

XV.

EUPHRASIA.

A TALE OF GREECE.

It was not long after the breaking out of the Greek Revolution that Harry Valency visited Greece. Many an Englishman was led thither at that time by the spirit of adventure, and many perished. Valency was not nineteen; his spirit was wild and reckless;—thought or care had never touched his brow; his heart was too light for love. Restless and energetic, he longed to try his powers, with the instinct that leads the young deer to butt against trees, or to wrestle with each other in the forest-dells. He was the only son of a widowed mother, whose life was wrapped in his, and he loved her fondly; yet left her, impelled by a desire for adventure, unable to understand what anxiety and fear meant; and in his own person eager to meet even misfortune, so that it came in a guise to call forth manly and active struggles. He longed to have the pages of his young life written over by deeds that would hereafter be memories, to which he could turn with delight. The cause of Greece warmed his soul. He was in a transport of ecstasy when he touched the shores of that antique land, and looked around on mountain and mountain-stream, whose names were associated with the most heroic acts, and the most sublime poetry man ever achieved or wrote. Yes, he was now in Greece. He was about to fight in her cause

against the usurping Turk. He had prepared himself by a sedulous study of Romainic; he was on his way to the seat of Government, to offer his services. To proceed thither from the spot where he had disembarked was a matter of some difficulty; the Turkish troops being then in possession of many of the passes. At length he heard that a band of about fifty Greek soldiers, headed by a young but brave and renowned chief, was about to pursue the same road; he asked, and obtained leave to accompany them.

How delightful was the commencement of the journey! How beautiful the country—defile and steep hill-side, by which they proceeded; where the grey olive clothed the upland, or vines, embracing elms, red now with late summer tints, varied the scene. The mountain-tops were bare, or crowned with pines, and torrents ran down the sides and fed a stream in the dell. The air was balmy; the cicada loud and merry—to live was to be happy. Valency was mounted on a spirited horse; he made it leap and caracole. He threw a spear against a tree, and dashed after to recover it. He fired at a mark as he hurried on at full gallop; every feat was insufficient to tame his exhaustless spirits.

The chief marked him with eyes, whose deep melancholy expression darkened as he gazed. He was known as bravest among the brave; yet gentle as a woman. He was young and singularly handsome; his countenance was stamped with traces of intellectual refinement, while his person was tall, muscular, and strong, but so gracefully formed, that every attitude reminded you of some Praxitelean shape of his own native land. Once he had been more beautiful; joy, as well as tenderness, and a soldier's ardour had lighted up his dark eye; his lip had been the home of smiles, and the thoughts, which presided in his brow, had been as clear and soft and glad-some as that godlike brow itself. Now this was changed.

Grief had become a master passion: his cheeks were sunken; his eye seemed to brood eternally over melancholy regrets; his measured harmonious voice was attuned to the utterance of no light fancy or gay sallies; he spoke only the necessary words of direction to his followers, and then silence and gloom gathered over his face. His sorrow was respected; for it was known to be well founded, and to spring from a recent disaster. If any of his troop desired to indulge in merriment, they withdrew from his vicinity. It was strange to them to hear the light laugh of the English youth ring through the grove, and to catch the tones of his merry voice, as he sang some of their own gayest songs. The chief gazed with interest. There was a winning frankness in the boy; he was so very young, and all he did was in graceful accordance with his age. We are alike mere youths, thought the chief, and how different! Yet soon he may become like me. He soars like an eagle; but the eagle may be wounded, and stoop to earth; because earth contains its secret and its regret.

Suddenly Valency, who was some hundred yards in advance, was encountered by a Greek, riding at full speed towards the advancing troop.

"Back! back! silence!" the man cried. He was a scout, who had been sent on before, and now brought tidings that a troop of three or four hundred of the Turkish army were entering the defile, and would soon advance on the handful of men which Valency accompanied. The scout rode directly up to the leader, and made his report, adding,—

"We have yet time. If we fall back but a quarter of a mile, there is a path I know, by which I can guide you across the mountain; on the other side we shall be safe."

