PROLOGUE

In a former volume we have traced the course of events which ended in

the complete overthrow of Xerxes and his great army. Our present task

is to describe the chief incidents in the cruel and devastating war,

commonly known as the Peloponnesian War, which lasted for twenty-seven

years, and finally broke up the Athenian Empire. The cause of that war

was the envy and hatred excited in the other states of Greece by the

power and greatness of Athens; and in order to make our story

intelligible we must indicate briefly the steps by which she rose to

that dangerous eminence, and drew upon herself the armed hostility of

half the Greek world.

We take up our narrative at the point of time when the Athenians

returned to their ruined homes after the defeat of the Persians at

Plataea. Of their ancient city nothing remained but a few houses which

had served as lodgings for the Persian grandees, and some scattered

fragments of the surrounding wall. Their first task was to restore the

outer line of defence, and by the advice of Themistocles the new wall

took in a much wider circuit than the old rampart which had been

destroyed by the Persians. The whole population toiled night and day to

raise the bulwark which was to guard their temples and their homes,

using as materials the walls of the houses which had been sacked and

burnt by the Persians, with whatever remained of public buildings,

sacred or profane, and sparing not even the monumental pillars of

graves in the urgency of their need.

But jealous eyes were watching them, and busy tongues were wagging

against that gallant race of Attica which had been foremost in the

common cause against the barbarian invader. "These Athenians are

dangerous neighbours," was the cry. "Let us stop them from building

their wall, or Athens will become a standing menace to ourselves."

Before long these murmurs reached the ears of the Spartans, and they

sent envoys to dissuade the Athenians from fortifying their city. Their

real purpose was disguised under the mask of anxiety for the general

safety of Greece. "It is not expedient," they urged, "that the

Persians, when next they come against us, should find fencéd cities

which they may make their strongholds, as they have lately done in

Athens and in Thebes. Cease, therefore, from building this wall, and

help us to destroy all such defences, outside of Peloponnesus. If we

are attacked again, we will unite our forces within the isthmus, and

meet the invader from there."

But Themistocles was not the man to be hoodwinked by the simple cunning

of the Spartans. By his advice the Athenians dismissed the envoys,

promising to send an embassy to discuss the matter at Sparta. As soon

as they were gone, Themistocles caused himself to be appointed as head

of the embassy, and set out at once for Sparta, instructing the

Athenians to keep his colleagues back until the wall had been raised to

a sufficient height for purposes of defence. Arrived at Sparta, he kept

himself close in his lodging, and declined all conference with the

authorities, alleging that he could do nothing without his colleagues.

Meanwhile the Athenians were making incredible efforts to carry on the

work which was essential to their liberty and prosperity. Men, women,

and children toiled without intermission, and the wall was rapidly

approaching a defensible height. The clamour of their enemies grew

louder and louder, and angry messages reached the Spartans everyday,

reproaching them with their supineness and procrastination. Being asked

the meaning of these reports, Themistocles professed total ignorance,

and bade the Spartans send men to Athens to see for themselves. The

Spartans did so, and when the men arrived at Athens the Athenians, who

had been privately warned by Themistocles, kept them in custody, as

hostages for their own representatives at Sparta. Themistocles had

meanwhile been joined by his partners in the embassy, and learning from

them that the wall was now of sufficient height, he spoke out plainly,

and let the Spartans understand what his true purpose was. "Athens," he

said, "is once more a fortified city, and we are able to discuss

questions of public or private interest on a footing of equality. When

we forsook all, and took to our ships to fight for the common weal, it

was done without prompting of yours; and that peril being past, we

shall take such measures as concern our safety, without leave asked of

you. And in serving ourselves, we are serving you also; for if Athens

is not free, how can she give an unbiased vote in questions which

concern the general welfare of Greece?"

It was impossible for the Spartans to express open resentment at a plea

so moderate and so reasonable. But they were secretly annoyed to find

that their malice had been detected and exposed; and by this incident

was sown the first seed of ill-will which was afterwards to bear such

bitter fruit for Athens and for Greece. For the present, however, the

affair was ended, and the first step secured for the Athenians in their

career of glory and power.

Themistocles was the first who clearly saw that the future of Athens

lay on the sea. But if Athens was to hold and extend her position as

the first naval power in Greece, it was above all things necessary that

she should have a strong and fortified station for her fleets, her

arsenals, and her dockyards. Nature had provided her with what she

needed, in the peninsula of Peiraeus, which juts out into the Saronic

Gulf, about five miles south-west of the inland town. As soon as the

city-wall was completed, fortifications of immense strength were

carried round the whole of Peiraeus; and within this vast rampart rose

a second city, equal in size to the old one, with streets laid out in

straight lines, and filled with the stir and bustle of a maritime

population. Three land-locked harbours gave ample room for the fleets

of Athens to lie in shelter and safety; and this great sea-port town

was afterwards united to the original city by two long walls, which met

the sea, one at the north-western corner of Peiraeus, and the other at

the south-eastern point of the Bay of Phalerum. Between these, at a

later period, a third wall was built, running parallel to the northern

wall at a distance of about two hundred feet, and known as the Southern

or Middle Wall.

Many years elapsed before these important works were completed; and in

the meantime great events had been happening in other parts of the

Greek world, tending more and more to realise the dream of

Themistocles, and make his beloved city the undisputed mistress of the

sea. After the defeat of the Persian armies and fleets at Salamis,

Plataea, and Mycale, much hard work remained to be done, in reducing

the outlying cities on the coasts of Thrace and in the eastern corners

of the Aegaean, which held out for the Great King. The Spartans were

still nominal leaders of the allied Greek navy; but after a year of

service they resigned this position, which they owed to their

acknowledged supremacy in land warfare, to the Athenians. They were

induced to take this step, partly by their own aversion to foreign

enterprises, and partly by the misconduct of their general Pausanias,

who had disgusted the allies serving under him in the fleet by his

intolerable arrogance and tyranny. The field was thus left open to the

Athenians, who willingly assumed the command offered them by the

maritime cities of Greece, with the object of prosecuting the war

vigorously against Persia. Each city was assessed to furnish a fixed

contribution of ships or money, and the sacred island of Delos was

appointed as the common treasury and meeting-place of the league. Thus

was formed the famous Delian Confederacy, with the avowed purpose of

making reprisals on the Great King's territory for the havoc which he

had wrought in Greece. For a time all went smoothly, and the various

members of the league fought under Athens as her independent allies.

But by degrees the Greeks from the islands and coast-lands of Asia

began to weary of their arduous duties, and murmured against the

Athenians, who proved hard task-masters, and compelled them by force to

perform their part in the bargain. One by one the cities revolted from

the leadership of Athens, were attacked by her navies, and reduced to

the position of subjects and tributaries. Others voluntarily withdrew

from all active co-operation in the war, agreeing to pay a fixed annual

sum as a substitute for service in the fleet. And before the outbreak

of the Peloponnesian War the two powerful islands of Lesbos and Chios

were the only members of the original league who still retained their

independence.

Such were the circumstances which led to the foundation of the Athenian

Empire, which grew up, by the force of necessity, out of the decay of a

confederacy born of a common need, and organised for the special

benefit of the Asiatic Greeks. For the names of the Greek cities on the

coasts of Asia Minor still figured in the Persian tribute-lists; and

the moment that the grasp of Athens relaxed on the confines of the

King's dominions, after the ruinous defeat in Sicily, Persian

tax-gatherers came knocking at the gates of Ephesus and Miletus,

demanding the arrears of tribute. So urgent was the need supplied by

the energy of Athens, and so blind were these Greeks of Asia Minor to

their own interests.

The visible sign of this momentous change, by which the Delian

Confederacy became merged in the Athenian Empire, was the removal of

the treasury from Delos to Athens. The Athenians now undertook the

whole administration of the common fund, using the surplus for the

adornment of Athens by magnificent public buildings. This appropriation

seems reasonable enough, when we consider that the whole burden of

defending the eastern Greeks against Persia, and keeping the barbarian

out of Greek waters, now lay upon Athens. This great public duty, which

had been thrown upon her by the indifference of Sparta, and the unmanly

sloth of her own allies, was faithfully performed; and she might well

ask why she should be called upon to lavish the blood of her own

citizens for nothing. That Athens should be great, splendid, and

powerful, was not only a reward due to her public spirit and devotion

to the common cause, but also a guarantee for the general dignity and

liberty of Greeks. And we, who have still before us the remnants of her

temples and statues, and learn from them what man can accomplish under

the inspiration of great ideals, need not scan too closely her claim to

appropriate the funds which she employed for so noble a purpose. For

this was the great age of Grecian art, the age of Phidias, Polycletus,

Myron, and Polygnotus. The greatest of these was Phidias; and in the

Parthenon, or Temple of the Virgin Goddess, [Footnote: Athene, the

patron goddess of Athens.] built under his direction on the Acropolis

at Athens, he has left the most enduring monument of his fame. He also

designed the Propylaea, a magnificent columned vestibule, fronting the

broad flight of steps which led up to the western entrance of the

Acropolis. But the most renowned of his works was the gigantic statue

of the Olympian Zeus, wrought in gold and ivory, which was the chief

glory of the temple at Olympia. Of this sublime creation, the highest

expression of divinity achieved by the ancients, only the fame

survives. These triumphs of art were not brought to completion until

nearly the close of the period of forty-eight years which separates the

Persian from the Peloponnesian War; and it is now necessary to glance

backward, and touch briefly on the principal events which occurred

after the formation of the Delian Confederacy. The war was carried on

with energy against Persia, and hostilities continued at intervals for

thirty years after the battle of Plataea. [Footnote: B.C. 479-449.]

The chief leader in these enterprises was the heroic Cimon, leader of

the conservative party at Athens, and the great rival of Pericles; and

his most brilliant exploit was a crushing defeat inflicted on the

Persian army and fleet at the mouth of the river Eurymedon in

Pamphylia. But the victorious career of the Athenians received a severe

check twelve years later in Egypt, where a large force of ships and men

was totally destroyed by the Persian general Megabyzus. The war dragged

on for five years longer, and peace was then concluded on terms highly

advantageous to the Greeks. Shortly before this, Cimon, who had been

the chief promoter of the war, died at Cyprus.

The same years which brought to a successful issue the long struggle

with Persia witnessed a renewal of those internal conflicts by which

the energies of Greece were finally exhausted, leaving her an easy prey

to the arms of Macedon. The guilt of renewing these suicidal quarrels

lies with the Spartans, who had long been nursing their grudge against

Athens, and were waiting for the opportunity to inflict on her a fatal

blow. Fifteen years [Footnote: B.C. 464. ] after the battle of Plataea

they seized the occasion when the Athenians were engaged with a large

part of their forces in carrying on operations against the revolted

island of Thasos to prepare an invasion of Attica. But at the very

moment when they were meditating this act of perfidy a double disaster

fell upon them at home, demanding all their exertions to save them from

ruin. Sparta was levelled to the ground by a terrible earthquake, in

which twenty thousand of her citizens perished; and in the midst of the

panic caused by this awful calamity the Helots rose in arms against

their oppressors, and forming an alliance with the Messenian subjects

of Sparta, entrenched themselves in a strong position on Mount Ithome.

Here they maintained themselves for two years, defying all the efforts

of the Spartans to drive them from their stronghold. In spite of their

recent treachery, the Spartans were not ashamed to apply to Athens for

help: and chiefly through the influence of Cimon, whose laurels from

the Eurymedon were still fresh, four thousand Athenian hoplites

[Footnote: Heavy-armed foot-soldiers.] were sent under his command to

aid in dislodging the Helots. The Athenians were famous for their skill

in attacking fortified places; but on this occasion they were

unsuccessful, and the Spartans, whose evil conscience made them prone

to suspicion, at once began to doubt the honesty of their intentions,

and dismissed them with scant ceremony. This unfriendly act helped to

embitter the relations between the two leading cities of Greece; and

two years later, when the Messenians were expelled from Ithome, and

driven into exile, the Athenians settled them with their families at

Naupactus, an important strategic position on the north of the

Corinthian Gulf, which has recently fallen into the hands of Athens.

Deeply offended by the affront received at Ithome, the Athenians now

formed an alliance with Argos, the ancient rival and bitter enemy of

Sparta. Thessaly, connected with Athens by old ties of friendship,

joined the league; and Megara, now suffering from the oppressions of

Corinth, made a fourth.

Within sight of the shores of Attica lies the island of Aegina, famous

in legend as the home of Aeacus, grandfather of Achilles, and

distinguished for its school of sculpture, and for its mighty breed of

athletes, whose feats are celebrated in the laureate strains of Pindar.

The Aeginetans had obtained the first prize for valour displayed in the

battle of Salamis, and for many years they had pressed the Athenians

hard in the race for maritime supremacy. They were now attacked by an

overwhelming Athenian force, and after a stubborn resistance were

totally defeated, and compelled to enroll themselves among the subjects

of Athens. A still harder fate was reserved for the hapless Dorian

islanders in the next generation.

In the following nine years [Footnote: B.C. 456-447.] the power of

Athens reached its greatest height, and for a moment it seemed as if

she were destined to extend her empire over the whole mainland of

Greece. By the victory of Oenophyta, gained over the Boeotians just

before the reduction of Aegina, Athens became mistress of all the

central provinces of the Greek peninsula, from the pass of Thermopylae

to the gulf of Corinth. The alliance of Megara, lately united by long

walls to its harbour of Nisaea, secured her from invasion on the side

of Peloponnesus. The great island of Euboea, with its rich pastures and

fruitful corn lands, had, since the Persian War, become an Athenian

estate, and was jealously guarded as one of her most valuable

possessions; and on the sea, from the eastern corner of the Euxine to

the strait of Gibraltar, there was none to dispute her sway.

But this rapid ascent was followed by no less speedy a fall, and one

act of indiscretion stripped the Athenians of all the advantages which

they had acquired on the mainland of Greece. In every city of Greece

there were always two parties, the wealthy and noble, called oligarchs,

and the demos, or commons; and according as Spartan or Athenian

influence was in the ascendant the balance of power in each city

wavered between the nobles and the people, the Athenians favouring the

Many, the Spartans the Few. Accordingly there was always a party living

in exile, and waiting for a turn of affairs which might enable them to

return to their city, and wrest the power from that faction which had

been the last to triumph. In the cities of Boeotia the leaders of the

oligarchs had been driven into banishment after the battle of

Oenophyta, and democracies were established under the control of

Athens. After nine years of banishment these exiles returned, and the

result was an oligarchical reaction in the chief cities of Boeotia. A

hastily equipped and ill-organised force was sent out from Athens to

put down the authors of the revolution, and in the battle which

followed, at Coronea, [Footnote: B.C. 447.] the Athenians sustained a

severe defeat, and a large number of their citizens were taken

prisoners by the Boeotians. To recover these prisoners the Athenians

consented to evacuate Boeotia, and by this surrender they lost their

hold on central Greece, as far as Thermopylae.

This heavy blow was followed two years later by the revolt of Megara

and Euboea; and in the midst of the alarm thus occasioned, the

Athenians heard that a powerful Spartan army was threatening their

borders. It was a terrible moment for Athens; but she was saved by the

prudence and energy of Pericles, whose influence in her councils was

now supreme. By some means or other--as the Spartans asserted, by a

heavy bribe--he induced the Spartan king Pleistoanax to draw off his

forces; and then crossing over into Euboea, he quickly reduced the

whole island to submission, and took severe measures to prevent any

outbreak in the future.

The exertions of the Athenians during the last thirty years had been

prodigious, and their efforts to found an empire in continental Greece

had ended in total failure. Discouraged by their reverses, they

concluded a thirty years' truce with the Spartans and their allies,

resigning the last remnant of their recent conquests, and leaving

Megara in her old position as a member of the Peloponnesian league

under Sparta. The loss of Megara was severely felt, and her conduct in

the late troubles was neither forgotten nor forgiven. The Megarians had

by their own free choice been admitted into the Athenian alliance, and

in an hour of great peril to Athens, without shadow of pretext they had

risen in arms against her. It was not long before they had to pay a

heavy penalty for their treachery and inconstancy.

The last event which we have to record, before entering into the main

current of our narrative, is the secession of Samos, the most important

member of the maritime allies of Athens. This wealthy and powerful

island had hitherto, with Chios and Lesbos, enjoyed the distinction of

serving under Athens as an independent ally. The Athenians, with a view

to their own interests, had recently set up a democracy in Samos, which

had hitherto been governed by an oligarchy. Incensed by this

interference, the Samian nobles, who had been driven into exile, hired

a mercenary force, and making a sudden attack from the mainland,

overthrew the democracy and raised the standard of revolt. The crisis

called for prompt and vigorous action on the part of Athens; for if

Samos had been successful in defying her authority, the other members

of the league would speedily have followed the example, and the whole

fabric of her empire might have been shattered to pieces. Pericles was

again equal to the emergency, and by employing the whole naval power of

Athens he was able, after a siege of nine months, to reduce the

refractory islanders to submission. The Samians were compelled to

surrender their fleet, to pull down their walls, to pay a heavy war

indemnity, and to give hostages as a security for their good conduct in

the future. And henceforward they became subjects and tributaries of

Athens.

We have now completed our review of the chief events which occurred

between the Persian and Peloponnesian wars. It was a period of rapid

development for Athens, of ceaseless activity at home and abroad, of

immense progress in all the arts of war and peace. The imperial city

had now risen to her full stature, and stood forth, supreme in

intellect and in action, the wonder and envy of mankind. Her mighty

walls bade defiance to her enemies at home, and she held in her hand

the islands and coast-districts of the Aegaean, where the last murmur

of resistance had been quelled. Her recent reverses on the mainland of

Greece had left the real sources of her power untouched; and taught

her, if she would but take the lesson to heart, the proper limits of

her empire. And she had risen to this height, not by the prevailing

force of any single mind, but by the united efforts of all her

citizens, working together for a whole generation, shunning no

sacrifice, and shrinking from no exertion, in their devotion to the

common mother of them all. Every Athenian, from the wealthiest noble to

the poorest rower in the fleet, felt that he had a stake in the

country, which to a Greek meant the city, where he was born. He gave

his vote in the Parliament [Footnote: Called the Ecclesia.] of Athens,

and served on the juries chosen by lot from the whole body of the

citizens, before whose judgment-seat, unassailable by bribery or

intimidation, the mightiest offenders trembled. He was a statesman, a

judge, a lawgiver, and a warrior, and he might even hope to climb to

the highest place in the State, and rule, like Pericles, as a prince of

democracy. Around him rose the temples and statues of the gods, fresh

from the chisel of the artist, the visible symbols of Athenian

greatness, and of the grand ideals which he served. The masterpieces of

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides opened to him the boundless realms

of the imagination, taught him grave lessons of moral wisdom, and

connected the strenuous present with the heroic past; and the Old

Comedy, the most complete embodiment of the very genius of democracy,

afforded a feast of wit and fancy for his lighter hours. If he had a

taste for higher speculation, he might hear Anaxagoras discoursing on

the mysteries of the spiritual world, or Zeno applying his sharp tests

for the conviction of human error. And when the assembly was summoned

to discuss matters of high imperial policy, he felt all the greatness

and majesty of the Athenian state, as he hung entranced on the lips of

Pericles.

Such was Athens in her prime, and such were the men who raised her to

the lofty eminence which she held among the cities of Greece. But the

years which had lifted her to that unparalleled height had raised up a

host of enemies against her, and it behoved her to temper ambition with

prudence if she would maintain the proud position which the held. The

scattered units which composed the Athenian empire were held together

by no tie of loyalty or affection to their common mistress, but solely

by the dread of her overwhelming naval power. Even in the noblest

spirits of ancient Greece, the feeling of patriotism, as we understand

it, was feeble and uncertain; when we speak of our \_country\_, the Greek

spoke of his \_city\_, and his love, his hopes, his highest aspirations,

were bounded by the narrow circuit of the walls which contained the

tombs of his ancestors and the temples of his gods. This feeling, the

most deeply-rooted instinct of Greek political life, had been

grievously offended by Athens, when she compelled the islanders of the

Aegaean, and the Greek cities of Asia, to serve in her navies, and pay

tribute to her exchequer.

Turning now to the mainland of Greece we find, in most of the leading

states, a sentiment of mingled fear and hatred against Athens, which

had been steadily increasing in volume in the course of the last thirty

years. The haughty Thebans had not forgotten their defeat at Oenophyta,

and their nine years of servitude to Athens. Aegina was groaning under

her yoke, and threatened with total political extinction. Megara

complained that her commerce was ruined by a decree which excluded her

merchants from the ports in the Athenian Empire. In the heart of

Peloponnesus the Spartans were hatching mischief against their hated

rival, who had robbed them of half their dignity as the acknowledged

leaders of the Greeks. Corinth, whose commerce was chiefly in the

western sea, outside the sphere of Athenian influence, was disposed to

be friendly, and had done the Athenians good service during the revolt

of Samos.[Footnote: See below, p. 31.] But five years later [Footnote:

B.C. 435.] an event occurred which changed this feeling into bitter

hatred against Athens, and drove the Corinthians into the ranks of her

most inveterate foes. And it is at this point that we take up the main

thread of our story.

STORIES FROM THUCYDIDES

CORINTH AND CORCYRA

I

It was in a remote corner of the Greek world that the trouble began

which was destined to breed such mischief and havoc for the whole of

Greece. At the beginning of the seventh century before our era the

island of Corcyra had been colonised by the Corinthians. The colony

grew and flourished, and in its turn founded other settlements on the

opposite coasts of Epirus and Illyria. Among these was Epidamnus,

called by the Romans Dyrrachium, and in Roman times the ordinary

landing-place for travellers from Italy to Greece. After many years of

prosperity the resources of Epidamnus were much crippled by internal

faction, and by wars with the neighbouring barbarians. Four years

before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, the nobles of Epidamnus,

who had been expelled in the last revolution, made an alliance with the

native tribes of Illyria, and by constant plundering raids reduced the

Epidamnians to such straits that they were compelled to apply to

Corcyra for help. But the Corcyraeans, whose sympathies were on the

side of the banished nobles, refused to interfere.

Epidamnus, as we have seen, was a colony founded by a colony, and

according to Greek custom the original settlers had been led by a

citizen of Corinth, the mother-city of Corcyra. Seeing, therefore, that

they had nothing to hope from the Corcyraeans, the distressed people of

Epidamnus began to turn their thoughts towards their ancient

metropolis, and considered whether they should appeal to her to save

them from ruin. But as this was a step of doubtful propriety, they

first consulted the oracle of Delphi, the great authority on questions

of international law. Receiving a favourable answer, they sent envoys

to Corinth, and offered to surrender their city to the Corinthians, in

return for their countenance and protection.

The Corcyraeans had long been in evil odour at Corinth, for they had

grown insolent in prosperity, and neglected all the observances which

were due from a colony to the mother-city. They were, in fact, superior

to the Corinthians in wealth and power, and their fleet, numbering a

hundred and twenty triremes, was second only to that of Athens. Corcyra

was famous in legend as the seat of the Phaeacians, a heroic sailor

race, whose deeds are sung by Homer in the \_Odyssey\_; and the

Corcyraeans regarded themselves as the lawful inheritors of their fame.

For all these reasons they despised the Corinthians, and made no secret

of their contempt. Remembering the many occasions on which they had

been publicly insulted by Corcyra, the Corinthians lent a favourable

ear to the petition of Epidamnus, and determined to appropriate the

colony to themselves. Accordingly they invited all who chose to go and

settle at Epidamnus, and sent the new colonists under a military

escort, with instructions to proceed by land to Apollonia, for fear

lest they should be obstructed by the Corcyraean fleet, if they went by

sea.

Great was the indignation at Corcyra when the news arrived that her

colony had been surrendered to Corinth, and a force of forty ships was

sent off in haste, bearing a peremptory demand to the Epidamnians that

they should receive back their exiles and send away the new colonists.

As the citizens refused to obey their mandate, they prepared to lay

siege to the town, which is situated on an isthmus.

When the Corinthians heard of the danger of Epidamnus, they began to

make preparations on a much larger scale, collecting a host of new

colonists, and a fleet of seventy-five ships to convoy them on their

passage to Epidamnus. Apprised of these proceedings, the Corcyraeans

sent envoys to Corinth, with a civil remonstrance against the arbitrary

interference with their own colony. They were willing, they said, to

submit the matter to arbitration, and in the meantime to suspend all

hostilities against the revolted city. But the Corinthians paid no

attention to their overtures, and all being now ready, the great

multitude, drawn from all parts of Greece, set sail for Epidamnus. When

they reached Actium, at the mouth of the Ambracian Gulf, they were met

by a herald, sent out from Corcyra in a skiff, to forbid their

approach. This was a mere manoeuvre, to throw the guilt of commencing

hostilities on the Corinthians; and meanwhile the Corcyraeans manned

their ships, to the number of eighty, and put out to meet the enemy's

fleet. In the sea-fight which followed the Corcyraeans gained a

complete victory, and on the same day Epidamnus was compelled to

capitulate to the besieging force.

By this victory the Corcyraeans gained complete command of the western

or Ionian sea, and for the rest of the summer they sailed from place to

place, plundering the allies of Corinth. The Corinthians, however, were

not at all disposed to acquiesce in their defeat, and during the whole

of the following year they were busy organising a fresh expedition on a

vast scale, being resolved at all costs to put down the insolence of

Corcyra. These preparations caused no small anxiety to the Corcyraeans.

Hitherto they had stood apart, and refused to take any share in the

complicated game of Greek politics. The course of affairs during the

last forty years had tended more and more to divide the Greek world

into two opposite camps, arrayed under the banners of Athens and

Sparta. As Dorians, the Corcyraeans would naturally have enrolled

themselves among the allies of Sparta,--as islanders and seamen, they

might have leaned to the side of Athens: but confident in their remote

situation, and in the power of their fleet, they had chosen to remain

neutral. But finding themselves threatened with destruction, they now

resolved to abandon their policy of selfish isolation, and sue for

admission into the Athenian alliance. Ambassadors were sent to Athens

to urge their plea; and the Corinthians, hearing of their intention,

sent representatives of their own to oppose the application.

The Athenians were fully alive to the gravity of the question which

they were called upon to decide, and after listening to the arguments

of the Corcyraean and Corinthian orators, they adjourned the debate

until the next day. To Corinth they were bound by old ties of

obligation; for on three distinct occasions the Corinthians had done

them signal service. More than seventy years before the date which we

have reached, the Spartans summoned their allies to consider whether it

was expedient to compel the Athenians to receive back the banished

tyrant Hippias; and it was chiefly by the eloquence of the Corinthian

speaker Sosicles, who drew a vivid picture of the miseries of

despotical government, that they were shamed out of their purpose. A

few years later, when the Athenians were at war with Aegina, they were

aided by twenty Corinthian ships. And quite recently, in the great

peril which menaced Athens at the revolt of Samos, Corinth had once

more shown herself a friend. At a congress of the Peloponnesian allies,

summoned to consider an appeal from the Samians for help, the

Corinthians had spoken strongly against interference with the revolted

allies of another city. Corinth was a place of old renown, the queen of

the Isthmus, a centre of civilisation; whereas Corcyra was a remote

island, and her people, though Greeks by descent, were in manners and

character more than half barbarians.

But there were two arguments put forward by the Corcyraean orator,

which outweighed all other considerations of policy or friendship. The

first was addressed to the fears of the Athenians, the second to their

ambition. War, he argued, was inevitable, and it was of the utmost

importance for Athens to secure the alliance of the Corcyraean fleet,

and prevent it from being added to the naval forces of her enemies. And

his concluding words struck a note which found a response among the

more daring spirits among his hearers, whose thoughts, as it would

seem, were already turning to the western colonies of Greece, as a new

field of enterprise and conquest. "It will not do," he said, "to be too

nice. While you are hesitating, and weighing nice points of

international right, you will be outdistanced in the race for power, if

you tamely give up a great naval station which holds the key to Italy

and Sicily."

Such reasoning, hollow and false as it was, turned the scale in favour

of Corcyra, and a defensive alliance was concluded, pledging the

Athenians and Corcyraeans to aid each other against any attack on the

territory or allies of either state. For the Athenians wished to avoid

breaking the Thirty Years' Truce, and therefore refrained from entering

into any agreement which might oblige them to acts of open aggression

against Corinth.

There can be little doubt that Pericles, who was mainly responsible for

this decision, committed a fatal error in advising the Athenians to

take up the cause of Corcyra. By this act Athens incurred the

implacable hostility of Corinth, and revived the old grudge which that

city had conceived against her when Megara joined the Athenian

alliance. In the constantly shifting currents of Greek politics, Athens

might well, under wise guidance, have steered her way safely through

the perils which surrounded her. The Corinthians had half forgotten

their grievance, as is proved by their conduct at the revolt of Samos;

and the tone of their representative at the Corcyraean debate is

decidedly friendly. The Spartans were sluggish and procrastinating by

nature, and required some powerful impulse to induce them to act with

vigour; and this impulse was now supplied by Corinth. By accepting,

therefore, the alliance of Corcyra, Athens barred the way to all

compromise, and gathered into one head all the scattered causes of

jealousy and hatred which had been accumulating against her in the last

fifty years.

Early in the following year the Corinthian fleet, numbering a hundred

and fifty sail, put to sea from Corinth, to renew the war with Corcyra,

and a battle was fought off the coast of Epirus. The engagement was

long and fierce, and the event was finally decided by a small squadron

of Athenian ships, which had been sent with instructions to hinder any

attempt of the enemy to land on the island Seeing that the Corcyraeans

were being forced back upon their own coast, the Athenian captains, who

had hitherto looked on, and taken no part in the battle, now assumed

the offensive, and lent such effectual aid that the Corinthians were

held in check until the sudden appearance of twenty additional ships

from Athens, which had been sent off immediately after the others, put

an end to the action. This timely interference saved Corcyra from ruin;

for next day the Corinthians, after a formal remonstrance, set sail for

home, taking with them two hundred and fifty prisoners, belonging to

the noblest families in Corcyra, whom they kept in safe custody, but

treated with great consideration, hoping by means of them at some

future time to recover their influence in the island.

II

It was not long before the effects of this impolitic breach with

Corinth were sensibly felt by Athens. In the course of the following

summer, Potidaea, a Corinthian colony, situated on the borders of

Macedon, and included in the Athenian alliance, openly raised the

standard of revolt, encouraged by promises from Sparta, and by the

presence of a strong body of hoplites, sent for its support from

Corinth. Potidaea was presently closely invested by an Athenian army

and fleet, and the Corinthians pretended to make this a fresh ground of

complaint, though they had themselves incited the city to throw off its

allegiance to Athens.

