most brilliant verdure, sometimes sparkling and bubbling to the sunshine of fancy, and at intervals solemnly gliding on with a deep undercurrent of philosophy.

The narrative of the "Epicurean" is given in the first person; and it is therefore necessary to create some device to explain how certain transactions, which are related to have happened in the time of Valerian, are now first brought to light in the nineteenth century. Mr. Moore may well be excused if his explanation of such matters be a very worn out expedient; and that the old fiction of valuable manuscripts rescued from destruction in some shape or other of every day uses, has been employed for the hundredth time by the author of the "Epicurean." The thing does happen in real life; the most authentic copy of the Septuagint was redeemed from a maker of rockets, and "Evelyn's Diary," from a fair fabricator of thread papers. We shall not like the "Epicurean" the less though we may not exactly believe that the copy was rescued from the holy fathers of St. Macarius, as the only perfect relic of "a chest of old manuscripts, which, being chiefly on the subject of alchemy must have been buried in the time of Dioclesian."

The followers of Epicurus, in the fourth

year of the Emperor Valerian (A. D. 257) were numerous at Athens; and they chose the hero of this Tale, then in the twenty-fourth year of his age, to fill the vacant chair of the sect. Their philosophy was at that period little else than a pretext for the more refined cultivation of pleasure; and the personal advantages of youth were, therefore, no objection to this honour. The purer part of the doctrine of their founder had been laid aside; and many who felt no interest in the old religion of Paganism, and were too indolent to inquire into the sanctions of Christianity, took refuge from both under the shelter of a luxurious philosophy. Such was the secret of the Garden at that day. Mr. Moore's object has evidently been of a loftier nature than merely to dazzle the fancy or enlure the passions; and, therefore, the voluptuous attractions of the practical belief of the Epicureans are very slightly passed over. We have, however, a brilliant description of an annual festival in honor of their founder, but our poet evidently felt himself upon unhallowed ground; and he escapes from those intoxicating scenes as one who looks back upon the broad pathways of pleasure, with less of fascination than of inquietude. The following natural thoughts, which are put into the mouth of this votary of earthly gratification, will apply as forcibly to the evening of life as of a day:

"This very night my triumph, my happiness had seemed complete. I had been the presiding genius of that voluptuous scene. Both my ambition and my love of pleasure had drunk deep of the cup for which they thirsted. Looked up to by the learned, and loved by the beautiful and the young, I had seen, in every eye that met mine, either the acknowledgment or triumphs already won, or the promise of others, still brighter, that awaited me. Yet, even in the midst of all this, the same dark thoughts had presented themselves;—the perishableness of myself and all around me every instant recurred to my mind. Those hands I had prest—those eyes, in which I had seen sparkling a spirit of light and life that should never die—those voices, that had talk'd of eternal love—all, all, I felt, were but a mockery of the moment, and would leave nothing eternal but the silence of their dust!

"Oh, were it not for this sad voice,
Stealing amid our mirth to say,
That all, in which we most rejoice,
Ere long may be the earth-worm's prey,
But for this bitter—only this—
Full as the world is brimmed with bliss,
And capable as feels my soul
Of drinking to its depth the whole,
I should turn earth to heaven and be,
If bliss made gods, a deity!"

It was in this frame of mind, panting for an eternity of pleasure, and not conceiving of any eternity beyond the objects of sense, that the Epicurean dreamed that a venerable man thus commanded him—"Thou, who seekest eternal life, go unto the shores of the dark Nile—go unto the shores of the dark Nile, and thou wilt find the eternal life thou seekest." Alchiphron (for such is the Epicurean) with the prevailing belief in dreams, set forth on a voyage to Egypt. The scenery of the coast is glowingly described. He lands in Alexandria;—and there, the presence of a veiled figure at a banquet, "on whose head was a chaplet of dark-coloured flowers," and who, when the veil was lifted, exhibited a skeleton, stamped the features of the grave on the idea that haunted him. He flew from Alexandria to Memphis.

It was in this gorgeous city—"still grand, though no longer the unrivalled Memphis, that had borne away from Thebes the crown of supremacy, and worn it undisputed through so many centuries"—it was here, at the fountain-head of Egyptian glory and

superstition, that the destinies of the Epicurean were fixed. At the celebration of the great festival of the Moon, an incident occurred to him peculiarly fitted to enchain his ardent and voluptuous spirit. We shall transcribe a passage descriptive of this festival, as an example of the felicitous pictures of manners which are developed in this Tale, as well as furnishing a key to the progress of the narrative:

"As I approached the island, I could see glittering through the trees on the banks, the lamps of the pilgrims hastening to the ceremony. Landed in the direction which those lights pointed out, I soon joined the crowd, and passing through a long alley of sphinxes, whose sparkling marble shone out from the dark sycamores around them; in a short time, reached the grand vestibule of the temple, where I found the ceremonies of the evening already commenced.