A smile of scorn for a moment wreathed the lip of the chief at the word safety, but his face soon reassumed its usual sad composure. The troop had halted; each man

bent his eye on the leader. Valency, in particular, marked the look of scorn, and felt that he would never retreat before danger.

"Comrades!" the chief thus addressed his men, "it shall never be said that Greeks fell back to make way for the destroyers; we will betake ourselves to our old warfare. Before we entered this olive wood, we passed a thick cover, where the dark jutting mountain-side threw a deep shadow across our path, and the torrent drowned all sound of voice or hoof. There we shall find ambush; there the enemy will meet death."

He turned his horse's head, and in a few minutes reached the spot he named; the men were mostly eager for the fray—while one or two eyed the mountain-side, and then the path that led to the village, which they had quitted that morning. The chief saw their look, and he glanced also at the English youth, who had thrown himself from his horse, and was busy loading and priming his arms. The chief rode up to him.

"You are our guest and fellow-traveller," he said, "but not our comrade in the fight. We are about to meet danger—it may be that not one of us shall escape. You have no injuries to avenge, no liberty to gain; you have friends—probably a mother—in your native land. You must not fall with us. I am going to send a message to warn the village we last passed through—do you accompany my messengers."

Valency had listened attentively at first; but as the chief continued, his attention reverted to his task of loading his pistols. The last words called a blush into his cheek.

"You treat me as a boy," he cried; "I may be one in aspect, but you shall find me a man in heart this day. You also young, I have not deserved your scorn!"

The chief caught the youth's flashing eye. He held out his hand to him, saying, "Forgive me."

“I will,” said Valency, “on one condition; give me a post of danger—of honour. You owe it to me in reparation of the insult you offered.”

“Be it so,” said the chief; “your place shall be at my side.”

A few minutes more and his dispositions were made;—two of the most down-hearted of the troop were despatched to alarm the village, the rest were placed behind the rocks; beneath the bushes, wherever broken ground, or tuft of underwood, or fragment from the cliff, afforded shelter and concealment, a man was placed; while the chief himself took his stand on an elevated platform, and, sheltered by a tree, gazed upon the road. Soon the tramp of horses, the busy sound of feet and voices were heard, overpowering the rushing of the stream; and turban and musket could be distinguished as the enemy's troop threaded the defile.

The shout of battle—the firing—the clash of weapons were over. Above the crest of the hill, whose side had afforded ambush to the Greeks, the crescent moon hung, just about to dip behind; the stars in her train burnt bright as lamps floating in the firmament; while the fire-flies flashed among the myrtle underwood and up the mountain-side; and sometimes the steel of the arms strewn around, dropped from the hand of the dead, caught and reflected the flashes of the celestial or earthly stars. The ground was strewn with the slain. Such of the enemy as had cut their way through were already far—the sound of their horses' hoofs had died away. The Greeks who had fled across the mountain had reached a place of safety—none lay there but the silent dead—cold as the moonbeam that rested for a moment on their pale faces. All were still and motionless; some lay on the hill-side among the underwood—some on the open road—horses and men had fallen, pell mell—none moved—none breathed.

Yet there was a sigh—it was lost in the murmur of the stream; a groan succeeded, and then a voice feeble and broken, “My mother, my poor mother!”—the pale lips that spoke these words could form no other, a gush of tears followed. The cry seemed to awake another form from among the dead. One of the prostrate bodies raised itself slowly and painfully on its arm, the eyes were filmy, the countenance pallid from approaching death, the voice was hollow, yet firm, that said, “Who speaks?—who lives?—who weeps?”

The question struck shame to the wounded man; he checked his overflow of passionate sobbings. The other spoke again, “It was not the voice of a Greek—yet I thought I had saved that gallant boy—the ball meant for him is now in my side.—Speak again, young Englishman—on whom do you call?”

“On her who will weep my death too bitterly—on my mother,” replied Valency, and tears would follow the loved name.

“Art thou wounded to death?” asked the chief.