Feeling that matters were now approaching a crisis, the Spartans

summoned a congress of their allies, and invited all who had any

grievance against Athens to state their case. Then some spoke of the

wrongs of Aegina, formerly not the least among Greek cities, but now so

crushed under the yoke of Athens that she had not dared to raise her

voice openly against the tyrant-city. The Megarians complained of the

restrictions on their commerce, which threatened them with an empty

exchequer and a starving population; and others followed in the same

strain. When all the rest had spoken, the Corinthian orator, who had

reserved his eloquence till the end, came forward and delivered a

vehement harangue, containing hardly any specific charge against

Athens, but well calculated to inflame the passions and provoke the

pride of the Spartans. Though the acknowledged leader of Greece, and

champion of her liberties, Sparta, he said, had always been the last to

see the dangers which menaced the common country, and the last to take

measures for her defence. Spartan apathy and indolence had brought the

Greeks to the brink of ruin in the Persian War; and when that danger

was passed, the same fatal indifference had enabled Athens to advance

step by step on the path of aggrandisement; until now she had grown so

strong that the united force of the whole Peloponnesian league would be

required to put her down. Why had not the Spartans listened to the

warnings which they had heard, when the Athenians were rebuilding their

walls? Then they might have stopped the evil at its source, and saved a

multitude of cities from slavery and oppression. "Consider," cried the

orator, warming to his subject, "what manner of men these Athenians

are, and how vast is the difference between them and you. While you are

shut up in this inland valley, treading the dull round of mechanical

routine, they are continually pushing forward the boundaries of their

empire, toiling night and day to make their city great, never satisfied

with what they have, always thirsting for more. Cautious, timid, and

conservative as you are, hardly to be roused from your sloth by the

most imminent perils, how can you hope to curb the flight of Athenian

ambition, which knows no limit, and is checked by no reverse?

"Men of Sparta, I speak as a friend, and you will not take my candour

amiss. New times require new manners, and if you would maintain your

great position you must move with the march of events, and abandon your

old-fashioned ways. Do not mistake stagnation for stability, but learn

a lesson even from these hated Athenians, who have risen to their

present pitch of greatness by adapting themselves to every new need as

it arose.

"You know what you have to do, if you would wipe out the reproach which

rests upon you, and keep the respect of your faithful allies. Send an

army into Attica, and compel the Athenians to withdraw their forces

from Potidaea. And let it be done speedily, for while we are talking

our kinsmen are perishing."

It happened that an Athenian embassy was present in Sparta, having been

sent there on some other business, and not for the purpose of

representing Athens at the debate. But when they heard of the outcry

which had been raised against their city, the envoys asked permission

for one of their number to address the Spartan assembly, wishing to

explain the true character and origin of the Athenian Empire, and to

warn the Spartans against plunging the whole country into the horrors

of civil war. Leave being granted, the Athenian orator entered on his

subject by sketching the course of events for the last sixty years.

Athens, he said, had twice saved Greece, first at Marathon, and

afterwards at Salamis. On the first of these occasions she had stood

almost alone against an overwhelming force of Persians; and ten years

later, though betrayed by her allies, she had borne the brunt against

the navy of Xerxes. Who, then, was worthier than she to hold empire

over Greeks? That empire had been forced upon her by the inertness of

Sparta, and by the cowardice and sloth of her own allies in the Delian

league. The power thus gained had been used with moderation, in marked

contrast to the previous tyranny of Persia exercised over the same

cities, and the arrogance of Spartan officers when engaged on foreign

service. But a light yoke, it would seem, was harder to bear than a

heavy one; if Athens had openly oppressed her subjects, she would never

have heard a murmur.

Having thus tried to combat the prejudice against Athens, the orator

addressed himself directly to the Spartans, and said: "Consider the

awful responsibility which you will incur, if you suffer yourselves to

be carried away by the invectives of your allies, and drive us against

our will to tempt with you the dark uncertainties and perilous issues

of war. There is still time for an amicable settlement of our

differences: Athens is prepared to make all reasonable concessions, and

to submit to arbitration, as the terms of the treaty direct. And if you

decline to accept this offer, the guilt of the aggressor will lie with

you."

It is remarkable that the speaker, in tracing the later course of

Athenian policy, lays no claim to those high motives of patriotism

which had inspired his people with sublime self-devotion two

generations back. He boldly asserts the principle that it is lawful for

the stronger to rule the weaker, and claims merit for Athens in

abstaining from excessive abuse of her power. The Athenians, we may

believe, had been tainted by the baseness of their confederates. In the

early days of the Delian league they had not attempted to educate the

Greeks whom they led up to the standard of their own splendid

zeal,--or, if the attempt had been made, it was unsuccessful. They had

taken upon themselves the whole burden of a great public duty, and

standing alone, without moral support from their countrymen, they had

gradually fallen away from the pure and lofty virtues of their

ancestors. This decay of public morality proceeds with rapid strides in

the years which follow, and we shall presently hear the doctrine that

might is right proclaimed with cynical frankness by the lips of an

Athenian.

Having heard the complaints of their allies against Athens, and the

reply of the Athenian orator, the Spartans ordered all but those of

their own race to withdraw, and continued the debate with closed doors.

A great majority of the speakers were in favour of declaring immediate

war on Athens. But there was one important exception: the aged

Archidamus, who for the last fourteen years had been reigning as sole

king at Sparta, spoke strongly against the imprudence of assuming the

aggressive, before they had made adequate preparations to cope with the

offending city. It was an opinion generally held by the war-party that

the Athenians would be ready to make any concessions, in order to save

the land of Attica from ravage. This, said Archidamus, was a great

error; and the event proved that he was right. The Athenians, with

their great colonial empire, and complete command of the sea, were

quite independent of the products of their own estates in Attica. And

many years must elapse before the states of Peloponnesus could train a

fleet, and attack them on the sea, where alone they were assailable. It

was folly to suppose that such a contest could be decided by a single

summer campaign, as was commonly believed by the enemies of Athens. "I

fear rather," said the king, with prophetic foresight, "that we shall

leave this war as an inheritance to our children; such is the power,

and such the pride, of the state with which we have to contend." On the

other hand, the Spartans, as champions of the liberties of Greece, must

not allow the common oppressors of their countrymen to continue their

career of tyranny unchecked. Let them first, however, try what could be

effected by negotiation, and in the meantime prepare for war, by

building ships, and above all by collecting money, without which all

their valour would be useless. Then, if Athens still refused to listen

to reason, they might declare war with better hope of success.

The speech of Archidamus shows a true insight into the nature of the

crisis which the Spartans were called upon to face, and his views were

amply justified by subsequent events. His wise words were no doubt

applauded by the older and more sober-minded among his hearers. But

there was another and a much more numerous party at that time in

Sparta, filled with bitter envy and hatred against Athens. Their

passions had been inflamed by the invectives of the Corinthian orator,

and without counting the cost they were resolved to try the issues of

immediate battle. Their blind rancour found expression in the curt and

pithy harangue of Sthenelaidas, one of the five Ephors, a college of

magistrates which in recent years had greatly encroached on the

authority of the kings. Sthenelaidas spoke with true laconic brevity.

"I don't understand," he said, "all the fine talk of these Athenians.

They have told us a great deal about their own merits, but have not

said a word in answer to the charges brought against them. Even if we

accept their own account of themselves, their good conduct in the past

only lends a darker colour to their present crimes. We have one plain

duty to perform, and that is to save our faithful allies from

ill-treatment. The time for words is past--leave them to the

transgressor. Our part is to act, at once, and with all our might, and

put down the overwhelming insolence of Athens."

Then, in his capacity as Ephor, Sthenelaidas, without staying for

further argument, forthwith put the question to the Spartan assembly.

According to their ordinary procedure, the Spartans gave their votes by

cries of "Ay" and "No." But on this occasion Sthenelaidas pretended to

be unable to distinguish whether the "Ays" or "Nos" had it, and wishing

to encourage the war-party by showing how much they were in the

majority, he ordered the house to divide on the question whether the

treaty was broken, and whether the Athenians were in the wrong or not.

The division was made, and a great majority were in favour of the

motion, recording their votes against Athens. The allies were then

called in, and informed to the result of the private debate, and a day

was named for a general synod of the whole Peloponnesian league, to

reconsider the situation and decide whether war was to be declared.

In the interval, before the final assembly of the allies, the Spartans

sent to ask the oracle at Delphi whether it was expedient for them to

make war; and the answer, according to common report, was that if they

fought with all their might they would conquer, and that the god

[Footnote: Apollo.] would be on their side. The Corinthians were at the

same time carrying on an active canvass against Athens, sending their

agents from city to city to blow up the flames of war.

In the autumn of the same year the allies met in full synod at Sparta,

and once more the Corinthian speaker led the cry against Athens, and

called for a unanimous war-vote, flattering his hearers with hopes of a

speedy victory. The Spartans, he said, had at last set a good example

to their allies, and shown themselves convinced that imperial cities

had imperial obligations, by pronouncing in favour of war. Every member

of the league must join heartily in the struggle, whether he belonged

to an inland or to a maritime city; for if the seaports were closed by

the Athenian fleets, the inland towns would be prevented from exporting

their products, and importing what they wanted from abroad. War, then,

was in the interest of the whole body of allies. And on the moral side

their position was equally sound, for they were only acting on

desperate provocation, and the common god of Greece had promised

success to their arms. But to deserve that success, all must co-operate

heartily, contributing freely from their private purses to raise a

fleet which would make them a match for Athens on her own element. And

they must watch the course of events with a vigilant eye, and be ready

to seize any opportunity which might arise to aim a decisive blow at

their common enemy. Let them be warned by the experience of the

Ionians, and put out all their strength to save themselves from being

swallowed up by the devouring ambition of Athens. Justice, heaven's

favour, the good-will of all Greece, were on their side.

Others spoke to the same effect, and then the representatives of each

city were called up in turn to give their vote; and by far the greater

number voted for war. But many months elapsed before any overt act of

hostility occurred, and the time was occupied in preparations for an

invasion of Attica, and in a series of demands sent by Sparta to try

the temper of the Athenians, and put them in the wrong, if they refused

to comply. The first of these messages was conveyed in mysterious

terms, bidding the Athenians "to drive out the curse of the goddess."

The meaning of this was as follows: nearly two hundred years before a

certain Cylon tried to make himself tyrant of Athens: the attempt was

frustrated, and some of his adherents, who had taken refuge in the

sacred precinct of Athene, were put to death by the magistrates, after

they had surrendered under a solemn promise that their lives should be

spared. The illustrious family of the Alcmaeonidae was especially

concerned in this act of murder and sacrilege, and the Spartans, in

reviving the memory of an ancient crime, were aiming a blow at

Pericles, who was descended on his mother's side from the Alcmaeonidae.

For the Athenians were highly sensitive in all matters of religion, and

it was possible that they might even banish Pericles, if their

consciences were suddenly alarmed. And though this was not likely, the

Spartans hoped at any rate to lessen his influence, which was adverse

to themselves, and fasten on him the odium of being, in some sense, the

cause of the war. But their manoeuvre was unsuccessful, and the

Athenians retorted by bidding the Spartans drive out the curse of

Taenarus, in allusion to the murder of certain Helots who had taken

sanctuary in the temple of Poseidon at Taenarus. And they further

charged the Spartans to rid themselves of the curse of Athene of the

Brazen House. This was a holy place in Sparta, where Pausanias, when

convicted of treasonable correspondence with Persia, had sought refuge

from the vengeance of the Spartans. He was kept a close prisoner in the

temple by the Ephors, who set a watch on him, to prevent him from being

supplied with food, and when he was reduced to the last extremity,

brought him out to die. But though his death occurred outside the

temple, this did not save them from the sin of sacrilege, and a public

reprimand by the Delphic God.

The game of diplomatic fencing went on for some time, and envoys were

continually passing to and fro between Athens and Sparta. The Athenians

were required to raise the siege of Potidaea--to allow the Aeginetans

to govern themselves--to rescind the decree against Megara; and when

all these demands were met by a firm refusal, the Spartans sent two

ambassadors, bearing their ultimatum, which was worded as follows: "The

Lacedaemonians wish that there should be peace, and war may be averted

if ye will let the Greeks go free." Knowing that the decisive moment

had now arrived, the Athenians met together in full assembly, to decide

on their final answer. There were many speakers on either side, some

arguing for peace, others for war: and then was heard that majestic

voice, which, for more than thirty years, had guided the counsels of

Athens--the voice of the Olympian Pericles. He had chosen his line of

policy a year before, in the fatal affair of Corcyra, and it was now

too late to draw back: peace with honour was no longer possible for

Athens. The furious zeal of Corinth had united her enemies against her,

and they were bent on her ruin. The demands put forward by Sparta were

a mere pretext, and if the Athenians had yielded the smallest point,

new concessions would have been required of them, until they were

stripped of all that had been won by the strenuous toil and devotion of

two generations. "We must listen," said Pericles, in the course of a

long speech, "to no proposal from Sparta which is not made as from an

equal to an equal. Dictation is not arbitration. If we are to fight at

all, the occasion matters little, be it small or great. What right has

Sparta to require of us that we should rescind the decree against

Megara, when her own laws jealously exclude all strangers from entering

her streets? Or why should we relax our hold upon our allies, or break

off the relations with them which were sanctioned by the Thirty Years'

Truce? No, all this is a mere pretence, and if we are deceived by it,

we shall be led on step by step to deeper and still deeper humiliation.

It may seem a hard thing to give up the fair land of Attica to pillage

and devastation. But think how far greater was the sacrifice made by

our grandsires, who refused the fairest offers from Persia, and gave up

all they had, rather than betray the common cause. Athens and Attica

were then all the country they had, and these lost they had nothing

left but their ships, their strong arms, and their stout hearts. In our

case, on the other hand, all the essential elements of our power--our

city, our fleet, our colonial empire--remain untouched. Shall we, then,

sell our honour to save a few vineyards and olive-grounds from

temporary damage? That would be a short-sighted policy indeed, and in

the end would involve not only dishonour, but the loss of our whole

empire. Let us act, then, in the spirit of our fathers, and send away

the Spartan ambassadors with the only answer which is consistent with

our dignity and our interest."

The reply to the Spartan ultimatum was framed as Pericles had directed,

and from this moment all negotiations ceased. And here we close our

account of the events which led to the Peloponnesian War.

THE SURPRISE OF PLATAEA

I

On the northern slope of Cithaeron, the mountain range which divides

Attica from Boeotia, lies the little town of Plataea. By race and by

geographical position the Plataeans were naturally included in the

Boeotian confederacy, under the leadership of Thebes. But nearly a

century before the time of which we are now speaking they had deserted

the Thebans, whose rule was harsh and overbearing, and enrolled

themselves among the allies of Athens. On the eve of the battle of

Marathon, they had joined the Athenians with their whole force, a

thousand strong, and shared the peril and the honour of that glorious

day. Ten years later their city was laid in ruins by the army of

Xerxes, at the instigation of the Thebans; and in the following year

the great battle which ended the long struggle between Greece and

Persia was fought within sight of their shattered walls. In gratitude

for this great victory, the confederate Greeks under Pausanias declared

that the Plataean territory should be hallowed ground, and swore a

solemn oath to maintain the independence of the city. But the Thebans

had never forgotten or forgiven the secession of Plataea from the

confederacy of which they were the leaders; and seizing the opportunity

while the Athenians were occupied with measures for their own safety,

they made a treacherous attempt to gain possession of the town.

On a dark and moonless night in the early spring three hundred armed

Thebans appeared before the gates of Plataea, which were opened to them

by a party of the citizens who favoured their design. Marching in a

body to the market-place, they made proclamation by a herald, inviting

all who chose to return to their allegiance, and take sides with their

lawful leaders, the Thebans. For they wished, if possible, to gain over

the place without bloodshed, and before the war had actually broken

out; otherwise, they might have to give it up again on the conclusion

of peace.

The Plataeans, being wakened out of their first sleep, and thinking

that the Thebans were in much greater force than was really the case,

at first attempted no resistance, but were disposed to accept the terms

offered them. But perceiving by degrees that their enemies were far

weaker in numbers than themselves, they changed their minds, and

resolved to attack them. For the party which had betrayed the town was

but small, and the general body of the citizens detested the thought of

falling once more under the supremacy of Thebes. Their measures were

taken with great secrecy and despatch: to avoid exciting the suspicions

of the Thebans, they broke down the dividing walls of their houses, and

passed to and fro unobserved, until they had completed their

preparations. To embarrass the movements of the Thebans, they

barricaded the streets with waggons, and then, just before daybreak,

they poured out of their houses, and fell upon the enemy, who were

still stationed in the market-place. Though taken by surprise, the

Thebans defended themselves stoutly, and standing shoulder to shoulder

repulsed the assault of the Plataeans two or three times. But they were

greatly inferior in numbers, wearied by their long vigil, and soaked

with the heavy rain which had fallen in the night; the Plataeans

returned again and again to the attack, assailing them with furious

cries; and the women and slaves who crowded the roofs added to their

discomfiture, pelting them with tiles and stones, and stunning their

ears with a frightful uproar of yells and shrieks; so that at last

their hearts failed them, and breaking their ranks they fled wildly

through the streets. Some succeeded in reaching the gate by which they

had entered, but only to find that their escape was cut off in this

direction; for one of the Plataeans had closed the gate, using the

spike of his javelin to secure the bolt. Others lost their way in the

narrow and muddy streets, and wandered up and down until they were

slain by the Plataeans. A few contrived to escape by an unguarded

postern-gate, having cut through the bolt with an axe given them by a

woman. Others, in despair, flung themselves from the walls, and for the

most part perished. But a good number, who had kept together, were

caught in a trap; for coming to a large building which abutted on the

wall, and finding the doors open, they thought that they had reached

the town-gate, and rushed headlong in. The pursuers, who were close at

their heels, made fast the doors, and then the question arose what they

should do with their captives. Some proposed to set fire to the

building, and to burn it down, with the Thebans in it; but at last

those who were thus taken, and the few who were still straggling in the

town, were allowed to surrender at discretion.

Meanwhile a strong reinforcement of Thebans, who had started after the

three hundred, were on the way to Plataea; but being delayed by the

state of the roads, and the swollen condition of the Asopus, which they

had to cross, they arrived too late. Being informed of what had

happened, they prepared to plunder the property of the Plataeans

outside the walls, and seize any of the citizens who crossed their

path, to serve as hostages for their own men in the town. The

Plataeans, perceiving their intention, sent a herald to remonstrate,

threatening that unless they desisted, all the Theban prisoners should

at once be put to death. And they promised further, under an oath, that

if the Thebans would withdraw their forces, the captives should be

restored--at least this was the account which was afterwards current at

Thebes, though the Plataeans denied that they had made any such promise

unconditionally, and declared that they had sworn no oath. It seems

probable that the Thebans had received some such explicit assurance as

they asserted; for, on receiving the answer from Plataea, they marched

away without doing any harm. No sooner were they gone than the

Plataeans made all haste to get their property within the walls, and

then put all their prisoners to death. The day was not far distant when

they were bitterly to rue this act of passion, which was not only

cruel, but grossly impolitic; for the Thebans thus slain in cold blood,

a hundred and eighty in number, would have been invaluable as hostages,

whereas the Plataeans had now cut themselves off from all hope of

reconciliation with Thebes, and virtually sealed their own fate.

Two messengers had been despatched from Plataea to Athens, one after

the first entrance of the Thebans, and the second after their defeat

and capture; and the Athenians, on receiving the second message, sent

off a herald bidding the Plataeans to wait for further instructions,

before taking any steps against the prisoners. When the herald arrived,

he found the men already slain, and the Athenians then proceeded to

place the town in a state of defence, removing the women and children

and all those who were unfit for military service, to Athens, and

leaving a small body of their own citizens to direct operations.

II

The surprise of Plataea was the first open violation of the Thirty

Years' Truce, and from this time forward all Greece was involved for

many years in civil war. Public opinion was strongly on the side of the

Spartans, who stood forward as champions of the liberties of Greece;

but there was great enthusiasm on both sides, and the popular

imagination was much excited by the approaching struggle between the

two imperial cities. Both in Sparta and in Athens there was a younger

generation, who had grown up during a long period of peace, and now

entered gaily into the contest with all the light-hearted ignorance of

youth. Old prophecies current among the people, foretelling a great war

of Greeks against Greeks, passed from mouth to mouth, and the

professional soothsayers, whose business it was to collect and expound

such sayings, found eager hearers. The gods themselves could not be

indifferent on the eve of such mighty events, so deeply affecting the

destiny of the nation which worshipped them in a thousand temples; and

an earthquake, which had recently occurred at Delos, the sacred island

of Apollo, where such a visitation had never been known before, was

interpreted as a portent of great things to come.

While the Peloponnesians were mustering their forces at the Isthmus,

the rural population of Attica were breaking up their homes, and

flocking by thousands into the city. A constant stream of waggons

passed along the roads, loaded with furniture, household utensils, and

even the woodwork of the farm-buildings; and many a little group of

women, children, and servants set out on that sorrowful journey,

leaving their fields, their gardens, and their vineyards, to be

trampled down and laid waste by the ruthless invader. Athens, indeed,

was the common mother of them all, their glory, their strength, and

their pride; for since the days of Theseus the scattered rural

communities of Attica had been united under the Aegis of Athene, and

acknowledged Athens as the head and centre of their civic life. But a

large proportion of the Athenian citizens still continued to reside in

the country, and all their dearest associations were connected with the

little spot of earth where they and their fathers were born. Here were

the graves of their ancestors, and the temples of the heroes who were

the guardian spirits of each little aggregate of families. It was

therefore with bitter and resentful feelings that they left these happy

scenes behind them, and turned their steps towards the gates of the

city, through which many of them were never to pass again. For all of

them it was a grievous change from the free and careless life of the

country-side to the confined space, polluted air, and jostling

multitudes of the town, now crowded to overflowing. Some few found

shelter in the houses of friends or relations; but by far the greater

number were obliged to encamp in the open spaces of the city, in the

precincts of temples, or in the narrow room between the Long Walls.

Even a place beneath the Acropolis, called the Pelasgic Field, was now

covered with the huts of the immigrants, though an ancient oracle had

forbidden its occupation under a curse. From day to day new crowds kept

flocking in, and the later comers were obliged to take up their

dwelling in Peiraeus, which was soon almost as much overcrowded as the

upper city.

And now the younger generation of Athenians, who had entered so

cheerfully into the conflict, were to have their first taste of the

grim realities of war. The Peloponnesian army advanced leisurely, and

proceeded at first to Oenoe, an outlying fort near the borders of

Boeotia; for Archidamus, who held the chief command, still hoped that

the Athenians, when they saw the enemy on the confines of Attica, would

make some concessions, to save their farms from destruction. For this

reason he had long delayed his march from the Isthmus, and now wasted

more time in fruitless operations at Oenoe, until the allies began to

murmur against him, and suspected him of receiving bribes from the

Athenians to spare their lands. At last, being unable to put off the

fatal moment any longer, he turned southwards, and after ravaging the

plain of Eleusis, advanced to Acharnae, one of the most fertile and

prosperous districts of Attica, about seven miles north of Athens. Here

the Peloponnesians encamped, and applied themselves systematically to

the work of pillage and havoc.

Great was the rage of the Acharnians, a hardy race of farmers and

charcoal-burners, when they saw the smoke rising from their ruined

homesteads; and their feelings were shared by the general body of the

citizens, who had watched the advance of Archidamus from Eleusis, and

had now no hope of saving their estates. Little knots of angry

disputants were seen in the streets and public places, for the most

part clamouring against Pericles, and demanding to be led against the

invader, while some few argued for the more prudent course. But

Pericles, who knew the fickle temper of the multitude, turned a deaf

ear to all this uproar, and steadily refused to summon an assembly,

lest some hasty resolution should be passed, which would lead to

useless loss of life. In order, however, to relieve the public

excitement, he sent out a body of horsemen to skirmish with the enemy,

and despatched a fleet of a hundred triremes to ravage the coasts of

Peloponnesus.

When the first invasion of Attica was over, two cities, which had been

foremost in stirring up war against Athens, were made to feel the full

weight of her resentment. The unhappy Aeginetans were expelled from

their island, and the land of Aegina was distributed among Athenian

citizens. And later in the same summer the Athenians marched in full

force into the territory of Megara, which was laid waste from end to

end. This proceeding, which afforded a pleasant summer excursion to the

Athenians, was repeated annually for the next seven years. The banished

Aeginetans found an asylum at Thyrea, a coast district of eastern

Peloponnesus, which was assigned to them by Sparta. And so the first

year of the war came to an end; for, except on extraordinary occasions,

no military operations were undertaken during the winter.

THE PLAGUE AT ATHENS

I

At the beginning of the next summer the Peloponnesians again entered

Attica, and resumed their work of devastation, destroying the young

crops, and wrecking whatever had been spared in the previous year.

Before they had been many days in Attica, a new and far more terrible

visitation came upon the Athenians, threatening them with total

extinction as a people. We have seen how the whole upper city, with the

space between the Long Walls, and the harbour-town of Peiraeus, was

packed with a vast multitude of human beings, penned together, like

sheep in a fold. Into these huddled masses now crept a subtle and

unseen foe, striking down his victims by hundreds and by thousands.

That foe was the Plague, which beginning in Southern Africa, and

descending thence to Egypt, reached the southern shores of the

Mediterranean, and passed on to Peiraeus, having been carried thither

by seamen who trafficked between northern Africa and Greece. From

Peiraeus it spread upwards with rapid strides, and before long the

whole space within the walls presented the appearance of a vast

lazar-house.

From the description of the symptoms we may conclude that this epidemic

was similar to that dreadful scourge of mankind which has been almost

conquered by modern science, the small-pox. The patient who had taken

the infection was first attacked in the head, with inflammation of the

eyes, and violent headache. By degrees the poison worked its way into

the whole system, affecting every organ in the body, and appearing on

the surface in the shape of small ulcers and boils. One of the most

distressing features of the disease was a raging thirst, which could

not be appeased by the most copious draughts of water; and the internal

heat, which produced this effect, caused also a frightful irritability

of the skin, so that the sufferer could not bear the touch of the

lightest and most airy fabrics, but lay naked on his bed, in all the

deformity of his dire affliction. Of those who recovered, many bore the

marks of the sickness to their graves, by the loss of a hand, a foot,

or an eye; while others were affected in their minds, remaining in

blank oblivion, without power to recognise themselves or their friends.

The healing art had made great progress in Greece in the course of the

last generation; and in this, as in all else, the Greeks remained the

sole teachers of Europe for ages after. But against such a malady as

this, the most skilful physicians could do nothing, and those who

attempted to exercise their skill caught the plague themselves, and for

the most part perished. Still less, as we may well suppose, was the

benefit derived from amulets, incantations, inquiries of oracles, or

supplications at temples; and at last, finding no help in god or man,

the Athenians gave up the struggle, and resigned themselves to despair.

It is recorded as a curious fact, showing the strange and outlandish

character of the pestilence, that the birds and animals which feed on

human flesh generally shunned the bodies of those who died of the

plague, though they might have eaten their fill, for hundreds were left

unburied. The very vultures fled from the infected city, and hardly one

was seen as long as the pestilence continued.

The fearful rapidity with which the infection spread caused a panic

throughout the city, and even the boldest were not proof against the

general terror. If any man felt himself sickening of the plague, he at

once gave up all hope, and made no effort to fight against the disease.

Few were found brave enough to undertake the duty of nursing the sick,

and those who did generally paid for their devotion with their lives.

In most cases the patient was left to languish alone, and perished by

neglect, while his nearest and dearest avoided his presence, and had

grown so callous that they had not a sigh or a tear left for the death

of husband, or child, or friend. The few who recovered, now free from

risk of mortal infection, did what they could to help their suffering

fellow-citizens.

The mischief was aggravated by the overcrowded state of the city,

especially among those who had come in from the country, and were

living in stifling huts through the intense heat of a southern summer.

Here the harvest of death fell thickest, and the corpses lay heaped

together, while dying wretches crawled about the public streets, and

encumbered the fountain-sides, to which they had dragged themselves in

their longing for drink. All sense of public decency, all regard for

laws, human or divine, was lost. The temples in which they had made

their dwellings were choked with dead, and the sacred duty of burial,

to which the conscience of antiquity attached so high an importance,

was performed in wild haste and disorder. Sometimes those who were

carrying out a corpse found a vacant pile prepared by the relatives of

another victim, flung their dead upon it, set fire to the pile, and

departed; and sometimes, when a body was already burning, others who

were seeking to dispose of a corpse forced their way to the fire, and

threw their burden upon it.

In the general relaxation of public morality all the dark passions of

human nature, which at ordinary times lurk in secret places, came forth

to the light of day, and raged without restraint. Some, who had grown

rich in a day by the death of wealthy relatives, resolved to enjoy

their possessions, and indulge every appetite, before they were

overtaken by the same fate. Others, who had hitherto led good lives,

seeing the base and the noble swept away indifferently by the same

ruthless power, began to doubt the justice of heaven itself, and rushed

into debauch, convinced that conscience and honour were but empty

names. For human laws they cared still less, for in the universal panic

there was none to enforce them, and before the voice of public

authority could be heard again, both judge and transgressor, as they

believed, would be involved in a common doom. All shame and fear were

accordingly thrown aside, and those whom the plague had not yet touched

seemed possessed by one sole desire--to drown thought and care in an

orgy of fierce excess, and then to die.

II

The second invasion of the Peloponnesians was prolonged for forty days,

and the whole Attic territory was laid waste. Pericles again refused to

venture a pitched battle against them, knowing well that the Athenian

army was no match for them in the open field. But a powerful fleet was

sent to cruise round Peloponnesus, which inflicted much damage on the

coast districts. It was a welcome relief to the Athenians selected for

this service to escape for a time from the plague-stricken city; but

unhappily they carried the infection with them, and the crews were

decimated by the same disease. Nor did the evil stop here: for the same

armament being afterwards despatched to Potidaea, to reinforce the

blockading army and fleet, caused a virulent outbreak of the plague

among the forces stationed there, which up till then had been healthy.

After some fruitless operations against the town this second armament

was withdrawn, and returned to Athens with the loss of more than a

thousand men.