"In this vast hall, which was surrounded by a double range of columns, and lay open overhead to the stars of heaven, I saw a group of young maidens, moving in a sort of measured step, between walk and dance, round a small shrine, upon which stood one of those sacred birds, that on account of the variegated color of their wings, are dedicated to the moon. The vestibule was dimly lighted,—there being but one lamp of naphtha on each of the great pillars that encircled it. But, having taken my station beside one of those pillars, I had a distinct view of the young dancers, as in succession they passed me.

"Their long, graceful drapery was as white as snow; and each wore loosely, beneath the rounded bosom, a dark blue zone, or bandelet, studded, like the skies at midnight, with little silver stars. Through their dark locks was wreathed the white lily of the Nile,—that flower being accounted as welcome to the moon, as the golden blossom of the bean flower are to the sun. As they passed under the lamp, a gleam of light flashed upon their bosoms, which, I could perceive, was the reflection of a small mirror, that in the manner of woman of the East, each wore beneath her left shoulder.

"There was no music to regulate their steps; but, as they gracefully went round the bird on the shrine, some, by the beat of the castanet, some by the shrilling of the sistrum,—which they held uplifted in the attitude of their own divine Isis,—harmoniously timed the cadence of their feet; while others, at every step, shook a small chain of silver, whose sound, mingling with those of the castanets and sistrums, produced a wild, but not displeasing harmony.

"They seemed all lovely; but there was one—whose face the light had not yet reached, so down cast she held it—whom attracted, and at length, riveted at my attention. I knew not why, but there was something in these half-seen features,—a charm in the very shadow that hung over their imagined beauty,—which took me more than all the out-shining loveliness of her companions. So enchained was my fancy, by this coy mystery, that her alone of all the group, could I either see or think of. Her alone I watched, as with the same down cast brow, she glided round the altar; gently and aerially, as if her presence, like that of a spirit, was something to be felt, not seen.

"Suddenly, while I gazed, the loud crash of a thousand cymbals was heard; the massy gates of the Temple flew open, as if by magic, and a flood of radiance from the illuminated aisle, filled the whole vestibule; while at the same instant, as if the light and the sounds were born together, a peal of rich harmony came mingling with the radiance.

"It was then,—by that light, which

shone full upon the young maiden's features, as starting at the blaze, she raised her eyes to the portal, and, as suddenly, fell their lids again,—it was then I beheld, what even my own ardent imagination, in its most vivid dreams of beauty, had never pictured. Not Psyche herself, when passing on the threshold of heaven, while its last glories fell on her dazzled lids, could have looked more beautiful, or blushed with a more innocent shame. Often as I had felt the power of looks, none had ever entered into my soul so far. It was a new feeling, a new sense, coming as suddenly as that radiance into the vestibule, and at once filling my whole being,—and had that vision but lingered another moment before my eyes, I should have wholly forgotten who I was, and where, and thrown myself, in prostrate admiration, at her feet.

"But scarcely had that gush of harmony been heard, when the sacred bird, which had till now, stood motionless as an image, expanded its wings, and flew into the Temple; while his graceful young worshippers, with a fleetness like his own, followed, and she who left a dream in my heart never to be forgotten, vanished with the rest. As she went rapidly past the pillar against which I leaned, the ivy which encircled it caught in her drapery, and disengaged some ornament which fell to the ground. It was the small mirror which I had seen shining on her bosom. Hastily and tremulously I picked it up, and hurried to restore it; but she was already lost to my eyes in the crowd."

This beautiful priestess of the mysteries of Isis becomes the load star of Alchiphron's fate. He traces her to the Necropolis or City of the dead; and descends into a Pyramid into which she had penetrated. He wanders through dark winding passages, till at length he beholds the object of his desire, bending over "a low altar of granite, on which lay a lifeless female form, enshrined within a case of crystal." The homage which this beautiful creature was paying to some departed object of affection at once destroyed all that was in the gaze of her pursuer—so touching was the purity of the whole scene; "so calm and august that protection which the dead seemed to extend over the living, that every earthly feeling was forgotten." He glides away from this "small chapel," and again ascends into light.

(To be concluded next week.)

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