“Thus unaided I must die,” he replied; “yet, could I reach those waters, I might live—I must try.” And Valency rose; he staggered a few steps, and fell heavily at the feet of the chief. He had fainted. The Greek looked on the ghastly palor of his face; he half rose—his own wound did not bleed, but it was mortal, and a deadly sickness had gathered round his heart, and chilled his brow, which he strove to master, that he might save the English boy. The effort brought cold drops on his brow, as he rose on his knees and stooped to raise the head of Valency; he shuddered to feel the warm moisture his hand encountered. It is his blood; his life-blood he thought; and again he placed his head on the earth, and continued a moment still, summoning what vitality remained to him to animate his limbs. Then with a determined effort he rose, and staggered to the banks of

the stream. He held a steel cap in his hand—and now he stooped down to fill it; but with the effort the ground slid from under him, and he fell. There was a ringing in his ears—a cold dew on his brow—his breath came thick—the cap had fallen from his hand—he was dying. The bough of a tree, shot off in the morning's *melée*, lay near;—the mind, even of a dying man, can form swift, unerring combinations of thought;—it was his last chance—the bough was plunged in the waters, and he scattered the grateful, reviving drops over his face; vigour returned with the act, and he could stoop and fill the cap, and drink a deep draught, which for a moment restored the vital powers. And now he carried water to Valency; he dipped the unfolded turban of a Turk in the stream, and bound the youth's wound, which was a deep sabre cut in the shoulder, that had bled copiously. Valency revived—life gathered warm in his heart—his cheeks, though still pale, lost the ashy hue of death—his limbs again seemed willing to obey his will—he sat up, but he was too weak, and his head dropped. As a mother tending her sick first-born, the Greek chief hovered over him; he brought a cloak to pillow his head; as he picked up this, he found that some careful soldier had brought a small bag at his saddle-bow, in which was a loaf and a bunch or two of grapes; he gave them to the youth, who ate. Valency now recognised his saviour; at first he wondered to see him there, tending on him, apparently unhurt; but soon the chief sank to the ground, and Valency could mark the rigidity of feature, and ghastliness of aspect, that portended death. In his turn he would have assisted his friend; but the chief stopped him—"You die if you move," he said; "your wound will bleed afresh, and you will die, while you cannot aid me. My weakness does not arise from mere loss of blood. The messenger of death has reached a vital part—yet a little while and the soul will obey the summons. It is slow,

slow is the deliverance ; yet the long creeping hour will come at last, and I shall be free."

"Do not speak thus," cried Valency ; "I am strong now—I will go for help."

"There is no help for me," replied the chief, "save the death I desire. I command you, move not."

Valency had risen, but the effort was vain : his knees bent under him, his head spun round ; before he could save himself he had sunk to the ground.

"Why torture yourself?" said the chief. "A few hours and help will come : it will not injure you to pass this interval beneath this calm sky. The cowards who fled will alarm the country ; by dawn succour will be here : you must wait for it. I too must wait—not for help, but for death. It is soothing even to me to die here beneath this sky, with the murmurs of yonder stream in my ear, the shadows of my native mountains thrown athwart. Could aught save me, it would be the balmy airs of this most blessed night ; my soul feels the bliss, though my body is sick and fast stiffening in death. Such was not the hour when she died whom soon I shall meet, my Euphrasia, my own sweet sister, in heaven !"

It was strange, Valency said, that at such an hour, but half saved from death, and his preserver in the grim destroyer's clutches, that he should feel curiosity to know the Greek chief's story. His youth, his beauty, his valour—the act, which Valency well remembered, of his springing forward so as to shield him with his own person—his last words and thoughts devoted to the soft recollection of a beloved sister,—awakened an interest beyond even the present hour, fraught as it was with the chances of life and death. He questioned the chief. Probably fever had succeeded to his previous state of weakness, imparted a deceitful strength, and even inclined him to talk ; for thus dying, unaided and unsheltered, with the starry sky overhead, he willingly reverted to the

years of his youth and to the miserable event which a few months before had eclipsed the sun of his life and rendered death welcome.