After all these disasters the reaction against Pericles, which had

begun with the first invasion of Attica, reached a climax, and on all

sides he was loudly decried by the Athenians, as the author of all

their miseries. Envoys were sent with overtures of peace to Sparta, and

when these returned with no favourable answer, the storm of popular

fury grew more violent than ever. Pericles, who knew the temper of his

people, and had foreseen that some such outbreak would occur, remained

calm and unmoved. But wishing to allay the general excitement, and

bring back the citizens to a more reasonable view of their prospects,

he summoned an assembly, and addressed the multitude in terms of grave

and dignified rebuke. He reminded them that they themselves had voted

for war, and remonstrated against the unfairness of making him

responsible for their own decision. If war could have been avoided

without imperilling the very existence of their city, then that

decision was wrong; but if, as was the fact, peace could only have been

preserved by ruinous concessions, then his advice had been good, and

they had been right in following it. The welfare of the individual

citizen depended on the welfare of the community to which he belonged;

as long as that was secured, private losses could always be made good,

but public disaster meant private ruin. On this principle they had

acted two years before, when they determined to reject the demands of

Sparta. Why, then, were they now indulging in weak regrets, and turning

against him whom they had appointed as their chosen guide and adviser?

Was there anything in his character, any fact in his whole life, which

justified them in suspecting him of unworthy motives? Was he the man to

lead them astray, in order to save some selfish end--he, the great

Pericles, whose loyalty, eloquence, clear-sightedness, and

incorruptibility, had been proved in a public career of more than

thirty years? If any other course had been open to them, he would have

been to blame in counselling war; but the alternative was between that

and degradation. The immediate pressure of private calamity was

blinding them to the magnitude of the interests at stake--Athens, with

all her fond traditions, and all the lustre of her name. That they were

sure of victory he had already declared to them on many infallible

grounds. But seeing them so sunk in despair, he would speak in a tone

of loud assurance, and boldly assert a fact which they seemed to have

overlooked. They were lords of the sea, absolute masters, that was to

say, of half the world! Let them keep a firm grasp on this empire, and

they would soon recover those pretty ornaments of empire--their gardens

and their vineyards--which they held so dear: but, that once

relinquished, they would lose all. Surely this knowledge should inspire

them with a lofty contempt of their foes, a contempt grounded, not on

ignorance or shallow enthusiasm, but on rational calculation. They

could not now descend from the eminence on which they stood. Athens,

who had blazed so long in unrivalled splendour before the eyes of the

world, dared not suffer her lustre to be abated: for her, obscurity

meant extinction. Let them keep this in mind, and not listen to

counsels of seeming prudence and moderation, which were suicidal in a

ruling state. All their calamities, except the plague, were the

foreseen results of their own decision. Now was the time to display

their known courage and patience. Let them think of the glory of

Athens, and her imperial fame.

This memorable speech, the last recorded utterance of Pericles, had the

desired effect. It was resolved to continue the war, and no further

embassies were sent to Sparta. But resentment still smouldered in the

hearts of the Athenians against their great statesman. How fearful was

the contrast between the high hopes with which they had embarked in

this struggle, and the scenes of horror and desolation which lay around

them! From the walls they could see their trampled fields, their

ravaged plantations, and the blackened ruins of their homes. Within,

the pestilence still raged undiminished, and the city was filled with

sounds and sights of woe. Under the pressure of these calamities the

ascendency of Pericles went through a brief period of eclipse, and he

was condemned to pay a fine. Soon, however, he recovered all his

influence, and remained at the head of affairs until his death, which

occurred in the autumn of the following year.

Pericles is the representative figure in the golden age of Athenian

greatness, the most perfect example of that equable and harmonious

development in every faculty of body and mind which was the aim of

Greek civic life at its best. As an orator, he was probably never

equalled, and the effect of his eloquence has found immortal expression

in the lines of his contemporary Eupolis. Persuasion, we are told, sat

enthroned on his lips; like a strong athlete, he overtook and outran

all other orators; his words struck home like the lightning, while he

held his audience enchained, as by a powerful spell; and among all the

masters of eloquence, he was the only one who left his sting behind

him. As a statesman, it was his object to admit every freeborn Athenian

to a share of public duties and privileges; and for this purpose he

introduced the system of payment, which enabled the poorer citizens to

perform their part in the service of the state. His military talents,

though never employed for conquest or aggression, were of no mean

order; and on two occasions of supreme peril to Athens, the revolt of

Euboea, and the revolt of Samos, it was his energy and promptitude

which saved his city from ruin.

But it is as the head of the great intellectual movement which

culminated in this epoch, as the friend of poets, philosophers, and

artists, that Pericles has won his most enduring fame. By his liberal

and enlightened policy the surplus of the Athenian revenues was devoted

to the creation of those wonders of architecture and sculpture, whose

fragments still serve as unapproachable models to the mind of modern

Europe. And under his rule Athens became the school of Greece, the

great centre for every form of intellectual activity, a position which

she maintained until the later period of the Roman Empire.

If, however, we would understand the character of Pericles, and the

spirit of the age which he represents, we must never forget that this

aspect of Athenian greatness, to us by far the most important, was not

the aspect which awoke the highest enthusiasm in him and his

contemporaries. Those things which have made the name of Athens

immortal, her art and her literature, were matters of but secondary

importance to the Athenian of that age. He worshipped his city as a

beloved mistress, and, like a lover, he delighted to adorn her with

outward dignity and splendour. But to lavish all his thought and care

on these external embellishments would have been, in his estimation, a

senseless waste of his highest faculties, as if a lover should make the

robes and jewels of his mistress the objects of his highest adoration.

To make Athens the mightiest state in Greece, to build up the fabric of

her material greatness--these were the objects for which he was ready

to devote the best energies of heart and brain, and if need were, to

lay down his life. He might be skilled in every elegant accomplishment,

an acute reasoner, an orator, a musician, a poet; and to some extent he

was all of these. But before all else he was in the highest sense a

practical man, finding in strenuous action his chief glory and pride.

And such a man was the last to melt into ecstasies over the high notes

of a singer, or dream away his life in the fairyland of poetry.

We have dwelt at some length on the work and character of Pericles, as

his death marks a turning point in Athenian history. From that day

onward the policy of Athens takes a downward direction, denoting a

corresponding decline in Athenian character and aspiration. Pericles

had been able, by his commanding talents and proved integrity, to

exercise a salutary check on the restless energies and soaring ambition

of his countrymen. He had been a true father and ruler of his people,

in evil times and in good, curbing them in the insolence of prosperity,

comforting and exalting them in the dark hour of disaster. But the

government now passed into the hands of weaker men, who, since they

were incapable of leading the people, were compelled to follow it, and

to maintain their position by pandering to the worst vices of the

Athenian character. Rash where they should have been cautious, yielding

where they should have been resolute, they squandered the immense

resources of Athens, and led her on, step by step, to humiliation and

defeat. The course of our narrative will show how easily the Athenians

might have emerged triumphant from the struggle with their enemies, if

they had followed the line of conduct marked out by Pericles. They

might, indeed, have avoided the occasion of offence which led

immediately to the war, and thus have escaped the necessity of fighting

altogether; and this, as we have seen, was the one fatal mistake made

by Pericles. But, once launched in the conflict, they were sure of an

easy victory, if they had only shown a very moderate degree of prudence

and self-restraint. And we need not blame the great statesmen too

harshly for not foreseeing the wild excesses of folly and extravagance

which we shall have to record in the following pages.

INVESTMENT OF PLATAEA

In the third year of the war the usual invasion of Attica was omitted,

and the Peloponnesian army under Archidamus marched against Plataea.

Having pitched their camp before the walls they prepared to lay waste

the territory; but before the work of havoc began, the Plataeans sent

envoys to remonstrate. "Unrighteous are your deeds," said the spokesman

of the embassy, "ye men of Sparta, and unworthy of the men whose sons

ye are. After the victory of Plataea, which ended the struggle against

Persia, Pausanias, the chief captain of the confederate Greeks, offered

sacrifice and thanksgiving at Plataea to Zeus the Liberator, and swore

a solemn oath, both he, and all the Greeks whom he led, to maintain the

independence of our city against all who should assail it. This they

did as a recompense for our valour and devotion in our country's

service. But ye, in direct violation of that oath, have made common

cause with our worst enemies, the Thebans, and have come hither to

enslave us. In the name of the gods who witnessed that covenant, in the

name of every power worshipped alike at Plataea and at Sparta, we

adjure you not to commit this sacrilege, but to leave us in peaceful

possession of the privileges vouchsafed to us on that memorable day."

Such were the words of the Plataeans, to which Archidamus replied as

follows: "Ye say well, men of Plataea, if ye act in the spirit of the

compact to which ye have appealed. The oath which Pausanias swore was

taken in defence of the common liberties of Greece. Against those

liberties a new enemy has arisen, Athens, who holds half our nation in

bondage, and threatens to lay her yoke upon us all. To put down that

tyranny has this great coalition been called together, and if ye are

true men, ye will enlist in the same cause, and take up arms for the

relief of your distressed countrymen. Or at least, if ye cannot do

this, then stand apart from this conflict, helping neither one side nor

the other; and with this we shall be satisfied."

Having heard the answer of Archidamus, the Plataean envoys went back,

and reported his words to their fellow-townsmen. But the Plataeans

replied that, without the consent of the Athenians, they dare not

accept his proposal, as their wives and children had been removed to

Athens. Moreover, they feared that if they remained neutral the Thebans

would seize the opportunity to make another attempt on their town.

"Well, then," answered Archidamus, "we make you this second offer: Hand

over your town and your dwellings to us, the Spartans; keep a strict

account of all your trees, [Footnote: Vines and olive-trees] and of all

else that can be numbered, and retire yourselves to some safe retreat,

as long as the war continues. When it is over, we will restore all your

property, and meanwhile keep the land in cultivation, and pay you a

fixed rent, such as may suffice you."

The offer was fair, and even generous; but the Plataeans were powerless

to act, without the consent of the Athenians, who held their families

as hostages. Accordingly they asked for a truce, to enable them to lay

the proposal before the authorities at Athens, and this being granted,

they sent envoys to Athens, who speedily returned with this answer: "We

have never left you at the mercy of your enemies in the past, since ye

became our allies, nor will we do so now, but will help you to the best

of our power; and we charge you by the oath which your fathers swore

not to depart from your allegiance to Athens."

It was a cruel alternative which was offered to the hapless Plataeans:

either they must leave their wives and children to the vengeance of

Athens, or face the whole power of the confederates, led by Sparta.

True to their character, they chose the nobler part, and determined to

stand by the Athenian alliance. Henceforth no one was allowed to leave

the town, and their final answer was delivered from the walls. They

were unable, they said, to accept the terms offered by Archidamus.

On hearing their decision, the Spartan king made a last solemn appeal

to the powers who presided over the territory of Plataea, a hallowed

precinct, now about to be given up to plunder and ravage: "Ye gods and

heroes, who keep the land of Plataea, bear witness that we had just

cause from the first for marching hither, since the Plataeans had

forsaken the alliance, and that if we do aught against them, we shall

still be justified. For we have made them the fairest offers, but they

would not be persuaded. Therefore let those with whom the guilt lies be

punished, and prosper ye the cause of righteous vengeance."

The siege of Plataea now began in earnest. First the town was

surrounded with a palisade, to prevent anyone from escaping, the

materials being taken from the plantations in the neighbourhood of the

town. Then they raised a mound against the wall, expecting that with so

large a force as theirs they would easily carry the place by storm.

Timber was brought from Cithaeron, and with this they set up two stout

buttresses of cross-beams, at right angles to the town-wall, to serve

as a support on either side of the mound. Within this framework they

piled up fascines, stones, earth, and whatever else was at hand. The

whole army was employed in this task, which was continued for seventy

days and nights without intermission, the men working in regular spells.

Meanwhile the Plataeans had not been idle. First they built a wall of

bricks and timber opposite to the point where the mound was rising, and

resting on the ramparts, in order to raise the height of their

defences. The new wall was covered with hides, raw and dressed, to

protect the timber and the workmen from being injured by burning

arrows. And while this structure was in progress, they made a breach in

the old wall, and carted away the earth from the bottom of the mound.

To prevent this, the Peloponnesians filled up the space thus caused

with heavy masses of clay, rammed tightly into baskets of osier, which

made a solid structure, much harder to remove than the loose earth.

Then the Plataeans had recourse to another device: marking carefully

the position of the mound, they ran a mine from the city under it, and

as fast as the earth fell in, they carried it away. This continued for

a long time, for the Peloponnesians, who saw their mound rising no

higher, for all their labour, but rather growing less, did not guess

the cause, but went on heaping up materials, which were swallowed up as

fast as they were brought.

Still the Plataeans feared that in spite of these counterworks they

would at length be overpowered by numbers, unless they contrived some

better means of defence. So they left off building the wall of bricks

and timber, and beginning at either end of it, they built a

crescent-shaped wall, curving inwards towards the city. Thus the

Peloponnesians, if they succeeded in carrying the first wall, would

find themselves confronted by a second line of defence, and would have

all their work to do over again, besides being exposed to a cross-fire.

While the Plataeans were thus vigorously defending themselves, and

before the mound was completed, the Peloponnesians brought

siege-engines to bear on the wall, one of which greatly alarmed the

besieged garrison, by severely shaking their wall of timber and bricks.

But this new mode of attack was frustrated, like the rest, by the

ingenuity of the Plataeans, who dropped nooses over the ends of the

battering-rams, and drew them up just before the moment of impact.

Moreover they suspended heavy beams of wood at intervals along the

wall, each beam hanging by long chains from two cranes which rested on

the wall and projected outwards from it; and whenever a ram was being

brought up, they drew up the beam at right angles to it, and then,

letting go the chains, dropped the ponderous timber, which came

crashing down on the ram, and broke off its head.

Thus baffled at every point, the Peloponnesians began to despair of

taking the town by assault, and thought that they would be compelled to

form a blockade. But before being driven to this costly and tedious

operation, they determined to try and set fire to the place, which

seemed possible, as it was but small in extent. So they waited till the

wind was in the right direction, and then brought vast quantities of

faggots, and threw them into the space between the mound and the wall;

and this being soon filled up, they piled up more faggots as far as

they could reach within the city itself, and then throwing in lighted

torches, with brimstone and pitch, they set fire to the whole mass.

Then arose a great sheet of flame, such as had never been raised by

human hands, though not, of course, to be compared to the vast

forest-fires, produced by natural means; yet it was sufficient to cause

a panic among the Plataeans, and bring their town to the verge of

destruction. The heat was so intense that a whole quarter of the place

was cleared of its defenders, and if a wind had arisen to drive the

flame inwards, nothing could have saved the whole town from

destruction. [Footnote: Thucydides seems to imply that there was a

wind, though a slight one.] But fortunately the breeze was but slight,

and it is said also that a heavy fall of rain came on, and quenched the

conflagration.

Having failed in their last attempt, the Peloponnesians sent away part

of their army, and employed those who remained in building a blockading

wall round Plataea. The work was completed towards the end of

September, and they then disbanded their army, leaving a force

sufficient to guard half the wall; for the Thebans, relentless in their

zeal against Plataea, took charge of the other half. The number of the

besieged was four hundred and eighty, of whom eighty were Athenians,

and a hundred and ten women to make bread for the garrison.

NAVAL VICTORIES OF PHORMIO

I

During the last half-century the art of naval warfare had made great

progress in Greece. The Greek war-galley, or trireme, a vessel

propelled by three banks of oars, had always been furnished with a

sharp-pointed prow, for the purpose of ramming an opponent's ship; but

many years elapsed before the Greeks attained genuine skill in the use

of this formidable weapon. According to the ordinary method of

fighting, after the first shock of collision the affair was decided by

the hoplites, or heavy-armed infantry, stationed on the decks of the

two contending ships; and in this manner was fought the engagement

between the Corcyraean and Corinthian fleets which occurred in the

year before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. There the ship was

simply a vehicle, which served to bring the antagonists together, and

the rest was left to the prowess of the hoplites.

The Athenians were the first to abandon this crude and clumsy style of

fighting, and in the course of two generations their seamen had become

renowned throughout Greece for the unrivalled skill which they showed

in working and manoeuvring the trireme. A few hoplites were still

carried, to serve in cases of emergency; but by far the most important

part in the encounter was played by the trireme itself, with its long,

tapering, sharp-pointed prow. To use this deadly but delicate

instrument with effect required great coolness, dexterity, and

judgment, on the part of the steersman, and a crew under perfect

command. The tactics usually employed were as follows: watching his

opportunity, the captain gave the order "full speed ahead!" and darting

rapidly through the enemy's line, wheeled suddenly round, and drove the

beak of his galley with terrible force against the stern or side of the

vessel selected for attack. One blow from the long lance-like point,

propelled by the whole weight and impetus of the trireme, was

sufficient to sink or disable an enemy's ship, and the attacking galley

was then backed away from the wreck, and directed against another

victim.

The incessant practice of nearly half a century had enabled the

Athenians to attain consummate mastery in this new method of naval

warfare; and they were now to give signal proof of their immense

superiority over the other maritime powers of Greece.

In the same summer which witnessed the investment of Plataea, the

Spartans planned an expedition against Acarnania, the westernmost

province of Greece, which they wished to detach from the Athenian

alliance. A Spartan officer, named Cnemus, was sent off in advance,

with a thousand hoplites, to raise the wild mountain tribes, and led an

attack against Stratus, the capital of Acarnania; and in the meantime

orders were sent round to equip a numerous fleet, which was to support

the operations of Stratus by harassing the coast districts.

The attack on Stratus failed altogether, chiefly in consequence of the

impetuosity of the rude mountaineers serving under Cnemus, who advanced

unsupported against the town, and meeting with a severe repulse

embarrassed the movements of their Greek allies. About the same time

the Peloponnesian fleet, consisting of forty-seven ships, was sailing

down the Corinthian Gulf to co-operate with Cnemus. It was known that

Phormio, the Athenian admiral, was stationed at Naupactus with a

squadron of twenty vessels; but the Peloponnesian captains never

dreamed that he would venture to attack them with so small a force, and

they pursued their voyage along the southern shore of the gulf, without

making any preparations for a battle. Phormio, however, had other

intentions: keeping close to the opposite shore, he followed their

movements, and allowed them to pass through the narrow strait which

divides the inner from the outer gulf, wishing to avoid an engagement

until they reached the open water. The Peloponnesians dropped anchor

for the night at Patrae in Achaia, and Phormio took up his station at

Chalcis, a harbour-town of Aetolia, at the mouth of the Evenus. Being

now convinced that Phormio meditated an encounter, for which they had

little inclination, the Peloponnesian admirals made an attempt

[Footnote: I have adopted the reading of Bloomfield, approved by

Classen (4th Edition).] to steal across under cover of darkness. But

this manoeuvre was detected, and they found their way barred by the

Athenian squadron in the middle of the channel. Being thus driven to

bay the Peloponnesians drew up their ships in a circle, with their

prows turned outwards, like a flock of sheep assailed by a dog. Within

the circle were placed the smaller vessels accompanying the fleet, and

five of the swiftest galleys, which were intended to lend assistance

against any attack of the enemy.

To keep a large flotilla in such a position, even in a calm sea, where

no hostile movement was made against them, would have been a task to

try the skill of the most accomplished mariners. But the Peloponnesian

crews were untrained, the decks of their ships were crowded with

soldiers, and they were hampered by the crowd of smaller craft. Worst

of all, they were threatened in every direction by the agile Athenian

galleys, which, moving in single file, swept round and round them,

approaching closer and closer at every circuit, so that they were

penned together in an ever-narrowing space, and in danger of fouling

one another. To complete their confusion, the morning breeze began to

blow from the gulf; and Phormio, who had been waiting for this, now

gave the signal for attack. The Peloponnesians hardly attempted any

defence; for the unskilful crews of the galleys could not manage their

oars in the rising sea, and the steersmen had consequently no control

of their vessels. All their efforts were employed in keeping clear of

one another, warding off a collision with long poles, amid a hubbub of

curses and abuse. Into this huddled, swaying mass of war-galleys and

merchant-craft mingled together now dashed the Athenian triremes,

wrecking every vessel which they met. A wild panic ensued among the

Peloponnesian crews, and as fast as they could extricate themselves

they rowed off and sought shelter in the harbour of Patrae. From here

they afterwards sailed to Cyllene, the dockyard of Elis, where they

were joined by Cnemus with the troops from Acarnania. Twelve ships fell

into the hands of the Athenians, and taking these with them they sailed

first to Rhium, a level headland on the Locrian Coast, on which stood a

temple of Poseidon. Having left one of the captured ships as a

thank-offering to the god of the sea, they made their way back to the

original station at Naupactus.

II

The authorities at Sparta were highly indignant at the failure of their

expedition in Acarnania, and the defeat of the Peloponnesian fleet by

so inferior a force. For this was their first experience of a sea-fight

since the outbreak of the war, and they made no allowance for the want

of skill in their own crews, attributing the disaster to mere

cowardice. They did not reflect how vast was the difference between raw

sailors, lately transferred from the plough to the oar, and the veteran

seamen of Athens, trained under a system which had been slowly

perfected in the course of half a century. So they sent three

commissioners to Cnemus, with peremptory orders to prepare for another

sea-fight, and not allow himself to be shut up in harbour by the feeble

squadron of Phormio. One of these commissioners was Brasidas, a

brilliant young officer, who had gained distinction two years before by

saving the harbour-town of Methone, on the coast of Messenia, from

being captured by the Athenians. We shall hear much more of him in the

sequel.

On the arrival of Brasidas and his colleagues, the ships lying at

Cyllene were made ready for immediate service, and orders were sent

round to the allied cities for other ships. Phormio also sent an urgent

despatch to Athens announcing his victory, and asking for

reinforcements; and the Athenians sent twenty triremes to his aid.

These vessels, however, arrived too late, for the admiral, acting on

instructions from Athens, sailed first to Crete, where he was delayed a

long time by contrary winds. Phormio, with his twenty triremes, was

therefore compelled to engage the whole Peloponnesian fleet, numbering

seventy-seven ships, which had now sailed round from Cyllene, and taken

up its station just within the strait, close to the Achaean town of

Panormus. A strong force of Peloponnesian soldiers was encamped on the

shore, to co-operate with the fleet. Phormio anchored his ships just

outside the strait, being resolved, if it were in any way possible, not

to fight the Peloponnesians in the narrow waters. As the

Peloponnesians, on their side, were equally determined not to be lured

out into the open sea, the two fleets remained confronting each other

for a whole week, without attempting any aggressive movement. At last

the Peloponnesian leaders decided to give battle with Phormio at once,

fearing that if they delayed any longer he would be reinforced from

Athens.

It was the universal custom of Greek commanders to wind up the courage

of their men on the eve of a battle by a short and pithy address,

calculated to inspire them with confidence, by giving them a reasonable

hope of victory. Such a practice, strange as it may seem to us, was

natural among a people whose armies and fleets were recruited from the

general body of the citizens, accustomed to free speech in their public

assemblies. They were not men of war by profession, trained in habits

of blind obedience, but sensitive Greeks, who carried into the camp the

noble freedom of civic life, and were not prepared to shed their blood

without sufficient cause, and a fair prospect of success.

Seldom was there greater need of this sort of military eloquence than

on the present occasion. On both sides there was much discouragement,

and a general reluctance to begin the fight. The Peloponnesians were

cowed by their recent defeat, and dreaded the naval skill of the

Athenians, which seemed to them almost supernatural; and Phormio's men

shrank from an encounter with such enormous odds. Accordingly the

Peloponnesian captains on one side, and Phormio on the other, did what

they could to argue their crews into a more hopeful frame of mind. The

Peloponnesian seamen who had taken part in the first battle were

reminded that they had been caught unprepared, and assured that this

time every precaution would be taken to prevent a second reverse. They

were flattered by the confident assertion that the superior skill of

the Athenians was far outweighed by their own superior courage. "Look,"

said one of the admirals, speaking to his own division, "at this

powerful armament, outnumbering the enemy by four to one--look at the

army drawn up on the shore, ready to lend aid to any who are hard

pressed--and you will see that with such advantages defeat is

impossible. Do your duty like men, and expect to be rewarded or

punished according to your deserts." Similar addresses, combining

encouragement with threats, were heard in the other parts of the fleet.

Among the Athenian sailors there had been much jesting about the

land-lubbers of Peloponnesus, and in the first flush of their victory

they had been ready to face any odds on the sea. But now, seeing

themselves confronted by such overwhelming numbers, they had lost heart

for the moment, and were seen standing about in little groups, shaking

their heads and whispering fearfully together. It was an anxious moment

for Phormio; he knew the immense importance of maintaining, at any

cost, the naval reputation of Athens, and if his men went into battle

in their present temper, they were certain to suffer a crushing defeat.

Determining, therefore, if possible, to allay the panic which was fast

spreading throughout the fleet, he summoned the crews into his

presence, and harangued them as follows:--

"Comrades, I have called you hither to assure you that you have no

cause for alarm. The numbers of the enemy, which seem to you so

formidable, should, if properly considered, be a ground of confidence;

for this unwieldy armament is a sign that they are thoroughly

terrified, and seek safety in a huge crowd of ships. The firmness and

discipline which they have acquired by long experience of land warfare

will avail them little on the sea For courage is largely a matter of

habit, and the bravest landsman is a mere coward when he is taken away

from his own element, and set down on the heaving deck of a war-galley

where he can hardly keep his feet. The disorganized multitude with

which we shall have to deal is a mere mob, held together by the

authority of Sparta, demoralized by their late defeat, and forced to

fight against their will. Face them boldly, and our very audacity in

assailing such numbers will sink them still deeper into helpless

terror, for they will think that we must be invincible, or we should

never run such risks. It shall be my business to bring on the

engagement in blue water, where we shall have them at our mercy. Now

every man to his station; be prompt, and be silent, and attend to the

word of command. Remember your old spirit, and reflect that the honour

of Athens is in your hands to-day."

The great object of the Peloponnesian leaders was to compel Phormio to

give battle in the confined space of the strait. With this intention

they determined to make a sudden movement towards the northern coast of

the gulf, threatening an attack on Naupactus. At daybreak they drew up

their ships in four lines, with the coast of Peloponnesus behind them,

and with twenty fast-sailing triremes stationed on the right wing, to

cut off Phormio's fleet, if, as they anticipated, he advanced to the

defence of Naupactus. Wheeling then to the right, the ships sailed some

distance, four abreast, towards the inner gulf; and when they came

opposite to Naupactus, they changed their course, and moved in column,

with the right wing leading towards the northern shore.

The manoeuvre, so far as concerned its immediate purpose, was

completely successful. Phormio, much against his will, was obliged to

leave his station outside the strait, and go to the aid of Naupactus,

which had been left undefended. Great was the delight of the

Peloponnesian captains when they saw the little Athenian squadron

creeping close, in single file, along the northern side of the gulf,

for they thought that not one of the twenty would escape them. At a

given signal, the whole fleet formed into line, resuming its original

order, four deep, and bore down upon the Athenians. Eleven of Phormio's

triremes succeeded in clearing the strait, and getting into the open

waters in the direction of Naupactus; but the remaining nine were

overtaken and driven aground, and their crews, except those who escaped

by swimming, were put to the sword. Some of these vessels were towed

off as prizes by the Peloponnesians, and one they captured with all her

crew. The rest were saved by the valour of the Messenian soldiers, who

had followed the movements of Phormio's vessels along the shore, and

now did good service by boarding the stranded triremes, and hauling

them to land, after a sharp tussle with the enemy.

Meanwhile the eleven ships which had eluded the attack were hotly

pursued by the twenty fast-sailing vessels on the Peloponnesian right

wing. All but one got through in safety, and took refuge in the harbour

of Naupactus, and drawing up in line, with their prows outwards,

prepared to defend themselves if the enemy advanced further against

them. But the rearmost vessel was hard pressed by a Leucadian ship, and

the rest of the pursuers followed at a considerable distance, singing

the paean [Footnote: A song of victory.] as they rowed, and expecting

an easy victory. Now, however, occurred one of those sudden turns of

fortune so frequent in the course of a sea-fight. The Athenian trireme

which had been left far behind in the chase, made a sudden sweep round

a merchant-vessel anchored at the mouth of the harbour, struck her

pursuer amidships, and sank her.

This splendid feat of seamanship filled the Peloponnesians, who were

advancing in disorder, with amazement and terror. On every trireme the

cry of "Hold her!" [Footnote: This was done by thrusting the oars, with

the blades held flat, deep into the water] was heard, and some of the

vessels, losing way suddenly, ran aground on the shallows. The others

hung back, waiting until the main body of the fleet should come to

their support. Seeing them drifting thus, stupefied and helpless, the

Athenians took heart again, and raising a shout rowed swiftly from

their station within the harbour, and charged down upon them. The

Peloponnesians, after a feeble attempt at resistance, took to flight,

heading for their original station on the opposite coast. Six of their

vessels were captured, and the Athenians, not content with this, fell

upon the main body of the fleet, and recovered their own ships which

had been taken in the strait. The victorious crews of Phormio then

returned to Naupactus, and set up a trophy at the place where they had

been moored when this splendid rally was made, opposite to the temple

of Apollo. The Peloponnesians also raised a trophy, to commemorate

their first success, and then, fearing the arrival of the fresh ships

from Athens, they sailed off to Lechaeum, the northern harbour of

Corinth.

III

In strange contrast with the disgraceful exhibition of cowardice and

incompetence which we have just witnessed, we have now to record a

daring attempt, undertaken shortly afterwards, to strike at the very

heart of the Athenian power. While the beaten crews of the

Peloponnesian fleet were waiting to be paid off at Lechaeum, they

suddenly received orders to take their oars and rowing-cushions, and

proceed to Nisaea, the port of Megara. The plan was to embark them on

forty vessels, which were lying in the dockyards, and make a

night-attack on Peiraeus. The suggestion came from the Megarians, but

in carrying it out the Peloponnesians were probably influenced by the

bold and enterprising spirit of Brasidas. And in fact, the meditated

descent on Peiraeus was neither so wild nor so rash as it may at first

sight appear. For the Athenians, never dreaming that they might be

taken by surprise, had not taken the precaution to close the entrance

of their harbour, or to station guard-ships for its defence.

Without delay, the officers in charge of the expedition mustered their

crews at Nisaea, and embarking by night, got their ships under way. But

at the last moment their hearts failed them, and instead of sailing to

Peiraeus, they landed on the island of Salamis, and after attacking a

sea-side fort, and capturing three triremes which were riding at anchor

near it, they spread themselves out, and began ravaging and plundering

the country.

Meanwhile fire-signals had been raised, conveying the alarm to Peiraeus

and Athens. A wild panic ensued, and a rumour ran through the upper

city that the enemy had sailed into Peiraeus, while in the harbour-town

it was generally supposed that Salamis was lost, and Peiraeus on the

point of being invaded. The Peloponnesians employed in this adventure

afterwards pretended that they had been hindered by contrary winds from

carrying out their original design. But this was a mere excuse, and if

they had chosen they might have sailed unopposed to Peiraeus, and

inflicted terrible injury on Athens. But it was now too late, for the

Athenians, as soon as the news was brought, had marched down with their

whole military force to Peiraeus, and occupied every assailable point

in the harbour, while at the same time every ship in the docks was

launched and manned, and sent off in headlong haste to Salamis.

By this time it was broad daylight, and the Peloponnesians, being

warned that a rescue was on the way from Peiraeus, made off with their

booty, and getting, on board their ships, sailed back to Nisaea. They

had the more reason for hastening their departure, as the Megarian

ships which had carried them to Salamis, having lain a long while in

dry-dock, were leaky and unseaworthy; for the harbour of Megara had for

some time past been kept in close blockade by the Athenians.

This memorable incident, following close on the brilliant victories of

Phormio, taught the Athenians to take better precautions for the

future. Hitherto they would have scoffed at the suggestion that their

own arsenals and dockyards were exposed to attack. But now they

provided for the safety of Peiraeus by closing the harbours and keeping

a vigilant watch. And that terrible night left an impression on their

minds which was not soon forgotten.

THE REVOLT OF LESBOS

I

We have already traced the steps by which the various cities composing

the Confederacy of Delos gradually became subjects and tributaries of

Athens. After this great change was effected, the only members of the

original league who retained their independence were the wealthy and

powerful communities of Chios and Lesbos. These two islands were

allowed to retain undisturbed control of their own affairs, with the

sole obligation of sending a fixed quota of ships to serve in the

Athenian Navy. It does not appear that the performance of this duty was

felt as a grievance, and no act of oppression had been committed by

Athens, such as might have provoked her allies in Lesbos or Chios to

turn against her. In both islands the general body of the citizens were

on the whole friendly to the Athenians, who afforded them an effectual

means of protection against the tyranny of the nobles, by summoning

high-born offenders to be tried before the Athenian tribunals.

[Footnote: The evidence for this statement will be found in Thucydides,

viii. 48.] It was therefore not among the people at large, but among

the privileged few, that any movement of revolt against Athens was to

be expected.

Some years before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War the Lesbian

malcontents had solicited the Spartans to help them in throwing off the

yoke of Athens. This application, which was probably made at the time

of the revolt of Samos, found no favour with Sparta, and nothing

further was attempted on that occasion. But in the fourth year of the

war alarming rumours were brought to Athens from Tenedos, a small

island included in the Athenian alliance, whose inhabitants were

jealous of the threatened ascendancy of Lesbos in the eastern districts

of the Aegaean. There was a design, it was said, among the leading

citizens of Mytilene, the principal city of Lesbos, to unite the

inhabitants of the island by force under their rule, and renounce their

allegiance to Athens. Help was expected from Sparta, and the Boeotians,

who were of the same race as the Lesbians, were also in the plot. This

statement was confirmed by envoys from Methymna, the second city of

Lesbos, which stood apart from the conspiracy, and by certain citizens

of Mytilene, who had turned informers from motives of private revenge.

Among the Athenians at this time there was a general feeling of

despondency and exhaustion. The full hardship of the war pressed

heavily upon them, and their population was thinned by the ravages of

the plague. In such a mood the thought of undertaking a campaign

against a great island like Lesbos, then at the height of her power,

filled them with dismay. Was it possible that a favoured and privileged

ally had taken up arms against them in the hour of their distress? It

was a slander, they could not, they would not believe it. At any rate,

before proceeding to extremities, they would try the effect of a

friendly remonstrance. So they sent envoys with a pacific message to

the Mytilenaeans, hoping by fair words to deter them from their

purpose. In this, however, they were disappointed, and being at last

convinced that the Lesbians were on the brink of revolt, they sent off

forty triremes without delay, in order, if possible, to catch them

unawares. For they had been informed that the Mytilenaeans were about

to celebrate the festival of Apollo, in which the whole population took

part, outside the city walls; and if the triremes arrived in time,

there would be a fine opportunity for a surprise. At the same time they

took possession of ten Mytilenaean triremes, which had been sent to

serve in the Athenian fleet, and imprisoned the crews.

But now was seen one of the weaknesses inherent in the nature of the

Athenian constitution. These measures could not be taken without public

debate in the popular assembly, and such a method of procedure rendered

secrecy impossible. The Mytilenaeans received timely warning of their

danger, and keeping close within their walls, repaired the weak places

in their defences, and set a careful watch. Shortly afterwards the

Athenian fleet hove in sight. As the Mytilenaeans refused to obey the

summons delivered to them in the name of the imperial people,--that

they should raze their walls, and surrender their ships,--hostilities

commenced. But on neither side was much vigour displayed, for the

Athenian officers thought themselves too weak to undertake any decisive

operations with their present force, and the Mytilenaeans desired to

obtain a respite, to enable them to obtain aid from Sparta. Accordingly

they asked for an armistice, pretending that they wished to plead their

cause by their own representatives before the Athenian assembly; and

their request being granted, they sent envoys to Athens, who made a

show of carrying on negotiations. And in the meantime a trireme was

despatched in all haste to carry their petition to Sparta.

On the return of the Mytilenaean envoys from Athens, where of course

they had accomplished nothing, the siege of Mytilene began in earnest.

The city was situated on a promontory facing the Asiatic coast on the

south-eastern side of the island, and had two harbours, on its northern

and southern side. Both of these harbours were now held in close

blockade by the Athenians, who established two camps, one on either

side of the town, and patrolled the harbour-mouths with their ships.

But on the land side the investment was not yet completed, so that

supplies could still be brought into the town from the island.

Reinforcements, however, came pouring into the Athenian quarters in

answer to a summons sent to the cities of the Athenian alliance, who

were the more willing to lend help, as the Lesbians made no vigorous

effort in their own defence.

While the prospects of Athens were thus brightening, the Mytilenaean

envoys, after a stormy voyage, arrived at Sparta, and laid their

petition before the authorities. It happened that the Olympic festival

was close at hand, where representatives would be present from all the

cities of the Peloponnesian league; so the envoys received orders to go

to Olympia, and state their case in the presence of the Spartan allies.

They went, therefore, to Olympia, and when the festival was over, the

Mytilenaean orator addressed the confederates as follows:--

"Before we urge our claim for assistance we wish to combat a prejudice

which we know to be general in Greece against those who desert their

allies in time of war. For we wish not only to obtain your countenance

and support, but also to preserve your respect. To abandon an ally

without just cause in a time of peril is justly regarded as an act of

treason. But then the alliance must be a fair and equal relation

voluntarily assumed on both sides, based on mutual esteem and parity of

power. Can anyone assert that our connexion with Athens answers to this

description? Have we not seen how the confederacy of maritime cities

formed against Persia was gradually converted into an Athenian empire?

And though we and the Chians enjoyed nominal independence, we had good

reason to fear that this was only a temporary concession, which would

be withdrawn as soon as the Athenians felt themselves strong enough to

attack us. We were allowed to retain our liberty, partly because they

feared our navy, and partly because they wished to make us accomplices

in their own aggressions, and lend an appearance of equity to the acts

of violence in which we were compelled to take part. Having swallowed

up the smaller states, they were ready to pounce upon us, and were only

prevented by the outbreak of the present war. Who, then, can blame us,

if we seized the opportunity when they were weakened to repudiate this

false alliance, and anticipate the blow which they were preparing for

us? Athens, we repeat, has no just title to our allegiance; the bond

which held us together was fear on our side and interest on theirs. We

are natural enemies; and when your foe is disabled, then is the time to

strike.

"Having thus cleared ourselves from the imputation of disloyalty, we

will now make plain to you the advantages which you will gain by

espousing our cause. If you wish to inflict irreparable injury on

Athens, you must promote every hostile movement against her in those

regions which contain the sources of her power, that is to say, the

islands and coast-lands of the Aegaean. For if our revolt is

successful, others will follow our example, and the Athenians will be

stripped of their revenues, the mainstay of their empire. You can lend

us aid most effectually by summoning your allies for a second

[Footnote: Attica had already been invaded earlier in the summer.]

invasion of Attica, and thus preventing the Athenians from sending

reinforcements to Lesbos. You have a rare opportunity, for their city

is wasted by the plague, and their navies are dispersed on foreign

service. Remember, then, your proud position as champions of Greek

liberty, and put away the reproach which you have sometimes incurred by

leaving the revolted subjects of Athens to fight their battles alone.

[Footnote: As in the case of Samos.] For the cause of Lesbos is the

cause of all Greece."

It will be observed that the greater part of this remarkable speech

consists of an elaborate endeavour on the part of the Mytilenaeans to

justify themselves. The arguments employed were entirely sophistical,

for the Lesbians had no real grievance--and the statement that they

were in danger of losing their independence was a pure invention. But

they spoke to a partial audience, and the Spartans had already

prejudged the case in their favour. It was therefore decided to receive

them into the Peloponnesian alliance, and orders were issued to the

allies to assemble at the Isthmus with two-thirds of their forces for

an immediate invasion of Attica. The Spartans, acting with unusual

vigour, were the first to appear at the Isthmus, where they made

preparations for hauling ships overland from the northern harbour of

Corinth, intending to attack Athens by sea and land. But the rest of

the confederates came in but slowly, as they were engaged in getting in

their harvest, and had little inclination for a second campaign.

The Spartans soon found out that they were mistaken in supposing the

energies of Athens to be exhausted. Without moving their fleet from

Lesbos, the Athenians manned a hundred triremes, raising the crews from

the whole body of the citizens, with the exception of the knights and

the wealthiest class of the Solonian census, and pressing even resident

foreigners into the service; and with this imposing force they made an

armed demonstration before the eyes of their enemies at the Isthmus,

and then, coasting along Peloponnesus, made descents wherever they

pleased. This spirited conduct produced the desired effect. For the

Spartans, who were still waiting for their allies at the Isthmus, saw

themselves baffled in all their calculations, and concluded that they

had been misinformed by the Lesbians as to the state of affairs at

Athens; and hearing that their own coast-lands were being ravaged by

the Athenian fleet, they hastily decamped, and the plan of a second

invasion came to nothing.

The summer was now drawing to a close, and as yet no progress had been

made with the siege of Mytilene. The town was still blockaded by sea,

but the Mytilenaeans had free egress on the land-side, and marched up

and down the island, confirming the other towns which had joined in the

revolt, and threatening Methymna, which still remained loyal to the

Athenian alliance. When the Athenians were informed of this state of

things, they sent a thousand hoplites under Paches to reinforce the

besieging army; and on their arrival the investment of Mytilene was

completed by a wall drawn from sea to sea, and cutting off the town

from the rest of the island. The Mytilenaeans now began to despair, for

their supplies were failing, and there seemed no hope of relief. But

during the winter a ray of hope reached them from outside, and

encouraged them to persevere in their resistance. There was a weak

point in the Athenian wall, where it closed a ravine; and through this

interval a Spartan named Salaethus, who had sailed to Lesbos in a

trireme, and crossed the island on foot, succeeded in making his way

into the town. Salaethus announced himself as an agent sent from

Sparta, to inform the distressed garrison that, as soon as the season

permitted, forty triremes would be sent to their assistance, and that

Attica would be invaded at the same time, to keep the enemy occupied at

home. At this welcome news the hopes of the Mytilenaeans revived, and

all thoughts of surrender were laid aside.

II

As soon as spring arrived, the Spartans, true to their promise, sent

off forty triremes, commanded by Alcidas, to raise the siege of

Mytilene, and marched in full force into Attica, thinking thus to

divert the attention of the Athenians, and prevent them from

interfering with the voyage of Alcidas. They remained a long time in

Attica, waiting for news from their fleet, and employing the time in a

systematic ravage of the whole territory. But time passed, and no

message arrived from Alcidas, who seemed to have disappeared with all

his ships; so that at last, as their expectations were disappointed,

and their supplies exhausted, they broke up their army and returned

home.

The position of Mytilene was now growing desperate. Nothing more was

heard of the relieving squadron, and the scanty store of provisions was

rapidly failing; for, owing to the betrayal of their design, the

Mytilenaeans had been hurried into revolt before their preparations

were completed, and had had no time to lay up a sufficient stock of

food. Salaethus, therefore, determined to make a sudden sally, and

break out of the town; and the better to effect this purpose, he

furnished the common people, who had hitherto served as light-armed

soldiers, with the full equipment of heavy infantry. But this

proceeding brought on a catastrophe, for the commons no sooner found

themselves in possession of better weapons than they turned upon their

masters, and accused them of secreting supplies of corn for their own

use. "Bring out your corn," they cried, "and divide it equally, or we

will go out and make terms with the Athenians for ourselves." Alarmed

at this threat, which if carried out would leave them exposed as the

sole objects of Athenian vengeance, the nobles sent a message to

Paches, on behalf of the whole city, offering to surrender, on

condition that their case should be tried by the tribunals at Athens,

and stipulating that, while the decision was pending, no violence

should be offered to any of the inhabitants. The proposal was accepted,

and Paches marched his forces into the town. In spite of the

convention, the leaders of the revolt took sanctuary in the temples,

being in dread of summary execution. Paches reassured them, and sent

them in safe custody to Tenedos.

We must now turn back a little, and follow the movements of Alcidas.

The Spartan admiral, it would seem, had small stomach for the bold

adventure on which he was bound--no less than to rob the Athenians of

one of their most important possessions, and defy the redoubtable

captains of Athens on their own element. After loitering for some time

off the coast of Peloponnesus, he sailed on slowly as far as Delos, and

then, touching at Icarus, he heard that Mytilene was already taken.

Wishing, however, to inform himself with certainty, he pushed on as far

as Erythrae, on the mainland of Asia, which he reached seven days after

the fall of Mytilene. Being now assured that the report was true, he

called a council of war to decide what was to be done. Then a certain

Greek of Elis, named Teutiaplus, made a bold suggestion: "Let us," he

said, "sail straight to Mytilene, and make an attempt to recapture the

town by surprise. Most likely the Athenians, flushed with success, will

be taken unawares, and we shall find the harbour open, and the land

forces dispersed, and if we make a sudden onfall, under cover of

darkness, we shall probably succeed."

The prudent Alcidas found this proposal little to his taste; nor was he

better pleased by another plan, put forward by the Lesbian envoys who

were returning on board the Peloponnesian fleet, and seconded by a

party of exiles from the cities of Ionia. These men tried to persuade

Alcidas to establish himself in some city of Asia Minor, and raise a

revolt among the allies of Athens in these parts. He had, they said,

every prospect of success, for his arrival was welcomed on all sides.

Let him seize the opportunity of attacking the Athenians in their most

mortal part, first by withdrawing the tribute of Ionia, and secondly by

putting them to the expense of a blockade.

This daring scheme might have led to something important, if the fleet

had been commanded by Brasidas. But Alcidas was a man of very different

temper, and having arrived too late to save Mytilene, he had now but

one thought,--to return to Peloponnesus as fast as he could, and get

out of the reach of the terrible Athenian triremes. So he set his fleet

in motion, and sailing along the coast in a southerly direction put in

at Ephesus. On the voyage he showed himself to be as cruel as he was

cowardly, by capturing and putting to death the crews of the vessels

which came in his way. These were not a few, for the ships which

crossed his path approached fearlessly, under the impression that his

fleet was from Athens; for no one dreamed that a Peloponnesian squadron

would dare to enter these waters. For this senseless barbarity he was

severely rebuked by a deputation of Samian exiles, now living on the

mainland, who met him at Ephesus. His was a strange method, they

remarked with bitter irony, of helping the Ionians to recover their

liberty--to butcher defenceless men, who had done him no harm, but

looked to him for rescue from their bondage to Athens! If he continued

to behave thus, he would make the name of Sparta detested throughout

Ionia. Dull as he was, Alcidas could not but feel the justice of this

reprimand, and he let the rest of his prisoners go.

The presence of a Peloponnesian fleet had caused great alarm among the

inhabitants of Ionia, and urgent messages came in daily to Paches at

Mytilene, summoning him to their aid. For even though Alcidas had

declined to take up a permanent station on the coast, as the exiles had

suggested, it was apprehended that he would pillage the sea-side towns,

which were unfortified, on his homeward voyage. At last two state

triremes, the \_Paralus\_ and \_Salaminia,\_ which had been sent on public

business from Athens, came into Mytilene with the news that they had

sighted the fleet of Alcidas lying at anchor off Clarus. [Footnote: A

little town, north-west of Ephesus.] Thereupon Paches put to sea at

once, and gave chase. But Alcidas had got wind of his danger, and was

already on the high seas, making all speed for Peloponnesus. Paches

pursued him as far as Patmos, and then turned back. He would gladly

have caught the Peloponnesians in blue water, where he could have sent

all their ships to the bottom; but as it was he thought himself

fortunate to have escaped the necessity of forming a blockade, as he

must have done if he had come up with them near land, and driven them

ashore. As for Alcidas, he fled in wild haste, keeping the open sea,

being resolved not to touch land, if he could help it, until he reached

the shelter of a Peloponnesian harbour.

III

On his return to Lesbos, Paches despatched to Athens the prisoners who

had been sent to Tenedos, among whom was the Spartan Salaethus. When

they arrived the Athenians immediately put Salaethus to death, and then

met in full assembly to decide on the fate of the rest. They had just

been delivered from a fearful danger, and in the natural reaction of

vindictive rage which had now set in they came to the horrible

resolution of putting all the adult male population of Mytilene to the

sword, and selling the women and children as slaves. The Mytilenaeans,

they argued, were without excuse: they were not subjects of Athens, who

might wish to escape from their burdens, but free and privileged

allies. They had treacherously plotted against Athens, when she was

sunk deep in calamity, and brought a Peloponnesian fleet within the

sacred circle of her empire. For a long time past they had evidently

been hatching a vile conspiracy against the very existence of Athens.

Having once come to this decision, the Athenians lost no time, but sent

off a trireme on the same day, with orders to Paches to carry the

decree into effect.

But after a night of cool reflection they began to repent of their

haste. It was a cruel and monstrous thing, they now thought, to butcher

the population of a whole city, innocent and guilty alike. The

Mytilenaean envoys, who had been sent to Athens on the surrender of the

city, perceived that there was a change in the public temper, and

acting in concert with influential Athenians who were in their

interest, they induced the magistrates to summon a second assembly, and

re-open the debate.

It is on this occasion that we first catch sight [Footnote: That is, in

the narrative of Thucydides.] of the notorious demagogue Cleon, who for

the next six years will be the most prominent figure in Athenian public

life. This man belongs to a class of politicians who had begun to

exercise great influence on the affairs of Athens after the death of

Pericles. That great statesman had really led the people, checking

their excesses, setting bounds to their ambition, and guiding all the

moods of the stormy democracy. But the demagogues were lowborn

upstarts, who, while seeming to lead the people, really followed it,

and kept their position by pandering to the worst passions of the

multitude. It must, however, be mentioned that the two contemporary

writers from whom we draw our materials for the portrait of Cleon, the

historian Thucydides and the comic poet Aristophanes, were both

violently prejudiced against him. Aristophanes hated him as the

representative of the new democracy, which was an object of abhorrence

to the great comic genius; and Thucydides, a born aristocrat, of strong

oligarchical sympathies, looked with cold scorn and aversion on the

coarse mechanic, [Footnote: Cleon was a tanner by trade.] who presumed

to usurp the place, and ape the style, of a true leader like Pericles.

In the previous debate Cleon had been the chief promoter of the

murderous sentence passed against Mytilene; and when the question was

brought forward again, he made a vehement harangue, the substance of

which has been preserved by Thucydides. In this speech he appears as a

practised rhetorical bravo, whose one object is to vilify his

opponents, and throw contempt on their arguments, by an unscrupulous

use of the weapons of ridicule, calumny, and invective. He reproaches

the magistrates for convening a second assembly, in a matter which had

already been decided; and this was, in fact, strictly speaking, a

breach of the constitution. He laughs at the Athenians as weak

sentimentalists, always inclined to mercy, even when mercy was

suicidal. Of the subject communities he speaks as if they were mere

slaves and chattels, outside the pale of humanity, to be kept down with

the scourge and the sword. "Let the law prevail," cries this second

Draco. "The law is sacred, and must not be moved. You are so clever

that you will not live, by fixed rule and order, and you deride the

approved principles of political wisdom. Every one of you wants to be a

lawgiver, a statesman, and a reformer, and to manage the public affairs

in his own way. We, who understand your true interests, are bound to

resist this mood of lawless extravagance, and keep you in the right

path, whether you will or no."

Then preserving the same tone, as of one who is exposing an outrageous

paradox, Cleon proceeds to deal with the actual subject of debate. To

massacre a whole population, was, in his view, a commonplace and

ordinary proceeding; and, in the present instance, the only course

consistent with prudence and common sense. Those who maintained the

contrary were either flighty enthusiasts, whose opinion was not worth

considering, or venal orators, who had sold their country for a bribe.

"Will you suffer yourselves," asked the indignant moralist, "to be

blinded by these corrupt advocates, who amuse you with their eloquence,

and then pocket the price? But it is your own fault: you have no sense

of public responsibility--you are like clever children, playing at a

game of politics. While you sit here, listening to your favourite

speakers, and sharpening your wits against theirs, your empire is going

to ruin. Plain fact is too simple a diet for your pampered appetites;

you must have it hashed and served up with a fine flavouring of fancy

and wit. In short, you have lost all hold upon reality, you live in an

intellectual Utopia, and treat grave matters of public interest as

though they were mere themes in a school of declamation."

In drawing this remarkable picture of Athenian character, which, though

strangely out of place, really contained a large element of truth,

Cleon overreached himself, and was caught in his own snare. It was he,

and not his opponents, who was diverting attention from facts, and

involving a plain issue in a cloud of wordy rhetoric. He has no

arguments, worthy of the name, but tries to carry his case by playing

on the passions of the people, and blowing up the flames of their

anger, which was beginning to cool. But though the more discerning

among his audience must have seen through his sophistries, to a large

proportion of his hearers his speech no doubt seemed a masterpiece of

eloquence. The Athenians, who, like all people of lively talent, were

fond of laughing at themselves, would be especially amused by his

humorous description of their own besetting weakness, their restless

vanity, and inordinate love of change.

The chief advocate for mitigating the sentence against Mytilene was a

certain Diodotus, who had taken a leading part in the previous debate,

and now stood up again to oppose the blood-thirsty counsels of Cleon.

The speech of Diodotus is calm, sober, and business-like. After a

dignified remonstrance against the vile insinuations of Cleon, by whom

all who differed from him were decried as fools or knaves, Diodotus

proceeded to argue the question from the point of view of expediency.

He was not there, he said, to plead the cause of the Mytilenaeans, or

to discuss abstract questions of law and justice. What they had to

consider was what course would be most conducive to the interests of

Athens. According to Cleon, those interests would be best served by a

wholesale massacre of the inhabitants of Mytilene, which would strike

terror into the other subjects of Athens, and prevent them from

yielding to the same temptation. But, reasoned Diodotus, experience had

shown that intending criminals were not deterred from wrongdoing by the

increased severity of penal statutes. For a long time lawgivers had

framed their codes in this belief, thinking to drive mankind into the

path of rectitude by appealing to their terrors. Yet crime had not

diminished, but rather increased. And what was true of individuals, was

still more true of cities, where each man hoped to be concealed among

the crowd of transgressors. Criminals, whether they acted singly, or in

large numbers, were only rendered desperate, if all degrees of crime

were confounded in one common penalty of death.

Such were the enlightened principles of jurisprudence set forth by an

Athenian of the fifth century before Christ--principles which were

first recognised in modern Europe within the memory of men still

living. Then, bringing his theories to a practical test, he pointed out

the gross impolicy of driving a revolted city to desperation, by

excluding all rebels from the hope of pardon. This, he said, would be

the effect on the subjects of Athens, if they passed the same sentence

on the Mytilenaeans, without distinction between the innocent and the

guilty. At present the commons in every city were loyal to Athens; and

though they might be beguiled or coerced into rebellion, they would, if

assured of fair treatment, take the first opportunity of returning to

their allegiance, as the commoners of Mytilene had done. "Do not,

therefore," concluded Diodotus, "destroy this, the strongest guarantee

of your security, but punish the ringleaders of the revolt, after due

deliberation, and leave the rest in peace."

The arguments of Diodotus were unanswerable, and it might have been

supposed that the Athenians, in their relenting mood, would have

carried the amendment by a large majority. But this was not the case.

The debate was keenly contested, and when the president called for a

show of hands, the more merciful decree was only passed by a few votes.

There was no time to be lost, for the first trireme was already a day

and a night on her voyage, and the fate of Mytilene hung by a hair. A

second trireme was launched with all speed, and the Mytilenaeans

present in Athens promised large rewards to the crew if they arrived in

time. With such inducements the rowers toiled day and night, taking

their meals, which consisted of barley-meal kneaded with wine and oil,

at the oar, and sleeping and rowing by turns. Happily there was no

contrary wind to retard their progress, and the crew of the first

vessel, bearing that savage mandate, made no efforts to shorten their

passage. As it was, they were not an hour too soon: for when they

arrived, Paches had already received the decree, and was preparing to

carry it out. Thus Mytilene escaped destruction by a hair's-breadth,

and Athens was saved from committing a great crime. But even the

modified sentence, which was passed directly afterwards on the motion

of Cleon, condemning more than a thousand Mytilenaean citizens to

death, was sufficiently ferocious, and was remembered against the

tyrant city in the days of her humiliation.

ESCAPE OF TWO HUNDRED PLATAEANS FALL OF PLATAEA

I

The siege of Plataea had now lasted for more than a year, and the brave

garrison began to be in sore straits, for their supplies were giving

out, and they had no hope of rescue from outside. In this desperate

situation they resolved to make an attempt to break through the

besieging lines, and make their escape to Athens. All were to take part

in the adventure, leaving the Peloponnesians in possession of an empty

town. But when the time came for carrying out this bold design, half of

the garrison drew back, thinking the risk too great. The other half,

numbering about two hundred and twenty, persisted in their purpose, and

forthwith fell to work on their preparations. They began by making

ladders for scaling the enemy's wall; and in order to ascertain the

proper length of the ladders, they counted the courses of bricks in a

part of the wall facing the town, which happened to have been left

unplastered. Many counted the courses together, and by repeating the

process over and over again, and comparing the result, they at last hit

upon the right number. When once this was known, they could easily

calculate the length of their ladders, for the bricks were all of the

same dimensions, and they knew the thickness of a single brick.

The Peloponnesians had built a double line of wall round Plataea, the

two lines being separated by a distance of sixteen feet. The whole of

the space within this double wall was covered by a flat roof, so as to

present the appearance of a single thick wall, with battlements on

either side; and this covered space, which was divided into rooms by

partition-walls, served as barracks for the besiegers. Along the top

were high towers, with intervals of ten battlements between them, and

built flush with the wall on both sides, so as to leave no passage,

except through the middle of the tower. These served as guard-rooms,

where the soldiers on duty took shelter on wet and stormy nights. For

the distance between the towers was very small, and they could rush out

and man the walls at a moment's notice.

The Plataeans omitted no precaution which might secure success for

their hazardous enterprise. Every man understood exactly the part which

he had to play, and knew that his own life, and the lives of his

comrades, depended on his courage and coolness. They had chosen their

time well, for it was now mid-winter. So they waited for a night of

storm and rain, when there was no moon, and sallying forth from the

town crossed the inner ditch, and came up to the inner wall,

unperceived by the enemy; for the noise of their footsteps was drowned

by the roaring of the wind, and they were careful to advance in open

order, so as not to be discovered by the clashing of their arms. The

whole troop was lightly equipped, and they walked with their right foot

unsandalled, to give them a firmer hold on the muddy ground. Choosing

one of the spaces between two towers, they adjusted their ladders, and

began to ascend the wall. The first to mount were twelve picked men,

armed with breastplates and daggers, who as soon as they reached the

top, rushed to the towers, six men to each, and having overpowered the

guard, stood ready to defend the passage. These were followed by

others, armed with javelins, whose shields were handed up to them from

below as they ascended, to enable them to climb the more easily.

Several of this party had got up in safety, when one of those who were

following dislodged a tile as he grasped the battlements. The sound of

the falling tile alarmed the guards in the towers, and soon the whole

besieging force was in a commotion. But being bewildered by the

darkness, and deafened by the tempest which was blowing, they knew not

which way to turn, and remained at their quarters, waiting for orders.

And at the same time the Plataeans left in the town made a feigned

attack on the Peloponnesian wall at the opposite side to divert the

attention of the enemy. In the general confusion thus created the

besiegers were at a loss what to do, and three hundred of their men,

who were kept together for prompt service on any pressing occasion,

took up their station before the outer wall, thinking that the

Athenians had come to relieve the town. Fire-signals were now kindled

by the Peloponnesians, to summon help from Thebes; but the Plataeans

were prepared for this also, and they kindled other beacons which had

been raised for the purpose on their wall, so as to obscure the meaning

of the enemy's signals, and delay the march of the Thebans, until their

own comrades had had time to escape.

The way was thus left clear for the gallant two hundred. Those who led

the party had secured possession of the passages through the towers,

and stood ready to bar the way against all assailants. Others who

followed brought ladders, and planting them at the foot of the towers,

mounted to the top, and kept off the Peloponnesians, when they

attempted to force an entrance, with a shower of javelins. Over the

intervening space now swarmed the main body of the Plataeans; and each

man, as he got over, halted at the edge of the outer ditch, and kept up

a hot fire of javelins and arrows, to cover the retreat of his

comrades, and repel any attack from below. When all the rest had

crossed the wall, those who held the towers began to descend; and this

was the most perilous part of the adventure, especially for those who

came last. All, however, succeeded in joining their comrades by the

ditch, and just at this moment the picked troop of three hundred, who

carried torches, came upon them. But fortune still favoured the

Plataeans; crouching in the deep shadow thrown by the high banks of the

ditch, they plied the enemy, who with their blazing torches afforded an

easy mark, with darts and arrows. And thus, fighting and retreating at

the same time, they made their way gradually across the ditch, but not

without a severe struggle, for the water was swollen by the snow which

had fallen in the night, and covered with rotten ice. Their best friend

was the tempest, which raged with extraordinary violence throughout the

night.