They—brother and sister, Constantine and Euphrasia—were the last of their race. They were orphans; their youth was passed under the guardianship of the brother by adoption of their father, whom they named father, and who loved them. He was a glorious old man, nursed in classic lore, and more familiar with the deeds of men who had glorified his country several thousand years before than with any more modern names. Yet all who had ever done and suffered for Greece were embalmed in his memory, and honoured as martyrs in the best of causes. He had been educated in Paris, and travelled in Europe and America, and was aware of the progress made in the science of politics all over the civilised world. He felt that Greece would soon share the benefits to arise from the changes then operating, and he looked forward at no distant day to its liberation from bondage. He educated his young ward for that day. Had he believed that Greece would have continued hopelessly enslaved, he had brought him up as a scholar and a recluse: but, assured of the impending struggle, he made him a warrior; he implanted a detestation of the oppressor, a yearning love for the sacred blessings of freedom, a noble desire to have his name enrolled among the deliverers of his country. The education he bestowed on Euphrasia was yet more singular. He knew that though liberty must be bought and maintained by the sword, yet that its dearest blessings must be derived from civilisation and knowledge; and he believed women to be the proper fosterers of these. They cannot handle a sword nor endure bodily labour for their country, but they could refine the manners, exalt the souls—impart honour, and truth, and wisdom to their relatives and their children. Euphrasia,

therefore, he made a scholar. By nature she was an enthusiast and a poet. The study of the classic literature of her country corrected her taste and exalted her love of the beautiful. While a child, she improvised passionate songs of liberty; and as she grew in years and loveliness, and her heart opened to tenderness, and she became aware of all the honour and happiness that a woman must derive from being held the friend of man, not his slave, she thanked God that she was a Greek and a Christian; and holding fast by the advantages which these names conferred, she looked forward eagerly to the day when Mohammedanism should no longer contaminate her native land, and when her countrywomen should be awakened from ignorance and sloth in which they were plunged, and learn that their proper vocation in the creation was that of mothers of heroes and teachers of sages.

Her brother was her idol, her hope, her joy. And he who had been taught that his career must be that of deeds, not words, yet was fired by her poetry and eloquence to desire glory yet more eagerly, and to devote himself yet more entirely and with purer ardour to the hope of one day living and dying for his country. The first sorrow the orphans knew was the death of their adopted father. He descended to the grave full of years and honour. Constantine was then eighteen; his fair sister had just entered her fifteenth year. Often they spent the night beside the revered tomb of their lost friend, talking of the hopes and aspirations he had implanted. The young can form such sublime, such beautiful dreams. No disappointment, no evil, no bad passion shadows their glorious visions. To dare and do greatly for Greece was the ambition of Constantine. To cheer and watch over her brother, to regulate his wilder and more untaught soul, to paint in celestial colours the bourne he tended towards by action, were Euphrasia's tasks.

“There is a heaven,” said the dying man as he told his tale,—“there is a paradise for those who die in the just cause. I know not what joys are there prepared for the blest; but they can scarcely transcend those that were mine as I listened to my own sweet sister, and felt my heart swell with patriotism and fond, warm affection.”

At length there was a stir through the land, and Constantine made a journey of some distance, to confer with the capitani of the mountains, and to prepare for the outbreak of the revolution. The moment came, sooner even than he expected. As an eagle chained when the iron links drop from him, and with clang of wing and bright undazzled eye he soars to heaven, so did Constantine feel when freedom to Greece became the war-cry. He was still among the mountains when first the echoes of his native valleys repeated that animating, that sacred word. Instead of returning, as he intended, to his Athenian home, he was hurried off to Western Greece, and became a participator in a series of warlike movements, the promised success of which filled him with transport.

Suddenly a pause came in the delirium of joy which possessed his soul. He received not the accustomed letters from his sister—missives which had been to him angelic messengers, teaching him patience with the unworthy—hope in disappointment—certainty of final triumph. Those dear letters ceased; and he thought he saw in the countenances of his friends around a concealed knowledge of evil. He questioned them: their answers were evasive. At the same time, they endeavoured to fill his mind with the details of some anticipated exploit in which his presence and co-operation was necessary. Day after day passed; he could not leave his post without injury to the cause, without even the taint of dishonour. He belonged to a band of Albanians, by whom he had been received as a brother, and he could not

desert them in the hour of danger. But the suspense grew too terrible; and at length, finding that there was an interval of a few days which he might call his own, he left the camp, resting neither day nor night; dismounting from one horse only to bestride another, in forty-eight hours he was in Athens, before his vacant, desecrated home. The tale of horror was soon told. Athens was still in the hands of the Turks; the sister of a rebel had become the prey of the oppressor. She had none to guard her. Her matchless beauty had been seen and marked by the son of the pasha; she had for the last two months been immured in his harem.