When their last man had crossed, the Plataeans went off at a run in the

direction of Thebes, being assured that no one would expect them to

take the road which led to their worst enemy. And the prudence of this

course soon appeared, for looking back they saw the Peloponnesians

hurrying with lighted torches along the road to Athens. Then after

marching towards Thebes for about a mile, they doubled back, and taking

to the mountains soon reached the friendly territory of Attica. They

received a kind welcome at Athens, where it was found that out of the

original two hundred and twenty, only eight were missing. Seven of

these had lost heart at the last moment, and returned to Plataea, where

they announced that all the rest of the party had been slain. One only,

an archer, was taken prisoner at the outer ditch.

On hearing the report of those who had turned back, the Plataeans

applied for a truce to bury their dead; and when their herald came back

from his useless errand, they learned to their delight that this

gallant enterprise, so ably planned, and so boldly executed, had been

crowned with complete success.

II

Well would it have been for the Plataeans who remained in the town if

they had stood by their first purpose, and shared the fortunes of their

brave comrades. Better far to have died, sword in hand, than to meet

the ignoble fate which was now reserved for them. It was in the

following summer, two years after the beginning of the siege, that the

crisis arrived. The Plataeans had come to the end of their provisions,

and were suffering severely from want of food. In this state of

weakness they were suddenly attacked by the besiegers, who might easily

have carried the town by storm. But the Spartan general wished, if

possible, to avoid this, as all places taken by assault would have to

be given back to their original owners on the conclusion of peace,

whereas those which had voluntarily surrendered might be retained.

Accordingly he sent a herald, and summoned the Plataeans to surrender,

promising that they should have a fair trial by Spartan judges; and

they, being actually on the point of starvation, accepted the terms

offered, and laid down their arms. They were kept in custody and

supplied with food until the judges, five in number, arrived from

Sparta. On the arrival of the judges no express charge was made against

them, but they were called up one by one, and asked this simple

question: "Have you done any service to the Spartans or their allies in

the course of the present war?"

The Plataeans saw the snare which was set for them, and seeking to

evade it they asked permission to plead their cause at length. Leave

being given, the Plataean advocate rose to address the court, and made

a most moving and eloquent appeal, which well deserves to be reproduced

in its main outlines.

"Men of Sparta," began the orator, "we surrendered our city on the

faith of your promise that the innocent should be spared, and only the

guilty condemned. But we fear that our confidence has been misplaced.

That our doom is already pronounced we have but too plain evidence, in

your sinister question, in your cold, condemning looks, in the gloomy

faces of our enemies, who have poisoned your ears against us. We have

but little hope of turning you from your purpose by anything that we

can say. Nevertheless we have resolved to speak, lest in the hour of

death we should be tormented by the thought that a word might have

saved us, and that word remained unspoken.

"In the history of the last fifty years no city in Greece has a fairer

record than ours. Though not trained to the sea, we served in the fleet

at Artemisium; we fought under Pausanias in the great battle which

decided the fate of Greece, and took part beyond our strength in all

the trials and perils of our common country. On the gratitude of Sparta

we have a special claim, for in the day of her direst extremity, after

the earthquake, when the Helots were in arms against her, we sent a

third part of our citizens to her aid. Since then we have been found in

the ranks of your enemies; but this was your fault, not ours. Who drove

us into the arms of Athens, when we were hard pressed by the tyranny of

Thebes? We joined the Athenian alliance at your bidding; they defended

us against our enemies, and admitted us to the rights of Athenian

citizenship. We were bound, therefore, by every tie of honour and duty

to stand by them, whether their cause was just or unjust.

"What, then, is the meaning of your question, whether we have done you

or your allies any service during this war? If you ask as foes, how can

you claim any service? And if you ask as friends, you have done us

bitter wrong, by attacking us unprovoked.

"The Thebans seized our city in time of peace, and at a holy season,

and we were justified by the laws of nature and of nations in wreaking

vengeance upon them. It may seem to your interest to pay court to them

now; but think how different was our conduct from theirs when the

Persian was at our doors, threatening slavery to us all. We were among

the few who obeyed the call of honour, while Thebes and all the other

towns of Boeotia took sides with the Barbarian.

"Hitherto Sparta has been called the glass of honour in Greece. What,

then, will men say, if Spartan judges are guilty of blotting Plataea

out of the map of Greece, and of the judicial murder of her citizens?

Strange, indeed, and terrible has been the fate of our city, both now

and in the past. Our fathers were brought to the brink of ruin by their

valour and devotion; we, their sons, have just passed through all the

horrors of a siege, and now we are forced to plead for our lives.

Outcasts from our fatherland, spurned and rejected of all, we are

thrown upon your mercy; and much we fear that your hearts are hardened

against us.

"We adjure you, then, by the memory of those times, and of the part

which we took in the salvation of Greece, not to betray us to our worst

enemies, the Thebans. Do not win their gratitude by murder, but ours by

mercy. Forget the cold calculations of policy; think of the everlasting

infamy of such a deed. Your fathers are buried in our land, and we have

been constant in paying all honour and service to their tombs. Will ye

give up the land in which they rest to the men [Footnote: The Thebans,

who fought on the side of the Persians at Plataea.] who are guilty of

their blood? Will ye enslave those fields which saw the triumph of

Greek liberty, and dishonour the gods by whose favour the victory was

won? By your own renown, by the conscience of Greece, by the memory of

your sires, we adjure you, men of Lacedaemon, not to do this deed.

"But it is time to make an end. If we have spoken in vain, and you are

resolved on our death, we have still one request. Send us back into our

city, and keep us there immured until we have perished of hunger. Any

fate is better than falling into the hands of the Thebans, the enemies

of Plataea, and of all Greece."

The orator had indeed spoken in vain, or if his words had made any

impression on the minds of the judges, it was speedily obliterated by a

fierce and bitter tirade which was delivered by a Theban speaker in

reply. As soon as he had finished his harangue, the prisoners were

called up again in turn, and questioned as before. When each of them

had answered, in the only manner possible, he was led away and put to

death; and not one of them was spared. The number of those slain was

two hundred and twenty-five, and of these twenty-five were Athenians.

The city was then levelled to the ground, and the territory left at the

disposal of the Thebans. Thus was this brave little community

sacrificed to the rancour of Thebes, and the selfish policy of Sparta.

CAPTURE OF A HUNDRED AND TWENTY SPARTANS AT SPHACTERIA

I

The result of six years of desultory fighting had fully justified the

forebodings of Archidamus, and the sanguine anticipations of Pericles.

In spite of the terrible ravages of the plague, Athens had easily held

her own against the whole power of the Peloponnesian league. As yet,

however, no decisive advantage had been gained on either side. But in

the seventh year of the war an event occurred which would have enabled

the Athenians, but for their own folly, to conclude an honourable peace.

The ablest of the Athenian generals at this time was Demosthenes,

[Footnote: To be carefully distinguished from the great orator, born

about forty years after the date reached in this chapter (425 B.C.).]

who in the previous year had greatly distinguished himself by a

brilliant campaign in Aetolia. In the following summer he obtained

permission to take passage on board a fleet which was bound on a voyage

to Corcyra and Sicily. He sailed in a private capacity, but he was

authorized to use the ships against the coasts of Peloponnesus, if he

saw any opening which might be utilized in the interests of Athens.

On a rocky promontory, at the northern end of the spacious bay of

Navarino, lies the little town of Pylos, generally believed to have

been the home of the Homeric Nestor. Since the conquest of Messenia by

the Spartans, the town had remained in ruins, and the country for some

distance round was a desert. The natural advantages of the adjacent

coast had already caught the keen eye of Demosthenes, and he had formed

the plan of raising a fortified outpost on the spot, to be held by a

picked troop of the banished Messenians, and thus planting a thorn in

the side of Sparta.

Fortune favoured his design. For on rounding the western headland of

Peloponnesus, the fleet encountered a storm, and was compelled to seek

shelter at Pylos. Demosthenes now urged the admirals to employ their

enforced leisure in fortifying the place. But they repulsed him rudely,

and treated his suggestion with contempt. He next tried to interest the

inferior officers in his project, but meeting with no better success,

he began to fear that this grand opportunity would be thrown away. The

discussion, however, had reached the ears of the soldiers, and having

nothing else to do, they agreed among themselves to pass the time by

building a fort. Choosing a place of great natural strength, where the

rocky coast descends abruptly to the open sea, they went to work with a

will. As they had no tools for stone-cutting, they picked out the

stones, and fitted them together according to their shape; and for want

of hods they carried the mortar, wherever it was required, on their

backs, stooping forward and clasping their hands together behind them,

to prevent it from slipping off. They carried out their self-imposed

task with great energy, and after six days of vigorous labour the fort

was completed, for the natural defences of the site were so strong that

in most places there was no need of a wall. As the weather was now

favourable, the fleet proceeded on its voyage, leaving Demosthenes with

five ships to garrison the fort.

The news of the occupation of Pylos soon reached the Spartans, but at

first they paid little heed, thinking that they could expel the

audacious intruders whenever they chose to exert themselves. Moreover,

they were just then engaged in keeping one of those religious festivals

of which the Spartan calendar was so full, and a good part of their

army was absent in Attica. Agis, however, the Spartan king, and those

under him who were commanding in Attica, took a wiser view of the

situation, and cutting short their operations they led their forces

with all speed back to Sparta. They were the more inclined to do this

as the season was yet early, the weather inclement, and, the corn being

still green, they wanted means to nourish their troops. Thus the

inventive genius of Demosthenes had already proved of signal service to

his country; for this was the shortest of all the Peloponnesian

invasions, lasting only fifteen days.

On the return of their troops from Attica the Spartans sent a small

force to commence the attack on Pylos, and ordered the main body of

their army to follow. There was some discontent among those who had

already been serving abroad at this second levy, and the full muster of

the troops was consequently delayed. In the meantime a message was

despatched to a Peloponnesian fleet then sailing to Corcyra, which at

this time was in a state of revolution, with orders to return at once,

and assist in the campaign against Pylos. Demosthenes was now in

imminent danger, being threatened with an immediate assault by sea and

land, which he had no adequate means of repelling. Having sent off two

of his ships to recall the Athenian squadron from its voyage to

Corcyra, he prepared to defend himself, until the arrival of succour,

as best he could.

The Peloponnesian fleet was the first to arrive, and the Spartans, who

were now present in full force with their allies, determined to make

the most of their time. They hoped, by a simultaneous onslaught of

their army and fleet, to carry the fort before the Athenian ships had

time to return. But in case they should fail in this, they intended to

cripple the movements of the relieving squadron, by blocking the

entrances to the bay. For the long, narrow island of Sphacteria forms a

natural break water, converting the harbour of Navarino into a

land-locked basin, with two narrow passages at the northern and

southern end. [Footnote: The description of Thucydides does not

correspond to the picture of the harbour given in our modern maps. But

in the course of twenty centuries great changes may well have

occurred.] These inlets the Spartans proposed to close, by anchoring

triremes close together, with their prows turned seawards, which they

could easily have done, for at the southern entrance there was only

room for eight or nine vessels to sail abreast, and at the northern

entrance only room for two. This precaution, however, was never carried

out; and the Spartans, as if blinded by fate, adopted another measure,

which led to fatal consequences for themselves. Wishing to keep command

of every spot of land in the neighbourhood of Pylos, they landed a body

of their own men, numbering four hundred and twenty, with the usual

proportion of Helots, on the island, and the same time posted troops at

every assailable point on the opposite coast.

Thinking now that the little garrison at Pylos, surrounded on all sides

by enemies, would fall an easy prey, they sent orders to the fleet to

get under way, and prepared to attack the fort on the land side.

Meanwhile Demosthenes had not been idle: having drawn his three

remaining ships under the shelter of the fort, and protected them in

front by a stockade, he armed the crews with such weapons as he had,

including a number of wicker-shields, taken from a thirty-oared

Messenian galley which had recently come to his assistance with a force

of forty hoplites. Then, having posted the greater part of his troops

for the defence of his position against the Peloponnesian army, he

himself descended with a picked body of sixty hoplites, and took up his

station on the rocky shore. For on this side the defences were weakest,

as the Athenians, in building the fort, had never anticipated an attack

from the sea.

Demosthenes had just time to address a few words of caution and

encouragement to his men, assuring them of victory, if they would only

stand fast, when the Peloponnesian fleet was seen bearing down upon

them; and at the same moment a loud shout from the fort announced that

the garrison was already engaged behind them. The assault was fiercest

at the point where Demosthenes and his men were stationed, and the

Peloponnesians made desperate efforts to effect a landing. But they

were embarrassed by the difficult and rocky coast, which only allowed a

few ships to approach at a time. As fast as one division was beaten

back, another came on, with the white foam spouting round the prows,

and the waters roaring and eddying to the strokes of the gigantic oars,

while the cliffs resounded with the shouts of their comrades in the

ships behind, cheering them on to the attack.

Conspicuous among those who fought on the ships was seen the gallant

figure of Brasidas, who exerted himself, by voice and by example, to

infuse his own heroic spirit into the rest of the crews and their

officers. His ringing tones were heard above the tumult, urging on the

captains and steersmen, when they hung back in fear lest their ships

should be shattered on the rocks. "Spare not these timbers," he cried,

"but let every hull among them go to wreck, rather than suffer the

enemy to violate the soil of Lacedaemon. Where is your loyalty to

Sparta? Have you forgotten the debt which you owe to her? Have at them,

I say, and hurl this fort with its defenders into the sea." Saying this

he ordered the master of his own trireme to beach the vessel, and stood

ready on the gangway, that he might be the first to leap on shore. But

as he attempted to land he was hurled back by the Athenians, and fell

fainting, covered with wounds, on the deck. His shield slipped off his

arm, and dropped into the sea, and having been washed ashore, was

picked up by the Athenians, who used it to adorn the trophy which they

afterwards erected.

After the fall of Brasidas the Peloponnesians still continued their

efforts to effect a landing, but they were baffled by the obstinate

defence of the Athenians, and the rugged and inhospitable coast. It was

a strange reversal of affairs which had been brought about by the

fortune of war. On one side were the Spartans, trained to military

service on land, but now compelled to serve on board a fleet, in order

to obtain a footing on their own territory, and on the other side the

Athenians, whose natural element was the sea, drawn up on land to repel

a naval attack.

Next day the assault was repeated, but again without success. The

Spartans sent for a supply of timber, to construct siege engines,

intending to try and batter down the Athenian wall where it overlooked

the harbour, as at this point there was a better landing-place for the

ships. In this task, however, they were interrupted by the sudden

appearance of the Athenian fleet, now numbering fifty vessels, having

been reinforced by four Chian ships, and six from Naupactus. Finding

the harbour occupied by the Peloponnesians, and the whole coast lined

with troops, they retired for the night to the little island of Prote.

Next day they weighed anchor early, and dividing their fleet, sailed

into the harbour of Navarino by both entrances at once. Though taken by

surprise, the Peloponnesians manned their ships, and as fast as they

were ready put out to meet them; but before their array was complete

they were attacked by the Athenians, who disabled many of their

vessels, captured five, and drove the rest ashore. So complete was the

rout that the Athenians pursued the flying ships into the very interior

of the harbour, and rammed some of them after they had been brought to

land. Others they charged while the crews were still getting on board,

and began to tow off the disabled hulls. But in the heat of victory the

Athenians had pushed their advantage somewhat too far, and they paid

for their audacity by the loss of a considerable number of their men.

For the Lacedaemonians, in wild dismay at the defeat of their ships, by

which their comrades on the island would be cut off from all help, made

desperate exertions to save their fleet, wading into the water in their

heavy armour, and hauling back the vessels as they were being towed

off. In the confined space manoeuvring was impossible, and the

sea-fight had now become a furious hand to hand encounter, as between

two armies on land. After a prolonged struggle, in which both sides

suffered severely, the Spartans succeeded in saving their ships, except

those which had been taken at first, and the Athenians then retired to

their station.

The result of this battle was to give the Athenians complete command of

the sea, for the Peloponnesian fleet was in no condition to renew the

engagement. From their camp on the mainland the Spartans could see the

Athenian triremes rowing round and round the island, and keeping

vigilant watch, to prevent those who were confined there from escaping.

News of the disaster was sent without delay to Sparta, and the

magistrates, recognising the gravity of the crisis, proceeded at once

to Pylos, wishing to inform themselves on the spot, and then decide

what was best to be done. Finding on their arrival that there was no

prospect of rescuing their men on the island, they applied to the

Athenian commanders for a truce, to enable them to send envoys to

Athens, and arrange some terms for the recovery of the imprisoned

Spartans. The Athenians consented, and a truce was made on the

following conditions: The Spartans were to surrender all their fleet,

including any ships of war on the coast of Laconia, to the Athenians,

and to refrain from any attack on the fort, until the return of the

envoys. The Athenians, on their part, agreed to allow provisions to be

sent to the Spartans on the island, all such provision being conveyed

thither under their own inspection, and none by stealth. They further

agreed to carry the envoys to Athens in one of their own triremes, and

to suspend all hostilities until the expiration of the truce. When the

envoys returned, the Peloponnesian ships were to be given back.

It was a proud moment for Athens when the Spartan envoys appeared

before the assembly, bearing the humble petition from her great enemy.

The terms offered by the spokesman of the embassy in the name of Sparta

were simple and concise, peace and friendship with Sparta, in return

for the men shut up on the island. The rest of his speech was made up

of grave moral reflections, such as are generally paraded by those on

the losing side. Let the Athenians beware of abusing their advantage;

though they had the upper hand to-day, they might be brought to their

knees to-morrow. War was a game of hazard, in which the luck was always

changing. Now they had an opportunity of concluding an honourable

peace, and establishing a lasting claim to the gratitude of Sparta. And

if the two leading states of Greece were once united, they could

dictate what terms they pleased to the rest.

The notorious selfishness of Spartan policy is glaringly manifested in

this speech. In their anxiety to recover their own citizens, the

Spartans completely ignored the interests of their allies, and held out

the right hand of fellowship to the people whom they had lately branded

as the oppressors and spoilers of Greece. The Athenians might well

distrust the professions of these perfidious statesmen, who repudiated

their sworn obligations with such cynical levity. The Spartans in

Sphacteria were already, they thought, prisoners of Athens, to be dealt

with as they pleased; and were they to resign this costly prize, in

return for a vague promise of friendship from Sparta? Their answer was

framed on the advice of Cleon: they could not, they said, enter into

any discussion, until the men on the island had surrendered themselves,

and been brought to Athens. Then, if the Spartans agreed to restore to

the Athenians Nisaea and Pegae, [Footnote: The harbour-towns of

Megara.] and some other places which they had held before the Thirty

Years' Truce, peace might be made, and the prisoners restored. The

Spartan envoys were somewhat startled by these demands, which involved

a gross breach of faith to their own allies; so they affected to ignore

the proposal, and suggested a private conference between themselves and

select Athenian commissioners. It is not impossible that the terms

offered, infamous as they were to Sparta, might have been accepted; but

the whole negotiation was frustrated by the violence of Cleon, who, on

hearing the suggestion of the envoys, overwhelmed them with abuse,

accusing them of double-dealing and bad faith. The envoys were

confounded by this specimen of Athenian manners, and seeing that they

were wasting their time to no purpose, they turned their backs on the

city of free speech.

On their return to Pylos the truce expired, and the Spartans demanded

back their ships, but the Athenians refused to restore them, on the

ground of some alleged violation of the conditions laid down. Thereupon

hostilities were resumed with vigour on both sides. The Spartans made

repeated attacks on the fort, and watched for an opportunity of

bringing off their men from the island: and the Athenians kept a

vigilant guard to prevent their escape. During the day two triremes

sailed continually round Sphacteria in opposite directions, and at

night their whole fleet, now raised to the number of seventy by the

arrival of twenty fresh ships, was moored about the island, except on

the exposed side in windy weather.

Before long the Athenians began to feel the difficulties of their

position. They were but scantily supplied with food, and had much

trouble in obtaining water. The only spring to which they had access,

and even that by no means abundant, was in the citadel of Pylos, and

most of them were reduced to scraping the shingle, and thus obtaining a

meagre supply of brackish water. On land their quarters were straitened

and uncomfortable, and they had no proper anchorage for their ships, so

that the crews had to go ashore in turns to get their meals. They were

greatly disappointed to find their task thus prolonged, for they had

supposed that a few days' siege would suffice to starve the imprisoned

Spartans into a surrender, as the island was barren and ill-furnished

with water. But day followed day, and still they waited in vain for any

sign of yielding. For the Spartan magistrates had offered large rewards

to anyone who succeeded in conveying wine, meal, or other portable

provisions, to the island, and many were tempted to run the risk,

especially among the Helots, who were offered their liberty in return

for this service. They put out from various points of the mainland, and

landed under cover of night on the seaward side of the island, choosing

their time when the wind was blowing strong from the sea, which made it

impossible for the Athenian triremes to keep their exposed anchorage.

The Spartan hoplites stood ready on the rocks to help them; and so long

as they could get ashore with their freight, they cared nothing what

happened to their boats, for if they were wrecked, the Spartans had

pledged themselves for the full value. Others, still bolder, swam,

across the harbour, dragging after them leather bags filled with a

mixture of poppy-seed or linseed and honey, [Footnote: Poppy-seed was

valued in ancient medicine as an antidote against hunger, and linseed

against thirst.] and attached to a cord. These were soon detected; but

the other source of supply remained open, and it seemed likely that the

siege would be protracted till winter, when it would have to be given

up.

The Athenians at home were much concerned when they were informed of

this state of affairs, and they began to regret that they had not

accepted the terms offered by Sparta. They were suspicious and uneasy,

and Cleon, on whose advice they had acted, saw himself in danger of

falling a victim to their resentment. But his boundless self-confidence

served him well in this crisis. At first he affected to disbelieve the

report sent from Pylos, and proposed to send commissioners to inquire

into the true state of the case. His motion was carried, and he himself

was nominated as one of the commissioners. Cleon was now placed in an

awkward position: either he would have to confirm the statement of the

messengers from Pylos, and thus make himself ridiculous, or, if he

contradicted them, he would be convicted of falsehood. So he turned

round again, and advised the Athenians, if they believed the report, to

waste no more time, but to order an immediate attack on the island. "If

I were general," [Footnote: The chief civil and military magistrate at

Athens, corresponding to the Roman consul.] he said, with a meaning

glance at Nicias, who was then holding that office, "it would not be

long before these Spartans were brought in chains to Athens. The

Athenians want a \_man\_ to lead them."

This Nicias, on whom the demagogue had so scornfully reflected, was a

great noble, and the chief political opponent of Cleon. When he heard

the boastful words of his rival, it struck Nicias that there was a fine

opportunity of bringing him to ruin, by thrusting upon him a command

for which he was totally unqualified. Encouraged by the shouts of the

multitude, who were crying to Cleon, "Why don't you go and do it?" he

rose from his place, and proposed that the tanner should be sent in

charge of an expedition to take the men at Sphacteria. At first Cleon

agreed to go, thinking that Nicias was jesting; but when he saw that

the proposal was made seriously, he began to draw back. "It is your

business, not mine," he said to Nicias. "I am not general--you are; why

should I do your work for you?" "Never mind the title," answered

Nicias; "I resign my office on this occasion to you." The dispute grew

hotter and hotter, much to the amusement of the Athenians, who fell

readily into the humour of the situation, and loudly applauded the

proposal of Nicias. The more Cleon objected, the more they shouted that

he should go. Finding that he must make good his words, Cleon at last

plucked up a spirit, and accepted the honour thus contemptuously forced

upon him. "I am not afraid of the Spartans," he declared valiantly.

"Give me the contingent of soldiers from Lemnos and Imbros, the

Thracian peltasts, [Footnote: Light-armed soldiers.] and four hundred

archers, and without taking a single Athenian from the city, within

three weeks I will either bring those Spartans as prisoners to Athens,

or kill them where they are."

There was some laughter among the Athenians at Cleon's vain-glorious

promise; but the more sober-minded were not displeased at his

appointment, expecting that, if he failed, they would be rid of a

nuisance; while, if he succeeded, they would gain an immense advantage

over their enemies. Such, at least, is the comment of the historian;

but he makes no remark on the incredible levity of the Athenians, to

whom the gravest interests of state were matter for mirth and pastime;

and he has not a word of censure for Nicias and his "sober-minded"

partisans, who, in their eagerness to ruin a political opponent, showed

a criminal disregard for the welfare of Athens.

II

When Cleon arrived at Pylos with his forces, he found Demosthenes

engaged in active preparations for an attack on the island. For his

troops were growing impatient, and clamouring to be led into action,

and a happy accident had recently occurred, which greatly increased the

prospect of success. Till quite lately Sphacteria had been covered with

a dense growth of underwood, and Demosthenes knew by his experience in

Aetolia that an attacking force would be at a great disadvantage in

marching against an enemy who fought under cover, and knew every inch

of the ground. But a party of Athenian soldiers, who had landed on the

island to cook their breakfast, accidentally set fire to the brushwood,

and a wind springing up, the flames were carried over the greater part

of the island, leaving it a blackened waste. Demosthenes now discovered

that the besieged Spartans were more numerous than he had supposed,

having hitherto believed that their number had been purposely

exaggerated, to give an excuse for sending more food; and the main

obstacle being now removed, he issued the welcome order to make ready

for an immediate assault.

When he received his commission, Cleon had prudently stipulated that

Demosthenes should be associated with him in the command. The two

ill-assorted colleagues--the turbulent demagogue, and the veteran

general--now took counsel together, and after a last fruitless attempt

at negotiation, they set sail at night with a force of eight hundred

hoplites, and disembarking just before dawn on both sides of the island

at once, led their men at a run against the first guard-station of the

Spartans. They found the enemy posted in three divisions: the first,

consisting of thirty hoplites, formed an advanced guard; some distance

behind these, where the ground forms a shallow basin, containing the

only spring in the island, was stationed the main body, commanded by

Epitadas; and at the extreme north, opposite Pylos, there was a small

reserve force, left to guard a sort of natural citadel, which would

serve as a last retreat, if Epitadas and his men were overpowered.

The thirty Spartans in the outpost were taken by surprise, and cut down

to a man; for though they had seen the Athenian ships putting out, they

had no suspicion of what was intended, supposing that they were merely

proceeding to their anchorage for the night. At daybreak the rest of

the fleet put in at the island, bringing the whole of the forces which

Demosthenes had at his disposal, except a few, who were left to

garrison the fort at Pylos. They were a motley host, armed for the most

part with slings, javelins, and bows, but admirably suited for the work

which was to be done. Swarming over the island by hundreds and by

thousands they took up their stations on every piece of rising ground,

threatening the enemy in front, in the rear, on the right flank, and on

the left. The Spartans, in their heavy armour, were helpless against

these agile foes, who eluded every attempt to come to close quarters,

and kept up a continual shower of arrows, javelins, and stones. Such

had been the orders of Demosthenes, which were now carried into effect.

When the Spartans under Epitadas saw their advanced guard cut up, and

the Athenians marching against them, they drew up in order, and tried

to come within spear-thrust of the enemy; but they were unable to

effect their purpose, for the Athenian hoplites kept their ground, and

at the same moment they themselves were assailed on both flanks and in

the rear by a cloud of light infantry. It was a kind of warfare to

which the Spartans were totally unaccustomed: if they attempted to

advance, their nimble assailants drew back, and pursuit was impossible

on the rocky and broken ground. For a time the light-armed troops

approached them with caution, being somewhat cowed in spirit when

brought face to face with the renowned warriors of Sparta, hitherto

supposed to be invincible. But seeing how the Spartans were

embarrassed, they took courage, and came on in a roaring multitude,

surrounding them on all sides, and leaving them not a moment to take

breath. The air was darkened by a tempest of missiles; and a fine dust,

caused by the ashes of the late fire, rose in choking clouds from the

trampling of many feet. Exhausted by their violent exertions, stunned

by the uproar, and blinded by the dust, the Spartans began to give

ground, and closing their ranks fell back on the stronghold where their

reserve was stationed. They were hotly pursued, and some few were cut

off in the retreat, but the greater part succeeded in reaching the

fort, where they turned at bay, and prepared to defend themselves to

the last. Until a late hour in the day the Athenians made vain attempts

to dislodge them from their position, which was only assailable in

front. At last, when both sides were sorely distressed by the long

conflict under a burning sun, an officer who was in command of the

Messenian troops came to the generals, and offered, if they would place

a few light-armed soldiers at his disposal, to lead them up the

precipitous cliffs at the northern end of Sphacteria, and take the

Spartans in the rear. Permission being readily granted, he chose his

men, and taking care that his movements were not perceived by the

enemy, made his way with them along the perilous and slippery face of

the cliffs to the rear of the beleaguered garrison, scaled the steep

ascent, and suddenly appearing on the heights, struck terror into the

Spartans, and gave fresh courage to their assailants.

The situation of the Spartans was now similar to that of their

ancestors when they made their last stand at Thermopylae. They were

attacked in front and rear, and hemmed in on both sides by the natural

difficulties of the place. In their weak and exhausted condition it

would have been an easy task to make an end of them. But the great

object of Cleon and Demosthenes was to take them alive. They therefore

suspended the attack, and sent a herald, and summoned them to lay down

their arms. When they heard the proclamation, most of them lowered

their shields, and waved their hands in the air, to show that they had

dropped their weapons. The Athenian generals then entered into a parley

with Styphon the third in command of the Spartans; for Epitadas, the

chief officer, was slain, and Hippagretus, the second, had been left

for dead on the field. Styphon requested permission to communicate with

the Spartan authorities on the mainland, and ask what he and his

comrades were to do; and the Athenian commanders sent one of their own

men to carry the message. Having heard his report, the Spartan

magistrates sent a herald to see how matters stood; and after more than

one messenger had passed to and fro between their camp and the island,

they sent their final instructions, conveyed in these words "The

Spartans bid you to decide for yourselves, but to do nothing

dishonourable."

Fifty years before, these wounded and weary men would have needed no

instructions to tell them their duty. According to the ancient

tradition of Sparta they had but one course open to them--to die at

their posts. But the lapse of time had softened the stern fibre of the

Spartan character; and the broken remnant now brought to bay in

Sphacteria interpreted the ambiguous mandate in their own favour, and

surrendered themselves and their arms.