“Despair is a cold, dark feeling,” said the dying warrior; “if I may name that despair which had a hope—a certainty—an aim. Had Euphrasia died I had wept. Now my eyes were horn—my heart stone. I was silent. I neither expressed resentment nor revenge. I concealed myself by day; at night I wandered round the tyrant’s dwelling. It was a pleasure-palace, one of the most luxurious in our beloved Athens. At this time it was carefully guarded: my character was known, and Euphrasia’s worth; and the oppressor feared the result of his deed. Still, under shadow of darkness I drew near. I marked the position of the women’s apartments—I learned the number—the length of the watch—the orders they received, and then I returned to the camp. I revealed my project to a few select spirits. They were fired by my wrongs, and eager to deliver my Euphrasia.”—

Constantine broke off—a spasm of pain shook his body. After this had passed he lay motionless for a few minutes; then starting up, as fever and delirium, excited by the exertion of speaking, increased by the agonies of recollection, at last fully possessed him. “What is this?” he cried. “Fire! Yes, the palace burns. Do you not hear the roaring of the flames, and thunder too—the artillery of Heaven levelled against the unblest? Ha!

a shot—he falls—they are driven back—now fling the torches—the wood crackles—there, there are the women's rooms—ha! poor victims! lo! you shudder and fly! Fear not; give me only my Euphrasia!—my own Euphrasia! No disguise can hide thee, dressed as a Turkish bride crowned with flowers, thy lovely face, the seat of unutterable woe—still, my sweet sister, even in this smoke and tumult of this house, thou art the angel of my life! Spring into my arms, poor, frightened bird; cling to me—it is herself—her voice—her fair arms are round my neck—what ruin—what flame—what choking smoke—what driving storm can stay me? Soft! the burning breach is passed—there are steps—gently—dear one, I am firm—fear not!—what eyes glare?—fear not, Euphrasia, he is dead—the miserable retainers of the tyrant fell beneath our onset—ha! a shot—gracious Panargia, is this thy protection?” Thus did he continue to rave: the onset, the burning of the palace, the deliverance of his sister, all seemed to pass again vividly as if in present action. His eyes glared; he tossed up his arms; he shouted as if calling his followers around him; and then in tones of heartfelt tenderness he addressed the fair burden he fancied that he bore—till, with a shriek, he cried again, “A shot!” and sank to the ground as if his heartstrings had broken.

An interval of calm succeeded; he was exhausted; his voice was broken.

“What have I told thee?” he continued feebly; “I have said how a mere handful of men attacked the palace, and drove back the guards—how we strove in vain to make good our entrance—fresh troops were on their way—there was no alternative; we fired the palace. Deep in the seclusion of the harem the women had retreated, a herd of frightened deer. One alone stood erect. Her eyes bent on the intruders—a dagger in her hand—majestic and fearless, her face was marked with traces of

passed suffering, but at the moment the stern resolution her soft features expressed was more than human. The moment she saw me, all was changed; the angel alone beamed in her countenance. Her dagger fell from her hand—she was in my arms—I bore her from the burning roof—the rest you know; have I not said it? Some miscreant, who survived the slaughter, and yet lay as dead on the earth, aimed a deadly shot. She did not shriek. At first she clung closer to my neck, and then I felt her frame shiver in my arms and her hold relax. I trusted that fear alone moved her; but she knew not fear—it was death. Horses had been prepared, and were waiting; a few hours more and I hoped to be on our way to the west, to that portion of Greece that was free. But I felt her head fall on my shoulder. I heard her whisper, ‘I die, my brother! carry me to our father’s tomb.’