The number of the prisoners was two hundred and ninety-two, of whom

about a hundred and twenty were Spartans of pure descent, several of

them belonging to the highest families in Sparta. They were distributed

among the captains of the fleet for transportation to Athens. Dating

from the first sea-fight, the siege had lasted altogether seventy-two

days; and during seven weeks of this period they had subsisted on the

casual supplies smuggled over by the blockade-runners from the

mainland. Great was the joy at Athens when that costly freight was

brought safely into the harbour of Peiraeus; and Cleon, whose bustling

energy had really helped to precipitate a crisis, was the hero of the

hour. He had promised to settle the business, one way or the other,

within twenty days, and this promise, which had been laughed at as a

piece of crazy vanity, was fulfilled to the letter. The whole merit of

the performance, however, belonged to Demosthenes, who had planned the

attack on Sphacteria with admirable sagacity, and led the operations

from first to last.

The surrender of a picked troop of Spartan warriors caused a revolution

of feeling throughout Greece. Hitherto it had been assumed as a matter

of course that no Spartan soldier, in any circumstances, would yield to

an enemy; but now more than a hundred Spartans had preferred life to

honour. It was generally believed that the survivors were inferior in

valour to those who had fallen; and some time afterwards one of the

captives was asked this insulting question by one of the Athenian

allies: "Your \_brave\_ comrades were buried on the field, I suppose?"

The Spartan's answer was couched in a riddle: "It would be a mighty

clever spindle, [Footnote: Arrow.] which singled out the brave." His

meaning was that the stones and arrows had dealt out death among his

comrades without distinction.

CAMPAIGNS OF BRASIDAS IN THRACE

I

One advantage which accrued to the Athenians from the possession of the

Spartan captives was the immunity from invasion. For if the Spartans

prepared to make any movement against Attica, they could bring out

their prisoners, and threaten to put them to death. And in other

directions the future looked brighter than it had done for many years.

They held Pylos, which was garrisoned by Messenian troops, and served

as an open door, through which they could carry havoc over the whole

western district of Laconia; and the occupation of Cythera, which was

effected in the following year, gave them increased facility for

harassing the commerce of Sparta, and making descents on her eastern

coast.

Elated by these successes, the Athenians determined on a bolder flight,

and forgetting the lessons of Pericles, thought of recovering the

possessions which they had held on the mainland thirty years before.

With this intention they planned an attack, which was to be carried out

from three different points at once, on Boeotia. But the whole scheme

proved a failure, and led to a severe defeat at Delium; and about the

same time news arrived from Thrace which showed that the tide was

turning, and should have warned them, if they were wise, to set bounds

to their restless ambition.

Brasidas had long since recovered from the wounds received at Pylos.

The deep humiliation of Sparta, now reduced to become a suppliant for

peace, filled him with shame and sorrow, and in the eighth year of the

war he formed the bold design of organizing a campaign against the

coast-towns of Thrace, which were among the most important of the

Athenian tributaries. Having obtained the necessary commission from

Sparta, he collected a force of seventeen hundred heavy-armed infantry,

and in the summer following the disaster at Sphacteria, turned his

steps northward, and arrived without mishap at the borders of Thessaly.

The Thessalians generally were then on friendly terms with Athens, and,

apart from this, the passage of so large a force through their

territory caused suspicion and alarm among the inhabitants. But

Brasidas was a man of rare gifts: endowed with more than a full share

of the typical Spartan virtues, he combined with these a graciousness

of manner, and a winning eloquence, which made him an equal of the most

accomplished Athenian. He had, moreover, friends among the powerful

nobles of Thessaly, who undertook to guide him in safety to the

Macedonian frontier. On reaching the river Enipeus, he found his

passage barred by a Thessalian force, who seemed resolved to dispute

his progress. His courteous demeanour, and fair words, disarmed their

hostility, and he was allowed to pass. Fearing, however, a general

rising of the natives against him, and urged to despatch by his guides,

he pushed on by forced marches, and entering the passes of Olympus,

descended into the southern plain of Macedonia, whose king Perdiccas, a

shifty and treacherous barbarian, though nominally in alliance with

Athens, favoured the enterprise of Brasidas.

Perdiccas had undertaken to provide pay for half the Spartan force, in

return for help to be rendered against a rebel chieftain with whom he

was at war. But Brasidas, whose main object was to raise a revolt among

the Athenian allies, insisted on entering into negotiations with the

rebel, and having patched up a truce, conducted his troops to the

neighbourhood of Acanthus, a town on the eastern side of the Chalcidian

peninsula, where there was a party discontented with the Athenian rule.

In all the cities subject to Athens the general mass of the people were

found loyal towards her, or, at the worst, disinclined for any change;

and Acanthus was no exception. When Brasidas with his little army

appeared before the walls the people at first refused him admission.

But it was just before the vintage, and their grapes were hanging in

ripe clusters, exposed to the hand of the spoiler; and so, to save

their vineyards from ravage, they were at last induced to give him a

hearing.

It was very important for Brasidas to secure the voluntary adherence of

the Acanthians, whose action would have a powerful effect in

determining the attitude of the other Chalcidians towards them.

Accordingly he exerted all his skill as an orator, which was

considerable, to allay their suspicions, and rouse their enthusiasm for

the cause which he represented. That cause, he said, was the liberation

of Greece from the tyranny of Athens. Let none of them suppose that he

had come in the interests of a faction, to enslave the many to the few,

or the few to the many. He had bound the authorities of Sparta by the

most solemn oaths to respect the constitution of any state which

enlisted under their banner. Freedom for Greeks!--that was the

watchword which should find a response in every patriotic heart. After

this fine burst of sentiment, Brasidas descended to a much lower level,

and plainly intimated that if the Acanthians would not join him from

these high motives, he would employ coercion, and proceed to ravage

their estates, This last argument was decisive, and in order to save

their valuable harvest from destruction, they agreed to admit Brasidas

and his army into the town. Shortly afterwards their example was

followed by Stagirus, one day to become famous as the birthplace of

Aristotle.

It is melancholy to find a man of really pure and generous character

like Brasidas lending himself to be the mouthpiece of Spartan

hypocrisy. To him the sounding phrases and lofty professions which he

uttered may have meant something: but in their essence they were mere

hollow cant, intended to divert attention from the true issue, and drag

a peaceful and prosperous community into the private quarrels of

Sparta. So degraded was now the tone of politics in Greece, even among

her best and ablest men.

II

On the banks of the Strymon, just where the river sweeps round in a

sharp curve, west and east, the Athenians had founded, six years before

the outbreak of the war, the colony of Amphipolis. It was a site which

had long been coveted by the leaders of Greek colonial enterprise,

being the key to the richest district in Thrace, with unrivalled

facilities for commerce, and close to the gold-mines of Mount Pangeus.

A previous attempt which was made by the Athenians to occupy the

position had ended in ruinous disaster; but nearly thirty years later a

second body of emigrants, led by Hagnon from Athens, met with much

better success; Amphipolis now grew and prospered, and at the time

which we have reached was the most important city in the Athenian

empire.

The Amphipolitans had a bitter and jealous enemy in the neighbouring

town of Argilus, situated a few miles to the west, on the road to

Amphipolis; and ever since the appearance of Brasidas in Thrace the

Argilians had been plotting against the tranquillity of their hated

rival. Accordingly, when Brasidas, who had planned a surprise on

Amphipolis, appeared before their gates, they welcomed him eagerly, and

conducted him and his army to the bridge over the Strymon, which

crossed the river just outside the southern end of the city wall. The

defenders of the bridge, few in number, and taken unawares, were

instantly cut to pieces; for Brasidas came upon them before daybreak,

and the weather, which was wintry and inclement, favoured his design.

The farms and country-houses of the Amphipolitans, which occupied an

extensive district on the eastern side of the city, now lay at the

mercy of Brasidas, and after choosing a position for his camp, he began

to overrun the country. For those who were responsible for the safety

of Amphipolis had taken no precautions, though they knew that this

daring and active enemy had been carrying on a campaign for many weeks

in the adjacent parts of Thrace. Consequently, a good number of the

citizens, who were attending to the business of their estates, fell

into his hands, and it is not improbable that, if he had made a sudden

assault on the city, he would have captured it on the same day.

There was a disaffected party in Amphipolis, who had planned the

betrayal of the place, acting in concert with Argilus, through the

agency of certain Argilian citizens residing in the town. The traitors

now proposed that Brasidas and his army should be admitted, but they

were overruled by the general voice of the people, and it was agreed

that the Athenian Eucles, governor of Amphipolis, should send a message

for help to another Athenian officer, who was commissioned to watch the

interests of Athens in Thrace. That officer was Thucydides, the

historian, from whose work the materials for the present narrative are

taken. Thucydides was descended on his mother's side from the royal

family of Thrace, [Footnote: Such, at least, is the highly probable

conjecture of Classen.] and through this connexion he was the owner of

valuable working rights in the gold-mines of Mount Pangaeus, and a man

of great power and, influence in these districts. When the message

arrived from Amphipolis, he was engaged in some business at Thasos, and

postponing all other concerns he collected a small squadron of seven

ships and hastened to the rescue with all speed. But Brasidas, who had

received intelligence of his movements, was too quick for him. He had

valuable hostages in the persons of those Amphipolitans who had been

taken outside the walls. The population of Amphipolis consisted almost

entirely of men of mixed or foreign descent, who were anxious about

their properties, and in fear for their friends, while the few Athenian

residents were alarmed for their own safety, having little hope of

prompt succour. Taking advantage of this state of public feeling, the

politic Spartan issued a proclamation, pledging him to respect the

rights and property of all who chose to remain; while those who

preferred to withdraw were allowed five days to take away their goods.

This tempting offer produced the desired effect. It was in vain that

the Athenian governor interposed his authority, and strove to uphold

the imperial claims of Athens. The people threatened to rise in mutiny

against him, and when the partisans of Brasidas, now grown bold, openly

moved a resolution to accept his conditions, the proposal was carried,

and the Spartan general marched unopposed into the town.

Late on the same day Thucydides sailed into the harbour of Eion, the

port of Amphipolis, and learning that Brasidas was already in

possession of the inland city, took all necessary precautions to

provide against an immediate attack. He was only just in time; for on

the very next day Brasidas carried his troops down the river on a

flotilla of boats, and tried to establish himself in a strong position,

commanding the mouth of the river, and at the same time sent a storming

party to make an assault on the land side. But the attempt was

frustrated, and Eion at least was saved to Athens.

The fall of Amphipolis, which occurred shortly after the crushing

defeat at Delium, caused great consternation among the Athenians. Apart

from the wound to their pride, they were deprived by this loss of a

large portion of their revenue, and cut off from the principal source

of their timber supply. And there were still further grounds for alarm.

For Amphipolis was now an open door, through which the Spartans could

send troops into eastern Thrace, and carry the war to the entrance of

the Euxine. For a moment it seemed as if all their fears would be

realized. The gentle manners of Brasidas--his fairness, modesty, and

strict regard for the rights of all men--had won the hearts of the

Athenian allies in Thrace, and secret agents were constantly arriving

at his head-quarters on the Strymon, inviting him to come and help them

to recover their liberty. He had skilfully appealed to the most

deeply-rooted instinct of the Greek, the desire for unfettered action

in his own city, free from all interference from outside. This

instinct, long held in abeyance, first by the necessity for protection

from Persia, and when that danger was removed, by the habits acquired

under the mild rule of Athens, was now awakened into new life by the

influence of the great warrior and accomplished statesman, whose

watchword was "Liberty for Greeks!" The recent reverses of Athens had

excited a feeling of contempt among her subjects, and led them greatly

to under-estimate her real power; and Brasidas himself, by a not

over-scrupulous perversion of facts, had been careful to encourage this

belief. All these causes produced a burst of enthusiasm throughout

Thrace, and if the Spartans had supported Brasidas with vigour, a

general insurrection would have followed among the Athenian allies. But

the authorities of Sparta were jealous of their brilliant officer, and

their chief anxiety was to recover the prisoners taken at Sphacteria.

In the same winter the indefatigable Spartan effected the capture of

Torone, a town situated on the second of the three headlands which

project, like the prongs of a fork, from the peninsula of Chalcidice.

As in the case of Amphipolis, Torone fell into his hands by treachery;

but he had now made good his title as the champion of Greek

independence, and early in the following spring the citizens of Scione,

on the first or westernmost headland, invited him to come over and take

command of their town. On receiving this welcome summons Brasidas lost

no time, and crossed over by night in a skiff, which was convoyed by a

trireme, so that if any hostile vessel appeared in sight, it might be

engaged by the trireme, and leave him free to escape. He reached Scione

in safety, and having convened a general assembly of the citizens,

addressed them in flattering terms, praising their high courage and

patriotic spirit. "You," he said, "have set a noble example to your

oppressed brethren: isolated as you are, and cut off from all succour

from the mainland, you have defied all perils, and thrown in your lot,

for better or for worse, with the friends of liberty. Your gallantry

and self-devotion has given you a just claim to the gratitude of Sparta

and of all Greece." The revolt of Scione was indeed a daring defiance

of the Athenian power, for since the capitulation of Potidaea, which

occurred seven years before, the inhabitants had been in the position

of islanders, exposed to the whole maritime power of Athens. For the

moment, however, the people were carried away by a transport of

enthusiasm, and little dreaming of the terrible vengeance which was to

overtake them two years later, they greeted Brasidas as a deliverer,

and vied with one another who should honour him most. He was publicly

presented with a crown of gold, as the liberator of Greece; and in

private houses he was wreathed with garlands, and surrounded with

worship, like a victorious athlete.

But a few days before the defection of Scione all the ambitious schemes

of Brasidas had been checkmated by the action of his own countrymen at

home. For some time past negotiations had been in progress between

Athens and Sparta; and since the battle of Delium, and the rapid

successes of their great enemy in Thrace, the Athenians had been more

disposed to come to terms. In this altered mood they agreed to make a

truce for one year with Sparta, which would give time to arrange the

conditions of a lasting peace, and leave them at leisure to repair the

shattered fabric of their empire. Two commissioners, an Athenian and a

Spartan, were at once despatched to announce the conclusion of the

truce to Brasidas. They found him at Torone, preparing to set out a

second time for the western peninsula, and continue his intrigues

against the subjects of Athens. In the interview which followed a

dispute arose between Brasidas and the commissioners, as to whether

Scione should be admitted into the truce. Brasidas asserted that the

city had joined the Spartan alliance before the truce was signed; but

the Athenian commissioner loudly protested that the revolt occurred

after the conclusion of the truce,--and such, indeed, was the fact.

Brasidas, however, was bound in honour to defend the hapless community

which had been drawn by his fatal influence into so fearful a peril;

and in the existing confusion of the Greek calendar it was not easy to

establish a date with perfect exactitude. Accordingly Brasidas refused

to surrender Scione to the vengeance of Athens, and placed the town in

a state of defence. Not content with this, he extended the same

measures of protection to Mende, which revolted after the arrival of

the commissioners. This was an open violation of the truce, and the

Athenians, in great fury, immediately prepared to send a fleet against

these audacious rebels, and passed a savage decree, condemning the

whole adult male population of Scione to death.

III

During the following summer Mende was recovered by Nicias for the

Athenians, Scione was closely invested, and Perdiccas, who had

quarrelled with Brasidas, once more became an ally of Athens, and gave

proof of his sincerity by preventing the passage of Spartan

reinforcements to Thrace. The Athenians were thus left free to turn

their attention to Amphipolis, and at the beginning of the tenth year

of the war, the truce having now expired, Cleon was sent with a fleet

of thirty ships to conduct the siege of this important place. That so

weighty a charge should have been entrusted to hands so incompetent

argues a degree of infatuation in the Athenians which is very hard to

understand. On his voyage Cleon succeeded in retaking Torone by a

sudden assault, and then proceeding northwards dropped anchor at Eion,

where he remained inactive, after despatching messengers to Perdiccas,

and to a friendly Thracian prince, to ask for reinforcements.

Meanwhile Brasidas, who some time before had returned to Amphipolis,

was waiting to strike a blow at his unwarlike enemy. His own troops,

though about equal in numbers to the force under Cleon, were far

inferior in equipment and discipline; but he counted on some incautious

movement on the part of the Athenian general, which would throw the

picked infantry of Athens into disorder, and place them at a

disadvantage. So he left Clearidas, a young Spartan, whom he had

appointed governor of Amphipolis, in charge of the garrison, and taking

with him fifteen hundred men occupied a position on the right bank of

the river, where the ground rises abruptly to a considerable height,

affording a wide view over the city to the country beyond, as far as

Eion. From this point, which is called Cerdylium, he could watch the

proceedings of the enemy, and still have ample time to rejoin Clearidas

in Amphipolis, if, as he expected, Cleon should leave his defences and

advance upon the town.

He had not long to wait. The Athenian soldiers stationed at Eion were

chafing at their inaction, and mutinous speeches were heard on all

sides. What a man was this Cleon, this cowardly braggart, under whom

they were to take the field against the most daring and skilful leader

in Greece! They had known what to expect from such a general, since the

day when they sailed for Thrace. These murmurs reached the ears of

Cleon, and he saw that something must be attempted, or his men would be

totally demoralized. So he gave the order to march, and led his troops

up the ridge of hills which slope down towards Amphipolis on the

eastern side, where the town was defended by a single line of wall,

reaching from the northern to the southern bend of the river. He was

far from supposing that anyone would come out to attack him; he only

wanted, he said, to take a good view of the place, and when his

reinforcements arrived, he would surround the city on all sides, and

carry it by assault. For his wonderful good fortune at Pylos had given

him unbounded confidence in his powers as a strategist, and he thought

that Amphipolis would prove a second Pylos, forgetting that here he had

a Brasidas to deal with, and no Demosthenes to do the work for him.

When he reached the top of the ascent, he called a halt, and took a

leisurely survey of the wide sweep of country spread below him,--to the

north, the broad, marshy waters of Lake Cercynitis, from which the

river issues just above the town,--eastwards, the towering summit of

Mount Pangaeus,--and on the other side, just beneath his feet, the

devoted city, which now seemed cowering, silent and deserted, as if

conscious of Cleon's eagle glance. The gates were closed, and not a man

was to be seen on the battlements. "What a pity," remarked Cleon, "that

we brought no siege-engines with us! We might have battered down the

wall, and marched in at once,--there is none to oppose us."

So readily did this holiday general fall into the trap which Brasidas,

with a just estimate of his capacity, had set for him. As soon as he

saw that Cleon had started from Eion, the Spartan general left his post

in Cerdylium, and led his men back into Amphipolis. Here he made such a

disposition of his forces as to give the place that peaceful and

innocent appearance which deceived Cleon's unpractised eye. Then he

took up his station with a picked troop of a hundred and fifty hoplites

at the southern gate of Amphipolis, leaving Clearidas in charge of the

main body, and awaited a favourable moment to attack.

But these preparations could not be made without exciting some

attention among the more experienced of the Athenian officers. They had

seen Brasidas entering the city, and observed him offering sacrifice,

as for battle, before the temple of Athene; and Cleon, who was

standing, lost in his contemplations, some distance in advance of his

forces, suddenly received the alarming intelligence that the enemy were

on the point of making a sally. "The whole garrison is in motion," said

the messenger, "and we have caught sight of the feet of many horses and

men under the gates: evidently they mean to attack us." Thus rudely

startled from his meditations, Cleon went to look for himself, and

seeing that the messenger had spoken the truth he gave the order for a

retreat in the direction of Eion. This movement should have begun from

the left wing, but there was some delay in executing the order, and

Cleon, who was in a great hurry to reach a place of safety, led the way

with his own division, which, being on the right, ought to have closed

the retreat. The consequence was that the whole Athenian army was

thrown into confusion, and Brasidas, who was watching from his station

at the gate, saw by the irregular motion of their spears and helmets

that all discipline was at an end. "Now is our time," he cried to his

men: "Open the gates! The day is ours." With these words he rushed out

with his troops, and fell upon the Athenian centre; and at the same

moment the main body under Clearidas poured out from the northern gate,

and attacked them in the rear.

The effect of this sudden assault was to cut the Athenian army in half:

the left wing, which was nearest to Eion, fled without striking a blow,

but the right made a vigorous resistance, though abandoned by their

cowardly general, who was cut down by a Thracian spearman as he tried

to make good his escape. A far nobler name was also added to the

death-roll of that fatal day: Brasidas, fighting at the head of his

troop, received a mortal wound, and was carried, unobserved by the

Athenians, into the city. He lived long enough to hear that his men had

gained a decisive victory, and then passed away, the purest and the

most heroic spirit among all those who played their part in this

unhappy war. After his death he received divine honours at Amphipolis,

and was worshipped as the second founder of the city.

THE HOLLOW PEACE

I

The negotiations for peace, begun in the previous year; had been

interrupted by the brilliant successes of Brasidas, and the factious

opposition of Cleon, and after their death the main obstacle to a

pacific understanding was removed. The high hopes conceived by the

Athenians after the capture of the Spartans at Pylos had been damped by

their disastrous defeat at Delium, and by the revolt of their allies in

Thrace; and, above all, they were anxious to recover Amphipolis. Still

more depressed was the temper of the Spartans. They had entered on the

war in a spirit of sanguine confidence, expecting to make an end of the

conflict by a single invasion of Attica; and now, after ten years of

fighting, their great rival remained almost untouched in the chief

sources of her power. Their coasts were exposed to continual ravage by

the Athenian fleets, and Pylos was still occupied by their bitter

enemies, the Messenians, attracting all the discontented elements in

Sparta, and keeping the Helots in a continual ferment. And finally a

hundred and twenty of their noblest citizens were immured in the

dungeons of Athens, and they were ready to make great sacrifices to

procure their release.

Accordingly, in the winter after the battle of Amphipolis, negotiations

were resumed, and early in the following spring a treaty of peace was

concluded between Athens and Sparta, on the understanding that all

places taken by force of arms should be restored, and all prisoners set

at liberty. Such was the Peace of Nicias, named after its chief

promoter, the former rival of Cleon, and now the leading politician at

Athens. It was really a private agreement between Athens and Sparta,

for the most important of the Spartan allies, who thought that their

interests were neglected, refused to sign the treaty. Alarmed by this,

the Spartans immediately concluded a second treaty with Athens, binding

both sides to mutual aid and defence, in case their territories were

attacked. The prisoners taken at Sphacteria were now restored, but

owing to the bungling of Nicias, the Athenians failed to regain

Amphipolis.

II

Six years elapsed after the conclusion of the Peace of Nicias, before

war was again openly declared; but it was a peace only in name, and was

broken by many acts of hostility on both sides. During this period the

principal states of Greece were involved in a network of political

intrigue, treaty following treaty, and alliance succeeding to alliance,

for the most part with no result. To this statement, there is, however,

one important exception. A year after the signing of the second treaty

between Athens and Sparta, a coalition was formed, including Athens,

Elis, and Mantinea, under the leadership of Argos; and in mentioning

this event we have to usher on to the stage one of the most

extraordinary characters in history. This was Alcibiades, a young

Athenian noble, endowed with every advantage of mind, person, and

fortune, whose fatal gifts, and lawless ambition, made him the evil

genius of his country. His high birth, his wealth, his wit, and his

wonderful beauty, attracted to him a host of flatterers, who fed his

vanity with soft adulation, and led him to believe that nothing was too

great for such powers as his. Like most of the brilliant young men of

his day, he attached himself for a time to the philosopher Socrates,

for whom he seems to have felt a warm admiration. But his connexion

with that great teacher and thinker, though it served to sharpen his

understanding, could not eradicate the effects of evil habit and

example. His wilful, selfish, and despotic temper soon broke loose from

that salutary restraint, and henceforth we find him pursuing a course

of action which brought ruin on his people, and on himself a traitor's

death and a dishonoured name.

Much irritation had been caused among the Athenians by the shifting and

treacherous conduct of the Spartans, who had failed to redeem their

sworn pledges, and had excited great suspicion at Athens by repeated

intrigues with Argos, and with their own offended allies of the

Peloponnesian League. Alcibiades had a private grudge against the

Spartans, to whom he had made overtures of friendship and service at

the time when the treaty was under discussion, only to be set aside as

a profligate and frivolous youth, unfit to meddle with serious matters

of state. He now placed himself at the head of the party hostile to

Sparta, and it was not long before he had an opportunity of revenging

the insult to his pride. He used all his influence to promote an

alliance with Argos, the ancient enemy and rival of Sparta in

Peloponnesus; and when envoys arrived from Sparta to remonstrate

against this proceeding, and reassure the Athenians as to their

intentions, he contrived by a masterpiece of low cunning to cover them

with shame and contempt. When the envoys were introduced to the senate

they declared that they had come with full powers to settle all

differences, and Alcibiades feared that if they made the same statement

to the general assembly of the citizens, they might induce the

Athenians to renounce their alliance with Argos. So, after the senate

had risen, he took the envoys aside, and with an air of great candour

and friendliness warned them that they must conceal the extent of their

powers when they appeared before the popular assembly. "You do not

understand," he said, "how to deal with the mob of Athens; if you show

your hand, they will force you into extravagant concessions. Leave the

matter to me, and everything will turn out as you wish."

The simple Spartans fell into the snare. They were not at all startled

by the proposal that they should eat their own words, for in dishonesty

they were not behind Alcibiades himself, though they were no match for

him in cunning. Being brought before the people, and asked whether they

had come with full powers, they answered bluntly "No!" Great was the

amazement at this flat contradiction of the avowal which they had made

before the senate, and Alcibiades, giving voice to the general

indignation, overwhelmed the astonished envoys with a torrent of

invective and abuse. The Spartans were dumb-foundered by his perfidy,

and looked helplessly at Nicias, the staunch friend and supporter of

Sparta, whom they had forsaken for this shameless young reprobate.

Nicias, who of course knew nothing of the trick, was utterly confounded

by the double-dealing of the envoys, and could do nothing to relieve

their embarrassment. The result was that the envoys were abruptly

dismissed, and after a fruitless mission of Nicias to Sparta, which

only served to lower his own reputation, the Athenians entered heart

and soul into the Argive alliance.

III

We have seen how much the credit of Sparta had been injured in the eyes

of Greece by the capture of her chosen warriors at Pylos, and by her

subsequent behaviour during the negotiations which led to the peace of

Nicias. Spartan valour was seen to be not above reproach, and the

Peloponnesian allies had still better reason to complain of the

hollowness of Spartan faith. The high reverence which had long been

attached to the name of Sparta had given place to something like

contempt, and the Eleans, who had an old grudge against her, took

advantage of this feeling to exclude her citizens from taking public

part in the Olympic festival, which was celebrated with great pomp and

splendour in the second year of the peace. And the degradation of the

proud Dorian city seemed to be complete, when a Spartan named Lichas,

who had entered for the chariot-race under another name, was driven

with blows from the racecourse. So deep was the abasement to which the

great name of Sparta had now sunk.

The Spartans saw that a vigorous effort must be made, if they would

recover their lost ascendancy; and two years later the opportunity

occurred for which they were waiting. On the northern side of the

Argolic peninsula lies the ancient city of Epidaurus, famous for its

rich vineyards, and its great temple of Asclepius, [Footnote:

Aesculapius.] the god of healing. For some time past, the Epidaurians,

who were in alliance with Sparta, had been involved in a dispute,

arising out of some obscure question of ritual, with Argos; and they

were now in sore straits, being hard pressed by the whole weight of the

Argive power, backed by the new confederacy. This was the pretext

needed by the Spartans, and mustering their whole forces they marched,

under the command of their king Agis, against Argos.

The Argives had received notice of the advance of Agis, and they

immediately marched out to meet him, wishing to engage the Spartans

before they had united with their allies from Corinth, Boeotia, and

elsewhere, who were assembling in great force at Phlius. The two armies

confronted each other for a moment at Methydrium, in Arcadia; but Agis

succeeded in avoiding an engagement, and breaking up his camp under

cover of darkness pushed on to Phlius. Thereupon the Argives, who were

accompanied by their allies from Mantinea and Elis, returned in haste

to Argos, and then, marching northwards, took up their position at

Nemea, which commanded the ordinary route from Phlius to the Argive

territory. But they were again outmanoeuvred by the skilful

dispositions of Agis. Avoiding the road by Nemea, which led through a

narrow and dangerous pass, he led his Spartans over the mountains and

descended into the plain which surrounds the city of Argos. One

contingent of his allies had orders to proceed in the same direction by

another mountain-path, while the Boeotians, who numbered no less than

ten thousand infantry, and five hundred cavalry, were directed to take

the high road by Nemea; for Agis expected that by threatening the

cultivated lands around Argos he would draw the Argives from their

position, and bring them down in haste to the defence of their estates.

The plan was completely successful. As soon as the Argives learnt that

Agis was ravaging their fields they set out with all speed towards

Argos, and finding Agis engaged in the work of pillage, they drew up

their forces, and offered battle. Their situation was in the highest

degree perilous. In front of them, cutting them off from the city of

Argos, was the flower of the Spartan army, reinforced by the troops of

Tegea and Arcadia; on their right flank the mountain slopes swarmed

with the infantry of Corinth and Phlius; and in the rear their retreat

was cut off by the thronging masses of Boeotians, who were now pouring

along the road from Nemea. They were fairly cut off, and seemed

delivered over to destruction; nevertheless, such was the presumptuous

confidence which possessed them, that they awaited eagerly the signal

for battle, crying out that they had caught the Spartans in a trap.

Fortunately for them there were two men among their leaders who took a

wiser view of the position; one of these was Alciphron, an official who

represented the interests of Sparta at Argos, [Footnote: The Greek word

is \_Proxenos\_,--a sort of consul.] and the other was Thrasyllus, one of

the five generals. These two men entered into a parley with Agis, and

by promising to satisfy the demands of Sparta induced him to grant a

truce. Agis then drew off his forces, and returned by way of Nemea to

Sparta; and the allies, much against their will, were compelled to

follow his example. Loud were the murmurs among the confederates, and

even among the Spartan soldiers, against Agis, who had thrown away this

golden opportunity of humbling the pride of Argos, and brought

dishonour on one of the finest armies that had ever been led into the

field by a Grecian general. Strange to say, the Argives were not less

indignant against the two men who had saved them from overwhelming

disaster; and Thrasyllus, the general, narrowly escaped being stoned to

death.

IV

The Argives thought themselves bound to abide by the conditions of the

truce, though made without their consent; but shortly after the retreat

of Agis, an Athenian force of a thousand hoplites and three hundred

cavalry arrived at Argos, and Alcibiades, who was present in the

character of ambassador, strongly urged the renewal of the campaign.

His proposal was warmly supported by the Mantineans and Eleans, and

they and the Athenians marched forthwith against Orchomenus in Arcadia,

which was in alliance with Sparta; and the Argives, who had wavered at

first, soon afterwards joined them. Orchomenus was gained over with

little trouble, and then the Eleans were eager to proceed against

Lepreum, a town in their alliance which had gone over to Sparta. But

the Argives, Athenians, and Mantineans, insisted on attacking Tegea,

where there was a party opposed to Sparta, by whose means they hoped to

bring this powerful city, the ancient rival of Mantinea, to their side.

Thereupon the Eleans abandoned the expedition, and went home in a rage,

but the rest of the allies took up their quarters at Mantinea, and

prepared to make an attack on Tegea.

The Spartans were in high anger against Agis for his unsoldier-like

conduct in the recent campaign, and when they heard of the capitulation

of Orchomenus their resentment rose to such a pitch that it was

proposed to inflict on him a heavy fine, and raze his house to the

ground. At his earnest entreaty they consented to reserve the sentence,

and give him an opportunity of wiping out the stain on his honour; but

as a mark of diminished confidence they appointed ten commissioners,

without whose consent he was not allowed to lead an army out of the

city.

They had just come to this decision when an urgent message arrived from

Tegea, bidding them to bring help with all speed, or the town would be

lost. The imminent peril startled the Spartans from their wonted

apathy, and they set out at once in full force to the relief of Tegea.

On reaching the borders of Arcadia they sent back the elder and younger

men, amounting to a sixth part of the army, to serve as a garrison in

Sparta; and at the same time couriers were despatched to summon their

allies in Arcadia and central Greece. The Arcadians arrived in time to

take part in the battle, but the Boeotians, Corinthians, and others,

though they hastened to obey the order, were delayed by a long and

difficult march, through the hostile territory of Argos.

Passing by Tegea, Agis entered the district of Mantinea, and having

pitched his camp began to lay waste the country. Informed of his

approach, the Argives and their allies marched out to meet him, and

choosing a position on the slope of a hill, defended in front by rugged

and broken ground, they drew up in order of battle. The Spartans,

incited, doubtless, by the example of their king, who was eager to

redeem his reputation, rushed impetuously to the assault; and they were

already within a stone's-throw of the enemy when a Spartan veteran

cried out to Agis: "Heal not ill with ill!" His meaning was that in

Argos Agis had been too cold, and now he was too hot. Agis heard the

warning voice, and his own good sense must have shown him how rashly he

was acting; accordingly, at the very moment of encounter, he gave the

word to retreat, and fell back to the neighbourhood of Tegea. At this

place there was a copious head of water, which, when properly

regulated, served to irrigate the fields of Tegea and Mantinea. The

disposal of the water-supply was a constant source of dispute between

the two rival cities; and Agis now prepared to turn the whole volume of

the fountain towards Mantinea, expecting that the Mantineans, when they

saw their fields threatened with inundation, would come down into the

plain to hinder the mischief.

The Argives and their allies were dumb-foundered by the sudden

disappearance of the Spartans; and when they had recovered from their

astonishment, they waited impatiently for the order to pursue the

runaways. As no such order was given, cries of "Treason!" arose in the

ranks, and the generals were openly accused of having sold themselves

to the enemy. The Spartans, it was asserted, had been allowed to

escape, when they were fairly caught under the walls of Argos; and now

the confederates had been betrayed a second time by their officers.

Amid the general clamour the Argive commanders stood for a moment

confounded and amazed; then recovering themselves they gave the word to

advance, and led their forces down into the plain. Here they passed the

night in the open field, and early next morning they stood to their

arms, and prepared for an immediate attack.

Agis was not aware that the Argive generals had taken up a new

position, and thinking that the confederates were still stationed on

the hill, he gave up his scheme of diverting the water, and directed

his march towards the place where he had first encamped. As they

proceeded thus in marching order, and quite unprepared for any hostile

movement, the Spartans suddenly found themselves face to face with the

whole Argive army, drawn up in order of battle. For one instant it

seemed as if a panic were about to spread through the Spartan ranks;

then their wonderful discipline prevailed, and with all promptitude,

but without flurry or confusion, the necessary orders were passed from

the King to the commanders of divisions, from these again to the

colonels, from the colonels to the captains, and from the captains down

to the sergeants, [Footnote: I have thought it best to give the English

titles, which of course have only a general correspondence with the

Greek Polemarch, Lochagus, etc.] who in their turn had to see that the

required movement was executed by the men under their command: for such

was the regular gradation of authority and responsibility in the

Spartan army. Thanks to this perfect organization, in a very few

minutes every man was in his place and ready for battle.

On the left wing of the Spartan army were posted the Sciritae, hardy

mountaineers from southern Arcadia; next to them stood the enfranchised

Helots, who had served under Brasidas in Thrace, and others of the same

race who had received the Spartan citizenship in reward for public

service; then came the main body of the Spartans themselves, and after

them the rest of the Arcadian allies; while the right wing was assigned

by immemorial privilege to the Tegeans, with whom were a few picked

Spartans. The cavalry, never a very strong part of the Spartan army,

were posted on either flank.

On the other side the Mantineans held the place of honour on the right

wing, because the engagement was fought in their territory; next in

order were the Arcadian allies of Argos, and after them, more towards

the centre, stood a picked troop of a thousand Argives, trained and

equipped at the public expense; then followed the main body of the

Argive troops, with the rest of their allies, the Athenians occupying

the extreme left. As to the numbers engaged, nothing certain is known.

Some time was lost by the Argive army in delivering the customary

harangues addressed by the generals of the several contingents to their

men, and this enabled the Spartans to steady their ranks before the

fighting began. They, on their side, men of war from their youth, had

no need of set speeches to remind them of their duty; but pithy words

of exhortation passed from man to man, and high and clear rose their

national war-songs, thrilling them with the memories of their heroic

past. Then the signal was given on both sides to charge, and the

Argives and their allies rushed impetuously to the onset, while the

Spartans advanced to meet them with even and deliberate pace, timed to

the music of numerous pipers, who were stationed at regular intervals

in their ranks.

The regular equipment of the Greek infantry soldier consisted, besides

his helmet and body-armour, of shield and lance, and in advancing to

battle he had always a tendency to diverge towards the right, from a

natural wish to keep his shielded side towards the enemy. This

divergence from the forward direction was begun by the man posted on

the extreme right; his comrade on the left followed his example, and

the deflection was continued along the whole line. The consequence was

that when two armies came into action, the left wing on either side was

greatly outflanked by the opponents' right; and the battle of Mantinea

affords no exception to this rule, for not even Spartan discipline was

able to counteract the overpowering instinct of self-preservation.

Seeing that his left wing was on the point of being outflanked by the

Mantineans, Agis signalled to the Sciritae and Brasideans to draw off

in a lateral direction towards the left, in order to present an equal

line to the right wing of the enemy. The order was executed, and to

fill up the gap thus produced on the left of his own centre, Agis

ordered the Spartan officers commanding on his right wing to bring up

their men and occupy the vacant space. They, however, flatly refused to

obey the order, and consequently the Sciritae and Brasideans were

assailed in front and on both flanks by overwhelming numbers, and

driven back with great loss to their camp.

So completely were the Spartans out-manoeuvred and worsted in tactics,

through the blunders of their general, and the cowardice of his

subordinates. But in this terrible crisis they showed what native

valour, aided by life-long discipline, can do. Leaving a victorious

enemy in their rear, they advanced without flinching against the

opposing centre, where the main body of the Argives were posted, with

the troops of Orneae and Cleonaea supporting them on the left. Then it

was seen that neither the courage of the Spartans, nor the terror of

their name, had diminished with the lapse of time; for when the

confederate troops found themselves face to face with the renowned

warrior of the Eurotas, they turned and fled, almost without striking a

blow, and trampling their comrades under foot, in their haste to avoid

the thrust of the Spartan lances. The Athenians on the left wing were

now in great danger; for the charge of the troops of Agis had cut them

off from the centre, and they were attacked on the other flank by the

Tegeans and Spartans. They were saved from immediate destruction by the

exertions of their own cavalry, and presently found themselves at

liberty to retire from the field; for Agis, having completed the rout

of the main body, called off his men, and went to the relief of his own

left. The Mantineans and the Argive Thousand made no effort to retrieve

the fortunes of the day, but gave way before the first onset of the

Spartans, and joined the flight of their comrades. The Mantineans

suffered severely in their retreat, but of the Argives only a few were

slain.

Such was the battle of Mantinea, which completely restored the military

fame of the Spartans, and blotted out the reproach of cowardice and

sloth which for some years past had rested on their name.

VI

One incident remains to be recorded, before we proceed to the crowning

catastrophe of our great historical drama. The Athenians, it should be

observed, were still nominally at peace with Sparta, and if they had

been wise they would have taken the opportunity of this respite from

hostilities to recover Amphipolis, and consolidate their empire in

Thrace. Instead of this, they looked around for fresh conquests, and

fixed their eyes on the little island of Melos, belonging to the Cyclad

group, which had been colonized in very early times from Sparta.

The Melians had not joined the Confederacy of Delos, and they might

therefore be reproached for sharing the protection of Athens without

making any return. Beyond this the Athenians had no ground of complaint

against them, for they had taken no part in the Peloponnesian War, but

had remained quietly at home, occupied with their own affairs. But

Athens claimed the haughty title of mistress of the sea, and pretended

to regard the neutrality of one insignificant island as an open

defiance of her power. Ten years before an Athenian fleet had been sent

under Nicias to reduce the refractory Melians to subjection; but the

attempt was unsuccessful, and Nicias withdrew, after having ravaged the

outlying districts. Being now more at leisure, the Athenians resolved,

in the mere wantonness of power, that Melos should only be suffered to

exist as a dependency of Athens, and thirty triremes sailed from the

harbour of Peiraeus to carry out the arbitrary decree.

On their arrival at Melos the Athenian admirals sent envoys into the

town, to summon the inhabitants to surrender. The envoys were invited

to a private conference with the chief men of the island; and between

the representatives of Athens and the Melian nobles there ensued an

extraordinary dialogue, which is given at great length by the

historian, and is commonly known as the Melian Debate. We cannot

suppose that the arguments here placed by Thucydides in the mouth of

the Athenian speaker were really uttered as set down by that writer.

Such a paradox of iniquity, such a shameless insult to the general

conscience of humanity, might have been employed by Plato, in exposing

the vicious teaching of the Sophists, or by Aristophanes in the full

riot of his satire: but the total abnegation of principle here implied

could never have been openly avowed by a responsible agent, speaking

for the most polished community in Greece. Even the worst criminals

seek to give some specious colour to their villainy; and the condemned

felon, who will face death without a tremor, shudders at the cry of

execration which greets his appearance at the scaffold. So hard it is,

even for the most depraved, to stifle the last embers of the moral

sense. We cannot suppose, then, that an educated Athenian of the fifth

century would publicly have claimed for his state the right of rapine

and murder. For this is the line of argument pursued by the

representative of Athens in the Melian Debate. The substance of what he

says may briefly be stated as follows "You are weak--we are strong;

Melos is a paltry island, Athens is queen of the Aegaean, and the

existence of an independent city in these waters is an insult to her

empire. Let us waste no time in discussions about abstract law and

right. For the mighty there is but one law--to get what they can, and

to keep it; and the weak have no rights, except by the sufferance of

the strong. This rule of conduct we know to be universal among men, and

we believe that the gods themselves are governed by it. [1] To sum up

the whole case in one word: you must yield or perish."

[1]

Desire of power, on earth a vicious weed,

Yet sprung from high, is of celestial seed;

In God 'tis glory; and when men aspire,

'Tis but a spark too much of heavenly fire.--DRYDEN.

It was in vain that the unhappy Melians tried to argue the question

from a higher standpoint; in vain they warned the Athenians that they

themselves might one day stand before the bar of justice, and plead for

their existence. They were brought back relentlessly to the grim

alternative-submission, or extermination. At length this strange

controversy came to an end, and after one final hint, of fearful

significance, the Athenian envoys withdrew, leaving the Melians to

consider their answer. The brave islanders were not long in coming to

their decision: they would not, they said, consent to enslave a city

which had maintained its liberty for seven hundred years; they put

their trust in divine justice, and in their kinsmen the Spartans, and

were resolved to resist to the last.

On receiving this answer the Athenian commanders at once laid siege to

Melos, and the doomed city was soon closely blockaded by sea and land.

The Melians made a gallant defence, and twice succeeded in breaking

through the lines of the besiegers, and conveying supplies into the

town. But presently reinforcements arrived from Athens, and the Melians

were confined within their walls. All hope of succour from Sparta had

vanished, food began to fail, and treason was at work among the

garrison. Thus driven to extremity, the Melians surrendered at

discretion. Then the Athenians showed that their threats had not been

idly uttered. All the men of military age in Melos were put to death,

the women and children were sold into slavery, and the land was

distributed among Athenian settlers.

In the fifth year of the war, after the capitulation of Mytilene, a

thousand of the inhabitants had been butchered in cold blood; and this

sentence, which seems so cruel to us, was regarded by the Athenians as

an act of mercy. Six years later, the decree which had originally been

passed against Mytilene, was actually executed on Scione, which had

revolted at the instigation of Brasidas. In this act of savage

retribution, Athens still remained within the limits of Greek

international law, which placed the inhabitants of a revolted city at

the mercy of their conquerors. But the case of Melos was different, for

that island had never been included in the Athenian alliance, and the

Melians had done nothing to provoke an attack. Thus the three names,

Mytilene, Scione, and Melos, mark an ascending scale of barbarity,

culminating in a massacre which, even in the eyes of Greeks, was an

atrocious crime. Athens had now offended beyond forgiveness, giving

colour to the accusations of her worst enemies, and heaping up

vengeance for the days to come.

THE ATHENIANS IN SICILY

I

The Peloponnesian War may be conveniently divided into four chief

periods. The first of these periods lasted for ten years, down to the

peace of Nicias. The second extends from the peace of Nicias to the

massacre of Melos. In the third, the scene of war was shifted from

Greece to Sicily, and it was there that the Athenian power really

received its death-blow. The fourth and final period begins after the

overthrow of the Athenians at Syracuse, and ends, nine years

afterwards, with their final defeat at Aegospotami, and the downfall of

the Athenian empire.

It is the third of these periods which will occupy our attention for

the remainder of the present volume, and as the momentous events which

we have to relate occurred entirely in Sicily, it is necessary to say

something of the previous history of that great island. The connexion

of the Greeks with Sicily begins in the latter half of the eighth

century before Christ, when settlers from Chalcis in Euboea founded the

city of Naxos on the north-eastern coast, under the shadow of Aetna.

Naxos in its turn sent out colonists, who built the cities of Leontini

and Catana, the former on an inland site, commanding the great plain

which extends southwards from Aetna, the latter on the coast, in a line

with the centre of the same plain. These were Ionic colonies, and we

may close the list with the name of Messene [Footnote: Originally

called Zancle.] founded twenty years later on the Sicilian side of the

strait which bears its name.

We have now to enumerate the principal Dorian cities. First among these

in time, and by far the first in importance, was Syracuse, founded from

Corinth a year after the settlement of Naxos. Between Syracuse and the

mother-city there was a close and intimate tie of friendship, which

remained unbroken throughout the course of Greek history. The original

city was built on the island of Ortygia, but a new town afterwards

arose on the low-lying coast of the mainland, and spread northwards

till it covered the eastern part of the neighbouring heights. Ortygia

was then converted into a peninsula by the construction of a causeway,

connecting the new city with the old. Under the despotism of Gelo, who

made himself master of the city in the early part of the fifth century,

[Footnote: 485 B.C.] Syracuse rose to great power and splendour, and

her territory extended over a great part of eastern Sicily. Gelo gained

immortal renown by defeating a mighty host of Carthaginians, who

invaded Sicily at the time when the confederate cities of old Greece

were fighting for their existence against Xerxes and his great armada.

After his death the power passed to his brother Hiero, whose victories

in the Olympian and Pythian Games are commemorated in the Odes of

Pindar. Hiero reigned for twelve years, and was succeeded by his

brother Thrasybulus; but a year later the despotism was overthrown, and

the government returned to a democracy.

A bare mention must suffice for Gela, founded from Rhodes and Crete

nearly half a century after Syracuse, and the more famous Agrigentum, a

colony from Gela, and next to Syracuse the greatest city in Sicily.

These played no part in the struggle with Athens; but Selinus and

Camarina, the two remaining Dorian cities of southern Sicily, will

occupy an important place in the following narrative.

Thus the whole coast districts on southern and eastern Sicily were held

by opulent and flourishing Greek cities. On the north was Himera, an

Ionic colony, and the scene of Gelo's great victory over Carthage;

while the western and north-western district was divided between the

Phoenicians and the Elymi, a people of unknown origin, whose chief

seats were at Eryx and Egesta. The inland parts were held, in the west,

by the Sicans, who are believed to have come from Spain, and in the

east by the Sicels, a people of Latin race, who gave their name to the

island.

II

Since the fourth year of the Peloponnesian War, Athens had been

meddling in the affairs of Sicily, under pretence of aiding the Ionian

cities, who dreaded the encroaching ambition of Syracuse. That these

fears were not unfounded was proved when, a few years afterwards, the

Syracusans expelled the commons of Leontini, and took possession of

their territory. The Leontine exiles sought refuge at Athens, but their

appeal for help remained for a time unanswered, as the Athenians were

then fully occupied in Greece. But six years after the conclusion of

the Peace of Nicias, an appeal came to Athens from a remote corner of

Sicily, which stimulated the Leontine exiles to fresh efforts, and led

to most important results.

Between the Greeks of Selinus and the Elymians of Egesta there was a

long-standing quarrel, and in a war which had recently broken out the

Egestaeans were reduced to severe straits by the combined forces of

Selinus and Syracuse. In their distress they turned to Athens for help,

and envoys were sent to plead their cause before the Athenian assembly.

In aiding Egesta, argued the envoys, Athens would be serving her own

interests; for if the Syracusans were not speedily checked in their

aggressions, they would soon make themselves masters of the whole of

Sicily, and in that case they could bring such an accession of strength

to the enemies of Athens in Greece as to make them irresistible. They

had good reason, therefore, to take sides against the enemies of

Egesta, and the more so as the Egestaeans promised to defray all the

expenses of the war.

The Athenians generally were inclined to take up the quarrel of Egesta,

but as a measure of precaution it was decided to send agents of their

own to make an inspection on the spot, and see whether the Egestaeans

were as wealthy as they pretended. On their return to Athens these men

reported that Egesta was possessed of fabulous riches. At every house

where they had been entertained, the tables and the sideboards had been

one blaze of gold and silver plate. The fact was that the Egestaeans

had collected all the gold and silver vessels in the town, and others

borrowed from the neighbouring cities, and by passing them on from

house to house, wherever these important guests were invited, had

contrived to make a great display. As an earnest of all this wealth,

the Athenian commissioners brought back with them sixty talents of

silver.

The smallness of this sum ought to have been sufficient to arouse the

suspicions of the Athenians; but they were willing to be deceived, and

they gave ready credence to reports of their commissioners. Voting in

full assembly, they passed a decree that sixty ships should be sent to

Sicily, under the command of Nicias, Alcibiades, and Lamachus. The

fleet was first to be employed in helping Egesta, and when that contest

had been brought to a successful issue the Leontines were to be

restored to their homes; finally, the generals were empowered to act as

might seem best in the interests of Athens. The real purpose of the

enterprise is indicated in the last clause. Vague plans of conquest

were floating before the minds of the Athenians, and at a time when

their whole energies should have been employed to repair the breaches

in their empire, they dreamed of founding a new dominion in the west.

Five days later the assembly met again to vote supplies and discuss any

further details which remained to be settled. But Nicias determined to

take the opportunity of reopening the whole question, wishing, if

possible, to divert his countrymen from their purpose, and put an end

to the expedition altogether. It was folly, he argued, to take up the

cause of needy foreigners, and drain the resources of Athens for a

distant and hazardous enterprise, when their subjects in Thrace were

still in open revolt, and their enemies in Greece were on the watch to

take them at a disadvantage. If they trusted in the treaty with Sparta,

they would soon find how infirm was the ground of their confidence.

That treaty had been forced upon the Spartans by their misfortunes, and

they would be only too glad to repudiate it, which they could easily

do, as many of the conditions were still under dispute. Moreover, the

most powerful cities of the Peloponnesian League had refused to sign

the treaty, and were ready, at the first hint from Sparta, to renew the

war. Athens was beset with perils, which were enough to tax her

strength to the utmost: and yet they talked of sailing to Sicily, and

raising up a new host of enemies against her! Even if the expedition

succeeded, they could never keep their hold on that vast and populous

island, while, if it failed, they would be utterly ruined. As to the

supposed danger from the ambition of Syracuse, that was mere idle talk.

The schemes of conquest, with which the Egestaeans had tried to alarm

the Athenians, would keep the Syracusans busy at home, and prevent them

from meddling in the affairs of Greece. "Leave the Greeks of Sicily

alone," said Nicias with true prophetic insight; "and they will not

trouble you. Do not disturb the prestige which belongs to a distant and

unfamiliar power. If they once learn to know you, they may learn to

despise you."

Then fixing his eyes on Alcibiades, who was sitting surrounded by his

own partisans, young profligates like himself, Nicias concluded thus:

"There is another danger against which I would warn you, men of

Athens--the danger of being led astray by the wild eloquence of

unscrupulous politicians, who seek to dazzle you with visions of new

empire, that they may rise to high command, and restore their own

shattered fortunes. Yes, Athens is to pour out her blood and treasure,

to provide young spendthrifts with the means of filling their

racing-stables! Against the mad counsels of these desperate men I

invoke the mature prudence of the elder members of this assembly, and

call upon them to show by a unanimous vote that neither flattery nor

taunts can induce them to sacrifice the true interests of Athens."

It must have been a severe ordeal for the young Alcibiades to sit and

listen to this keen and bitter invective, which set in a glaring light

the worst features in his character--his selfish ambition, his

shameless life, his total want of principle, his vulgar ostentation.

The last quality, so alien from the best traditions of Athenian

character, had been conspicuously displayed only a few weeks before at

the Olympic festival, where he had entered seven four-horsed cars for

the chariot-race, and won the first, second, and fourth prizes. Every

word of Nicias went home, galling him in his sorest point--his

outrageous vanity; and hardly had the elder statesman concluded his

speech, when he sprang to his feet, and burst without preface into a

wild harangue, which is a remarkable piece of self-revelation,

disclosing with perfect candour the inner motives of the man on whom,

more than on any other, the future of Athens depended. He began by

defending his barbaric extravagance, recently displayed at Olympia,

which, as he pretended to believe, had covered his native city with

glory, and spread the fame of Athenian wealth and power from one end of

Greece to another. The lavish outlay, and haughty demeanour, which

would be justly blamed in a common man, were right and proper in him,

one of the elect spirits of the time, inspired with great aims, and

treading the summits of public life. He had already shown what he could

do in the highest regions of diplomacy, by raising a great coalition in

Peloponnesus, which had faced the whole might of Sparta in the field,

and struck terror into the enemies of Athens.

After this impudent defence of his own pernicious policy, which had led

to the crushing defeat at Mantinea, and thus enabled the Spartans to

restore their damaged reputation, Alcibiades proceeded to deal with the

question of the day, and exerted all his sophistry to confirm the

Athenians in their design of invading Sicily. That island, he asserted,

was inhabited by a mixed population with no settled homes, and no

common patriotic sentiment; and among these motley elements they would

find plenty of adherents. The Siceliots [Footnote: Greeks of Sicily.]

were poorly armed, ill-furnished with heavy infantry, and in constant

danger from the hostile Sicels. The risk of attack from the

Peloponnesians would not be increased by sending part of the Athenian

fleet to Sicily: for Attica was in any case always exposed to invasion,

and a sufficient force of ships would be left at home to keep command

of the sea.

"We have no excuse, then," said Alcibiades in conclusion, "for breaking

our word to the Egestaeans, and drawing back from this enterprise. Both

honour and policy are pointing the way to Sicily. An empire like ours

is an ever-expanding circle, which lives by growing, and cannot stand

still. It is only by getting more, and always more, that we can keep

what we have. And let not Nicias succeed in his attempt to set the old

against the young, neither let us believe, like him, that the stability

of a state consists in stagnation. It is only by a hearty co-operation

of all ages and classes that any state can prosper, and a community

which finds no outlet for its energies abroad is soon worn out by

discord and faction at home. Above all is this true of us Athenians, to

whom ceaseless toil and endeavour is the very element in which we live."

The advice of Alcibiades, thus tendered in the garb of political

wisdom, was of fatal and ruinous tendency, and in direct opposition to

the oft-repeated warnings of Pericles. But his speech was exactly

suited to the temper of his audience, and most of those who followed

him spoke to the same effect, and when the Egestaeans and Leontines

renewed their entreaties it became evident that the original motion

would be confirmed by a large majority. Nicias, however, resolved to

make one more effort, and he came forward to speak again, hoping by a

new device to check the torrent of popular enthusiasm. Affecting to

regard the matter as settled, he entered into an estimate of the force

required for the proposed expedition, prefaced by an alarming picture

of the wealth and power of the Sicilian Greeks. To act with effect

against such an enemy, they must send, not only an overwhelming naval

force, but a numerous body of troops, both cavalry and infantry, and a

fleet laden with supplies for many months. They must proceed, in fact,

as if they were founding a great city on a hostile soil. On no other

condition, added Nicias, would he undertake the command. Nicias had

intended, by exaggerating the difficulties of the undertaking, to damp

the ardour of the Athenians; but to his utter dismay, these timid

counsels were greeted with a great shout of applause. It was supposed

that he had changed his opinion, and even the elder men began to think

that so prudent a leader, backed by such an armament, could not fail of

success. A great wave of excitement swept over the assembly, and the

few who still doubted were cowed into silence. When the tumult had

subsided, a certain Demostratus, [Footnote: The name is given by

Plutarch.] who had spoken strongly in favour of the expedition,

addressing Nicias in the name of the assembly, asked him to state

plainly what force he required. Thus driven into a corner, Nicias

answered, with great reluctance, that the number of triremes must be

not less than one hundred, with five thousand heavy-armed infantry, and

slingers and bow-men in proportion. This enormous estimate was carried

without demur, and by the same vote full powers were conferred on the

generals to fix the scale of the armament as they might think best for

the interests of Athens.

Thus, by a strange freak of fortune, the Athenians, at the most

momentous crisis of their history, were urged along the road to ruin by

the most opposite qualities in their leaders, the cold caution of

Nicias, and the wild energy of Alcibiades.

III

During the whole of the following spring [Footnote: B.C. 415.]

preparations for the invasion of Sicily were actively pushed on, and

the whole city was in a bustle and stir of excitement. Athens had

recently recovered from the ravages of the plague, and six years of

peace had recruited her resources, both in men and money. Since the

first outbreak of the war a new generation had grown up, and these

young and untried spirits joined, with all the fire of youth, in an

enterprise which promised them a boundless field of adventure. Others

were attracted by the baser motive of gain, or by mere curiosity, and

the love of travel. No thought of danger or hardship, no hint of

possible failure, clouded the brilliant prospect; it was a gay holiday

excursion, and at the same time a grand scheme of conquest, offering

fame to the ambitious, wealth to the needy, and pleasant recreation to

all. Thousands flocked eagerly to enter their names for the service,

and the only trouble of the recruiting officers was in choosing the

stoutest and the best.

The great armament was on the eve of departure, and all hearts were

full of joyful anticipation, when an event occurred which suddenly

chilled this happy mood, and cast a shadow of evil augury on the whole

undertaking. The Athenians of that age, like their descendants nearly

five centuries later, [Footnote: See Acts xvii. 22.] were "more

god-fearing than other men." They worshipped a multitude of divinities,

and their city was thronged with the temples and statues of heroes and

gods. Conspicuous among the objects of popular adoration was the god

Hermes, who is exhibited by ancient poets and artists as a gracious and

lovely youth, the special patron of eloquence and wit, the guardian

spirit of travellers and merchants, and the giver of good luck. A

familiar feature in the streets and public places of Athens was the

bust of Hermes, surmounting a quadrangular stone pillar. Many hundreds

of these pillars, which were called Hermae, were scattered about over

the whole city, standing before the doors of houses and temples, at

cross-ways and places of public resort. Wherever he went, whatever he

did, the Athenian felt himself to be in the presence of this genial and

friendly power, who attended him, with more than human sympathy, in all

his ways.

If such were the feelings of the Athenians towards their favourite

deity, what must have been their horror when they awoke one morning to

find that all the busts of Hermes, with one or two exceptions, were

shattered and mutilated beyond all recognition. The whole population

was thunderstruck, and wild rumours ran from mouth to mouth concerning

the perpetrators and the motive of this shocking outrage. It was

evident that many hands must have been employed on the work of

destruction, and those who had so foully insulted the most hallowed

affections of their fellow-citizens were believed to be capable of any

enormity. It was loudly asserted that a black conspiracy was hatching

against the liberties of the people, and that the worst days of the

tyranny were about to be revived. For in those days religion and

politics were associated with a closeness of intimacy unknown in modern

Europe, and sacrilege might well be regarded as a prelude to treason.

Active measures were at once taken to bring the offenders to justice,

and great rewards were offered to anyone, whether citizen, slave, or

resident foreigner, who gave information concerning this or any similar

crime. At first nothing was disclosed as to the mutilation of the

Hermae, but other recent acts of profanation were brought to light, and

among these was mentioned a derisive parody of the great Eleusinian

Mysteries, alleged to have been performed in the house of Alcibiades,

and elsewhere. The enemies of Alcibiades, who were both numerous and

powerful, eagerly seized this handle against him; but when the matter

was debated in the public assembly, it became evident that, if he were

brought to trial at once, his present popularity, as chief promoter of

the Sicilian expedition, would ensure his acquittal. Seeing, therefore,

that their attack had been premature, those who had led the outcry

against him now drew back, reserving themselves for a more favourable

occasion. Being known as the bitter opponents of Alcibiades, they could

not, without exciting grave suspicions, propose the adjournment of his

trial; but other speakers, prompted by them, urged on grounds of public

expediency that the charges against him should be held in suspense, so

as not to delay the departure of the fleet. Alcibiades saw plainly that

this manoeuvre was contrived to get him out of the way, to remove his

adherents from Athens, and leave his enemies free to pursue their

machinations during his absence. But it was in vain that he exposed the

malicious motives of the last speakers, and pleaded earnestly for an

immediate trial. The Athenians were still possessed by their daring

scheme of conquest, and they decreed that Alcibiades should keep his

command, and sail at once to Sicily.