“My soul yearned to comply with her request; but it was impossible. The city was alarmed; troops gathering from all quarters. Our safety lay in flight, for still I thought that her wound was not mortal. I bore her to the spot where we had left our horses. Here two or three of my comrades speedily joined me; they had rescued the women of the harem from the flames, but the various sounds denoting the advance of the Turkish soldiery caused them to hurry from the scene. I leapt on my horse, and placed my sweet sister before me, and we fled amain through desert streets, I well knew how to choose, and along the lanes of the suburbs into the open country, where, deviating from the high-road, along which I directed my companions to proceed in all haste—alone with my beloved burden, I sought a solitary, unsuspected spot among the neighbouring hills. The storm which had ceased for a time, now broke afresh; the deafening thunder drowned every other sound, while the frequent glare of the lightning showed us our path; my horse did

not quail before it. Euphrasia still lay clinging to me ; no complaint escaped her ; a few words of fondness, of encouragement, of pious resignation, she now and then breathed forth. I knew not she was dying, till at last entering a retired valley, where an olive wood afforded shelter, and still better the portico of a fallen ancient temple, I dismounted and bore her to the marble steps, on which I placed her. Then indeed I felt how near the beloved one was to death, from which I could not save her. The lightning showed me her face—pale as the marble which pillowed it. Her dress was dabbled in warm blood, which soon stained the stones on which she lay. I took her hand ; it was deathly cold. I raised her from the marble ; I pillowed her cheek upon my heart. I repressed my despair, or rather my despair in that hour was mild and soft as herself. There was no help—no hope. The life-blood oozed fast from her side ; scarce could she raise her heavy eyelids to look on me ; her voice could no longer articulate my name. The burden of her fair limbs grew heavier and more chill ; soon it was a corpse only that I held. When I knew that her sufferings were over, I raised her once more in my arms, and once more I placed her before me on my horse, and betook me to my journey. The storm was over now, and the moon bright above. Earth glittered under the rays, and a soft breeze swept by, as if heaven itself became clear and peaceful to receive her stainless soul, and present it to its Maker. By morning's dawn, I stopped at a convent gate, and rang. To the holy maidens within I consigned my own fair Euphrasia. I kissed but once again her dear brow, which spoke of peace in death ; and then saw her placed upon a bier, and was away, back to my camp, to live and die for Greece."

He grew more silent as he became weaker. Now and then he spoke a few words to record some other of

Euphrasia's perfections, or to repeat some of her dying words ; to speak of her magnanimity, her genius, her love, and his own wish to die.

"I might have lived," he said, "till her image had faded in my mind, or been mingled with less holy memories. I die young, all her own.

His voice grew more feeble after this ; he complained of cold. Valency continued : "I contrived to rise, and crawl about, and to collect a capote or two, and a pelisse from among the slain, with some of which I covered him ; and then I drew one over myself, for the air grew chill, as midnight had passed away and the morning hour drew near. The warmth which the coverings imparted calmed the aching of my wound, and, strange to say, I felt slumber creep over me. I tried to watch and wake. At first the stars above and the dark forms of the mountains mingled with my dreamy feelings ; but soon I lost all sense of where I was, and what I had suffered, and slept peacefully and long.

"The morning sunbeams, as creeping down the hillside they at last fell upon my face, awoke me. At first I had forgotten all thought of the events of the past night, and my first impulse was to spring up, crying aloud, where am I? but the stiffness of my limbs and their weakness, soon revealed the truth. Gladly I now welcomed the sound of voices, and marked the approach of a number of peasants along the ravine. Hitherto, strange to say, I had thought only of myself ; but with the ideas of succour came the recollection of my companion, and the tale of the previous night. I glanced eagerly to where he lay ; his posture disclosed his state ; he was still, and stiff, and dead. Yet his countenance was calm and beautiful. He had died in the dear hope of meeting his sister, and her image had shed peace over the last moment of life.

"I am ashamed to revert to myself. The death of

Constantine is the true end of my tale. My wound was a severe one. I was forced to leave Greece, and for some months remained between life and death in Cefalonia, till a good constitution saved me, when at once I returned to England."