IV

At last the great day arrived, and in the first light of a mid-summer

dawn, a vast multitude was seen pouring along the broad highway which

led, between the Long Walls, from Athens to Peiraeus. The Upper City

was almost deserted by its inhabitants, for there was hardly one

Athenian who had not some cherished comrade, or some near relation,

enrolled for service in Sicily, and the crowd was swelled by thousands

of strangers, who came as spectators of that memorable scene. Little

now appeared of that sanguine and joyous temper which had prevailed

among the Athenians when they first voted for the expedition. Their

feelings had lately been fearfully harrowed by the mutilation of the

Hermae, and now that the moment of parting was at hand, all the perils

and uncertainties of their grand enterprise rose up vividly before

them. They were restored, however, to some degree of cheerfulness, when

they reached the harbour of Peiraeus, and saw the magnificent fleet

riding at anchor. Nearly all the vessels lying in the bay were

Athenian; for the main body of the allies, and the commissariat ships,

had been ordered to muster at Corcyra. The triremes furnished by Athens

numbered a hundred, of which sixty were fully equipped as war-galleys,

while forty were employed as transports. These numbers had been

equalled more than once before during the war; but in efficiency, in

splendour of appearance, and in the quality of the crews, this was by

far the finest fleet that ever sailed from Peiraeus. Only the bare

hulls of the ships were provided by the state, and each vessel was

assigned to some wealthy citizen, who defrayed all the expense of

fitting her for active service. Sometimes the cost of equipping a ship

was divided between two or more citizens, and at ordinary times this

form of taxation must have been felt by the rich as a heavy burden. But

such was the popularity of the Sicilian expedition that the wealthy

Athenians who were charged with this duty went far beyond what was

required of them, each striving to surpass the others by the superior

beauty and speed of his own ship. The crews were all composed of picked

men, attracted by the double rate of pay which was furnished from the

state exchequer; and in addition to this, the trierarchs [Footnote:

Citizens charged with the duty of equipping a trireme.] paid special

premiums to the petty officers and to the highest class of rowers. The

same spirit of emulation extended to the whole body of Athenians

enrolled in the army and fleet; every man felt that whatever he spent

on his own personal equipment was spent for the honour and glory of

Athens. And the effect produced on the public mind in Greece was, in

fact, prodigious: after all the ravages of the plague, and ten years of

exhausting warfare, Athens, it seemed, was stronger than ever, and in

the mere exuberance of energy was making this imposing display of

wealth and power. As to the ostensible object of the expedition--the

conquest of Sicily--few doubted that it must follow as a matter of

course.

The last farewell had been spoken, the troops were all embarked, and

the rowers sat ready at their oars. The trumpet sounded, commanding

silence, and the voice of the herald was heard, repeating a solemn

prayer, which was taken up by the whole multitude on sea and on shore,

while the captains and soldiers poured libations of wine from goblets

of silver and gold. When this act of worship was ended, the crews

raised the paean, and at a given signal the whole fleet was set in

motion, and passed, in single file, out of the harbour. On reaching the

open water, they quitted this order, and engaged in a friendly contest

of speed as far as Aegina. Then the crews settled down to their work,

and the great armament swept on, high in heart and hope, to join the

allied contingents, and commissariat fleet, now assembled at Corcyra.

As yet only general rumours of the intended invasion had reached

Syracuse, and few of the citizens were aware of the imminent peril in

which they stood. Among those who were better informed was Hermocrates,

a Syracusan of high rank, who for many years had been the guiding

spirit in Sicilian politics. Speaking at a public assembly, about the

time when the Athenian fleet sailed from Peiraeus, he urged the

necessity of taking prompt measures for placing the city in a thorough

state of defence. He had no fear, he said, of the ultimate triumph of

Syracuse in the approaching struggle: only let them be on their guard,

and not underrate the power of the enemy whom they would have to face.

The words of Hermocrates, who enjoyed a high reputation for valour,

patriotism, and sagacity, were not without their effect, and it was

resolved that the generals should at once set about organizing the

military resources of Syracuse, and providing all things necessary for

the public safety. Some steps in this direction they had already taken;

and tidings soon arrived at Syracuse which caused them to redouble

their exertions.

For in the meantime the Athenians had reached Corcyra, where they held

a final review of all their forces. The total number of the triremes

was a hundred and thirty-four, and with these sailed a vast fleet of

merchant ships, and smaller craft, laden with stores of all kinds, and

carrying a whole army of bakers, masons, and carpenters, with the tools

of their crafts, and all the engines required for a siege. Besides

these, there was a great number of other vessels, small and great,

fitted out by private speculators for purposes of trade. The military

force was on a corresponding scale, comprising five thousand, one

hundred hoplites, of whom fifteen hundred were full Athenian citizens,

four hundred and eighty archers, seven hundred slingers from Rhodes,

and a hundred and twenty exiles from Megara, equipped as light-armed

troops. The force of cavalry was but small, being conveyed in a single

transport.

The whole armament now weighed anchor from Corcyra and sailed in three

divisions, each commanded by one of the generals, to the opposite coast

of Italy. On arriving at Rhegium, an Ionic city on the Italian side of

the strait, they received permission to beach their ships, and form a

camp outside the walls; and here they waited for the return of three

fast-sailing triremes, which had been sent forward from Corcyrato carry

the news of their approach to Egesta, and claim the promised subsidy,

and at the same time to sound the temper of the Greek cities in Sicily.

Before long the ships came back with their report, and the Athenians

now learned to their great chagrin that all the fabled wealth of Egesta

had dwindled to the paltry sum of thirty talents.

The three generals now held a council of war, to decide on a plan of

campaign. It was evident that no help was to be obtained from Egesta,

and the attitude of the Rhegini, who declined to enter their alliance,

boded ill for the success of the expedition. As their prospects were so

discouraging, Nicias proposed to confine their operations within the

narrowest limits, to patch up a peace between Selinus and Egesta, to

aid the Leontines, if it could be done without risk or expense, and

after making a display of the Athenian power, to sail home to Athens.

Alcibiades protested strongly against such a course, as disgraceful to

Athens, and unworthy of the splendid armament entrusted to their

command. Let them try first what could be effected by negotiation with

the Greek cities and native tribes of Sicily, and after gaining as many

allies as possible in the island, let them proceed to the attack of

Selinus and Syracuse. Lamachus, on the other hand, a plain, downright

soldier, was for sailing straight to Syracuse, and striking immediately

at the heart of Sicily. The city, he argued, would be found unprepared,

and if they acted at once, in the first terror of their presence, they

were certain of victory; but if they waited, their men would lose

heart, the efficiency of the fleet would be impaired, and the

Syracusans would gather strength and courage from the delay.

How true was the forecast of Lamachus was proved by the event; but his

bold plan was distasteful alike to the timid temper of Nicias, and to

the tortuous, intriguing spirit of Alcibiades. Finding, therefore, that

he had no hope of convincing his colleagues, he voted for the middle

course, and accordingly the plan of Alcibiades, unquestionably the

worst of the three, was adopted.

In pursuance of this fatal policy Alcibiades crossed over to Messene,

and tried to win over that city to the side of Athens. Meeting with no

success, he returned to Rhegium, and immediately afterwards he and one

of his colleagues sailed with a force of sixty triremes to Naxos. Here

the Athenians found a hearty welcome, but at Catana, which was then

under the influence of Syracuse, their overtures were rejected, so they

continued their voyage southwards, and made their camp for the night at

the mouth of the river Terias. Starting early next day, they proceeded

along the coast, and, crossing the bay of Thapsus, came in sight, for

the first time, of their great enemy, Syracuse. The main body of the

fleet remained in the offing, but ten triremes were sent forward to

reconnoitre the Great Harbour, and get a nearer view of the

fortifications. When the little squadron came within hearing of the

walls, a herald proclaimed in a loud voice that any of the Leontines

now present in Syracuse should leave the city without fear, and come

over to their faithful kinsmen and allies, the Athenians. After this

futile demonstration, better calculated; to excite laughter than

terror, the reconnoitring triremes withdrew, and the whole fleet sailed

back in the direction of Rhegium. On their return voyage the Athenians

succeeded, by a lucky accident, in gaining the adherence of Catana,

which henceforth became the head-quarters of the whole armament. Soon

after they had effected this important change of station the Salaminian

state trireme arrived with momentous news from Athens. We have seen

what a panic of superstitious fear had been caused among the Athenians

by the mutilation of the Hermae. Arrested for the moment by the

all-absorbing interest of the Sicilian expedition, the excitement broke

out with renewed violence after the departure of the fleet. The enemies

of Alcibiades saw that the time was now ripe for bringing up against

him the charge of violating the mysteries, and pressing for a judgment.

A formal indictment was laid before the senate, and it was decided that

he should come home and stand his trial. But it was necessary to

proceed with caution, for Alcibiades was popular with the troops

serving in Sicily; and it was possible that, if any violence were

attempted against his person, they might break out into mutiny.

Accordingly the captain of the Salaminian trireme was instructed to

treat him with all respect, and allow him to return to Athens in his

own vessel. On receiving the summons Alcibiades affected to obey, and

set sail from Catana, with the state trireme in attendance. The two

ships remained in company as far as Thurii, a Greek town of southern

Italy, but there the great criminal disappeared, and after searching

for him in vain the officers of the Salaminia were obliged to return to

Athens without him. When the news of his flight was brought to Athens,

he was arraigned in his absence, and condemned to death. But if his

enemies supposed that they had heard the last of Alcibiades, they soon

learnt how deeply they were mistaken.

V

The conduct of the campaign in Sicily was thus left in the feeble hands

of Nicias; for though Lamachus nominally held an equal command, his

poverty and political insignificance prevented him from holding the

position to which his military talents entitled him. The few remaining

weeks of summer were frittered away in trivial operations on the

western coasts of the island, and then the Athenians withdrew into

winter quarters at Catana. The predictions of Lamachus now began to be

fulfilled: seeing that Nicias, with the vast force at his disposal,

attempted nothing against them, the Syracusans began to despise their

enemy, and thought of taking the offensive. Horsemen from Syracuse rode

repeatedly up to the Athenian outposts at Catana, and tauntingly

inquired if the Athenians had come to found a colony in Sicily. At last

even Nicias felt that some display of activity was necessary to save

himself from contempt. He had learnt from certain Syracusan exiles that

there was a convenient place for landing troops, on the low-lying shore

where the river Anapus flows into the Great Harbour. Here he determined

to make a sudden descent, and in order to avoid disembarking in the

face of an enemy, he contrived a stratagem to remove the whole

Syracusan force out of reach. A citizen of Catana, who was attached to

the Athenian interest, was sent with a message to the Syracusan

generals, which held out a tempting prospect of gaining an easy and

decisive advantage over the Athenian army. Professing to come from the

partisans of Syracuse still remaining in Catana, he promised on their

behalf that if the Syracusans made a sudden assault on the Athenian

camp, their friends in Catana would simultaneously fall upon the

Athenian troops, who were in the habit of deserting their quarters and

straggling about the town, and set fire to their ships.

This plausible story found ready credence with the Syracusan generals,

and they named a day on which they promised to appear in full force

before the walls of Catana. When the time appointed drew near, they

marched out with the whole Syracusan army, leaving the city to be

garrisoned by their allies, and took up a position within easy reach of

Catana. Thereupon Nicias, who was fully informed of their movements,

embarked his troops by night, sailed down the coast past Syracuse, and

entering the Great Harbour, came to land near the outlying suburb of

Polichne, where stood the great temple of the Olympian Zeus. Here he

planted a breastwork of palisades to defend his ships, and drew up his

army on ground which offered many obstacles to the advance of the

Syracusan cavalry. Then, having broken down the bridge over the Anapus,

he waited for the enemy to appear.

Meanwhile the Syracusan generals had marched upon Catana, and finding

that they had been duped, returned with all speed to the defence of

their own city. After a long and fatiguing march, they came in view of

the Athenian position, and drew up their forces for battle. But Nicias

declined the challenge, and the day being now far advanced, they fell

back and encamped for the night in the open field.

Next morning Nicias, acting with unusual vigour, drew up his army in

two equal divisions, and leaving one half to defend the camp, and act

as a reserve, with the other he advanced rapidly upon the enemy. The

Syracusans, who had perhaps reckoned too much on the known indolence of

Nicias, were taken by surprise. Their discipline was lax, and many of

them had left their posts, and gone off into the town. Nevertheless,

they met the attack with firmness: those who were on the spot hastened

to assume their weapons, which they had laid aside, while the

stragglers came running back, and took their stand wherever they saw a

gap in the ranks. After some preliminary skirmishing between the

light-armed troops, the heavy masses of the hoplites came to close

quarters, and a fierce hand to hand struggle ensued. While the issue

was still uncertain, a violent thunderstorm broke over the contending

armies, and struck terror into the Syracusans, who regarded it as an

omen of defeat. But the seasoned soldiers of Nicias saw nothing unusual

in an autumn tempest, and perceiving the enemy to waver, they pressed

their attack, and broke through the opposing lines. The whole Syracusan

army now fell back upon Syracuse, but they retired without haste or

disorder, and their retreat was covered by a numerous and efficient

body of cavalry, so that their total loss amounted only to two hundred

and sixty.

The victory thus remained with the Athenians; but the moral advantage

was entirely on the side of the Syracusans. With an army composed of

raw recruits, they had met the flower of the Athenian forces, trained

by years of warfare, and led by experienced generals, in fair fight,

and though attacked at a disadvantage, they had fought with spirit, and

retreated with coolness and deliberation. They had good reason to be

satisfied with the result of their first encounter with the invader,

and they might well share the high and confident hopes expressed by

their most eminent citizen, Hermocrates. Speaking at a general

assembly, immediately after the battle, the great patriot congratulated

his countrymen on the courage which they had displayed, and at the same

time pointed out the necessity of improving their discipline and

military organization. One important reform should be made at once; the

number of the generals, which had hitherto been fifteen, should be

greatly reduced, and those appointed to the supreme command should be

given absolute power, so that they might act with secrecy and despatch.

Further, let the whole adult male population be placed under arms, and

kept in constant drill all through the winter. If these measures were

vigorously carried out, they might successfully defy the Athenians to

do their worst.

Acting on this advice, the Syracusans deposed the existing generals,

and chose Hermocrates, with three others, to fill their place. The

reform of the army was at once taken in hand, and ambassadors were sent

to Corinth and Sparta to ask for aid. Corinth, as the mother-city of

Syracuse, might well respond to the call, and it was hoped that the

Spartans would be induced to declare open war on Athens, so as to

compel the Athenians to withdraw their forces from Sicily, or at least

prevent them from sending reinforcements.

Various defensive works were undertaken by the Syracusans during the

winter. The most important of these was a new wall, extending from the

northern sea to the Great Harbour, and taking in a wide space of

ground, outside the old line of wall, to the west of the city. By thus

increasing the area of Syracuse, they made it much more difficult for

Nicias to draw his line of blockade, when the siege began in the

following spring. They also constructed a fort, with a permanent

garrison, to guard the temple of Zeus in the suburb of Polichne, and

drove piles into the sea at all the landing-places of the Great Harbour.

Soon after the battle Nicias shifted his winter quarters to Naxos, and

learning this the Syracusans marched in full force to Catana, laid

waste the territory, and burnt the deserted huts of the Athenians. The

insult was tamely endured, and shortly afterwards the ever-active

Hermocrates had an opportunity of thwarting the Athenian intrigues

among the Greek cities of Sicily. The scene of this diplomatic

encounter was Camarina, a Dorian city which had hitherto wavered

between its hatred of Syracuse and its fear of Athens. Early in the

winter Athenian envoys appeared at Camarina with overtures of alliance,

and Hermocrates was sent to represent the interests of Syracuse.

Speaking first in the debate, Hermocrates set himself to unmask the

designs of the Athenians, who, under the thin pretence of helping the

Ionic cities of Sicily, had come (he said) to make a conquest of the

whole island. The Ionians of Greece had long groaned under their yoke,

and the same fate was in store for the Ionians of Sicily, if they

allowed themselves to be beguiled by specious lies. The plea of

friendship and goodwill might pass with the degenerate Greeks of Asia

and the Aegaean, born to be cajoled and enslaved; but the Camariaeans

were of the stout Dorian race, the hereditary foes of tyranny, too wise

and too brave to lend themselves as tools to a bare-faced scheme of

aggression. If not, let them beware: Syracuse was fighting in a

righteous cause, and must prevail in the end; help was coming from

Peloponnesus, and if the Camariaeans stood aloof, the day would come

when they would regret their disloyalty.

There can be no doubt that Hermocrates was right in his view of the

motive which brought the Athenians to Sicily, and the arguments of

Euphemus, the advocate for Athens, who strove to confute him, will not

bear examination. But the people of Camarina were in a difficult

position; their city had suffered many things in the past at the hands

of Syracuse, and they had reason to fear that her oppressions might be

renewed, if she emerged triumphant from the present struggle. On the

other hand, if the Athenians were victorious, they might forfeit their

independence altogether. In this dilemma they determined to play a

waiting game, and when the time came for action, to throw their weight

on the winning side. For the present they answered that they chose to

remain neutral.

The debate at Camarina, though interesting and instructive from the

light which it throws on the passions and motives of the combatants,

had little influence on the final issue of the war. But about the same

time a scene was being enacted in another part of the Greek world,

which led to most momentous consequences. Early in the winter the

Syracusan envoys arrived at Corinth, and made an earnest appeal for

help. The Corinthians were warmly attached to their famous colony,

which had never wavered in its allegiance to the mother-city, and

moreover they were the implacable enemies of Athens. They therefore

took up the cause of Syracuse with enthusiasm, and they sent the envoys

on to Sparta, accompanied by delegates of their own, to urge the

immediate resumption of hostilities against Athens, and the sending of

prompt aid to Sicily.

At Sparta they found an able and unscrupulous ally, the very last whom

they had expected to meet there. This was the outlaw Alcibiades, who,

after eluding the vigilance of the Athenian officers at Thurii, had

crossed over in a merchant ship to Cyllene, the port of Elis. While

staying there, he received an invitation from the Lacedaemonians to

proceed to Sparta, and made his way thither, having first stipulated

for a safe-conduct; for he dreaded the vengeance of the Spartans, to

whom he had done much mischief by raising the coalition which led to

the battle of Mantinea. So there he was, the guest of his old enemies,

burning with all an exile's hatred, and ready to strike some deadly

blow against the city which had cast him out.

At first the Spartans gave but a cool and qualified response to the

application of the envoys from Corinth. They were prepared to lend

moral support to the Syracusans, by sending an embassy to encourage

them in their resistance, but of more substantial aid they said little

or nothing. Now was the time for Alcibiades to play his part. He knew,

far better than any of his hearers, all the vulnerable points of

Athens, and had no scruple in using his knowledge for her ruin. Having

obtained permission from the magistrates, he rose to address the

Spartan assembly; and his speech is given at full length by the

historian, who was himself an exile at the time, and may possibly have

been present [Footnote: The suggestion is made by Grote.] on this

important occasion.

The Spartans might smile when they heard this accomplished traitor

professing friendship towards themselves, and zeal for their service;

they might be disgusted at the flippant sophistries by which he strove

to defend his unexampled villainy. But far different feelings must have

been awakened, when he went on to unfold the gigantic scheme of

conquest, to which, as he pretended, the invasion of Sicily was no more

than a prelude. According to this statement, the Athenians intended,

after subjugating the Greeks of Sicily, to turn their arms against the

Italian Greeks, and finally to attack Carthage. If all these designs

were successful, they would build a great number of new ships, taking

their materials from the forests of Italy, raise a vast military force,

both of Greeks and barbarians, and then return, backed by the whole

power of the West, and draw a ring of war round Peloponnesus. With such

resources they would be irresistible, and all Greece must inevitably

fall under their sway.

"Such," continued Alcibiades, "is the secret history of the Sicilian

expedition, which you have heard from the mouth of him who knows it

best. Remember, then, that the issue before you concerns not Syracuse

only, but Sparta also: for if Syracuse falls--and fall she must, if

left without support--all Sicily will be under the heel of Athens; then

will come the turn of Italy, and after that you will soon have the

enemy at your own doors. Now learn what you must do, if you would avert

all the evils which I have foretold. You must send a fleet to Sicily at

once, with hoplites who can row the ships themselves, and serve in the

army as soon as they land, and with them a Spartan commander, to

organize the fighting men of Sicily, and compel those who are hanging

back to do their duty. Such a man will be a host in himself, and will

infuse new life and energy into the defence. Further, you must

establish a fortified camp at Decelea, a position which commands the

whole territory of Attica; for by so doing you will reduce Athens to a

state of siege, and compel the whole male population to serve on

garrison duty; you will deprive the Athenians of their revenues from

the silver-mines at Laurium, and you will put new heart into the cities

subject to Athens, and encourage them to withhold their tribute. Let

these measures be carried out with promptitude and vigour, and you will

soon reap your reward, in the humiliation of Athens, and the honour and

gratitude of all Greece."

At these words of Alcibiades the sluggish Spartans took fire, and

recognizing the importance of his advice they determined to follow the

course which he had indicated. Gylippus, a Spartan of high rank,

received orders to proceed at once to Syracuse, and assume the control

of the war, and the Corinthians were directed to provide ships for the

conveyance of troops. But after this brief display of energy the

Spartans relapsed into their wonted torpor. Many months elapsed before

Gylippus was able to embark for Sicily, and meanwhile important events

had been occurring at the seat of war. We return, therefore, to the

head-quarters of Nicias, which had once more been removed from Naxos to

Catana.

VI

For the next year and a half [Footnote: Spring 414--autumn 413 B.C.]

the scene of our narrative lies almost entirely in the immediate

neighbourhood of Syracuse, so that it now becomes necessary to describe

in some detail the site of that city, and the character of the adjacent

country. Mention has already been made of the island of Ortygia, the

site of the original colony, connected with the mainland of Sicily by a

bridge or causeway. At the southern extremity of Ortygia there is a

narrow strip of land, pointing like a finger towards the rocky

peninsula of Plemmyrium; and between these two points lies the entrance

to a spacious bay, already alluded to under the name of the Great

Harbour. At the western end of the bay there is a long stretch of low,

marshy ground, intersected by the little rivers Cyana and Anapus, and

infested with fever during the heats of summer. On a rising ground,

south of the Anapus, stood the suburb of Polichne, with its great

temple, sacred to the Olympian Zeus. A little to the north of Ortygia

the coast rises abruptly in a bold line of cliffs, facing eastwards,

and forming the base of a triangular plateau, which slopes upwards from

the sea, and gradually grows narrower until it ends in a point, called

the hill of Euryelus. This plateau, which bore the name of Epipolae, is

guarded on all its three sides by rocky precipices, only to be ascended

at two or three places. Its eastern end, called Acheadina, from the

wild pear-trees which once flourished there, was occupied by a new

city, now included with Ortygia in the same wall of defence. Here were

situated the famous stone-quarries, which afterwards acquired so tragic

an interest from the sufferings of the captive Athenians; and

southwards from this district the ground shelves gently to the shores

of the Little Harbour, a sheltered inlet at the northern end of Ortygia.

At the opening of spring the operations against Syracuse began in good

earnest. The first object of Nicias was to obtain possession of the

heights of Epipolae, for since the construction of the new Syracusan

wall it had become impossible for him to draw his line of blockade from

the side of the Great Harbour. His preparations were already far

advanced, when the Syracusan generals resolved to anticipate him, by

occupying all the approaches to Epipolae. With this intention they

issued an order for a full muster of troops in a meadow by the Anapus,

and after a general review and inspection of arms they appointed a

picked body of six hundred hoplites to guard the heights of Epipolae,

and hold themselves ready for any other pressing service. But the

precaution was taken too late. On the night before the review Nicias

set sail with his whole army from Catana, and landed at a place called

Leon, not more than six or seven furlongs from the northern side of

Epipolae. The fleet then took up its station in the sheltered water

behind the peninsula of Thapsus, while the land forces, advancing at a

run, crossed the level ground, and then, breasting the ascent, gained

the summit of Euryelus.

News of their approach presently reached the Syracusans, who were still

mustered by the Anapus, and breaking off the review, they marched in

haste towards Epipolae, hoping still to dislodge the Athenians from

their position. But in their rapid advance over a distance of nearly

three miles their ranks became disordered, and their attack was so

straggling and ineffectual that they were easily repulsed, and driven

back with considerable loss into the town. On the following day Nicias

led his troops down the slope, and offered battle before the walls of

Syracuse; but the challenge was declined, and the Syracusans remained

within their defences, leaving the Athenians in undisputed possession

of Epipolae.

After this important success the Athenian generals prepared at once to

form the siege of Syracuse. They first constructed a fort at a place

called Labdalum, on the northern verge of Epipolae, and near its

western extremity, to serve as a safe depositary for their baggage and

money. Then, taking up a position near the centre of Epipolae, they

built a circular wall, covering a considerable space of ground, and

defended on the side towards the city by an outer breastwork, a

thousand feet long. This enclosure, which was called the Circle, was

intended as a shelter for the men employed on construction of the

blockading wall, which started from either side of the Circle, and was

to be carried north and south until it reached the sea. The work made

rapid progress, and greatly alarmed the Syracusans, who saw themselves

in danger of being cut off from all hope of succour on the land side.

Dismayed by this prospect, they resolved to make one more effort to

drive the Athenians from their position, and marching out in full

force, offered battle. Advancing in haste and disorder, they would

certainly have suffered a crushing defeat, but for the prudent caution

of their generals, who were so much impressed by the superior

discipline of the Athenians, that they gave the order to retire, and

led their troops back into the city, leaving only a detachment of horse

to skirmish with the besiegers. But the Athenians had now an efficient

force of cavalry, which had been raised by successive reinforcements to

the number of six hundred and fifty men; and these, backed by a small

force of infantry, soon drove the horsemen of Syracuse from the field.

The Athenians then completed the building of their Circle, and began to

lay the materials for the northern line of wall. By the advice of

Hermocrates the Syracusans made no further attempt to attack them in

full force, but began to build a counterwall, running out from the city

in a direction south of the Athenian Circle, so as to cross the line to

be followed by the wall of blockade, and prevent it from reaching the

Great Harbour. The work proceeded without interruption, for the

Athenians were engaged in their building operations north of the

Circle, and did not choose to divide their forces. When it was

completed, this counterwork consisted of a solid stone wall, crowned

with wooden towers, and defended in front by a palisade. The blockade

of Syracuse was thus rendered impossible, as long as the defenders

could keep possession of their counterwall. But unfortunately the

guards left in charge of the new wail soon began to neglect their duty,

and erected tents in the shade, where they passed the hot hours of the

afternoon, while some even left their posts, and went off to refresh

themselves in the city. The Athenian generals did not fail to take

advantage of this negligence. Watching their opportunity, when most of

the Syracusan guards were reposing under the shelter of the tents, they

sent a chosen troop of some three hundred men to make a sudden assault

on the counterwall. Then, having divided the main body of the Athenian

army between them, they disposed their forces so as to prevent any

rescue from the town. One division was drawn up before the principal

gate in the new Syracusan wall, while the other proceeded to a

postern-gate, at the point where the counterwall started from the city.

The combined movement was completely successful; the three hundred

carried the stockade and cross-wall by storm, and compelled the

defenders to take refuge within the ramparts of Syracuse. The whole

Athenian army then marched up to the counterwall and stockade, which

they speedily demolished, carrying off the materials for their own use.

Wishing to prevent any second attempt on the part of the Syracusans to

cut them off from the southern slope of Epipolae, the Athenian generals

now fortified that part of the cliff which looks towards the Great

Harbour. By occupying this point they obtained a new centre, commanding

the space between the Circle and the southern edge of the cliff, and

placing them in communication with the level valley of the Anapus,

across which they had to carry their line of blockade. For the present

building operations were suspended on the northern side of the Circle,

as they wished first of all to complete the investment of Syracuse

towards the south.

Perceiving their intention, the Syracusans began a second counterwork,

consisting of a stockade and ditch, which started at the point of

junction between the old city-wall and the new, and ran across the low

swampy ground as far as the Anapus. Thus the Athenians were confronted

by a new obstacle, which had to be removed, before they could make any

further progress. Acting with energy and decision, they sent orders to

the fleet, which was still lying at Thapsus, to sail round into the

Great Harbour; and without waiting for its arrival, before daybreak

Lamachus led his troops down the cliff, and advanced against the

stockade. His men carried hurdles and planks, to secure their footing

in the most treacherous parts of the swamp, and, proceeding thus, in

the first light of dawn they came up to the stockade. They found the

Syracusans assembled in force to resist them, and an engagement ensued,

which speedily ended in favour of the Athenians. The right wing of the

Syracusan army fled back into the city, while the left wing retreated

towards the suburb of Polichne, hotly pursued by the picked troop

[Footnote: P. 203.] of Athenian hoplites, who wished to cut them off

before they reached the river. By this rash movement the Athenians came

near to forfeiting the advantage which they had gained, and brought

upon themselves an irreparable loss. For the Syracusan cavalry turned

on their pursuers, and drove them back in disorder upon the Athenian

right. The sudden reverse created something like a panic in that part

of the line, and Lamachus, who was in command of the left wing,

hastened to their relief, and threw himself, with a handful of men,

between the Syracusan cavalry and the fugitives. This gallant action

turned the tide of battle once more, and gave the Athenians on the

right wing time to rally; but Lamachus and his followers, pushing

forward too hotly, were attacked by the enemy in a place where their

retreat was cut off by a ditch, and slain to a man.

Meanwhile the Syracusans who had fled into the city, observing the

temporary defeat of the Athenians, had taken courage again, and they

returned to the field, having first sent a detachment to attack the

Athenian Circle, where Nicias, who was disabled by sickness, had been

left in charge with a small garrison. Thinking to make an easy capture,

the party sent on this service ran up the slope of Epipolae, and

reached the breastwork of the Circle, which they took and demolished.

With the scanty force at his disposal, Nicias had little hope of

repelling the attack, so he had recourse to a desperate expedient. He

ordered the camp-servants to set fire to a great pile of timber, which

was lying, together with a number of siege engines, in front of the

wall. They did as he directed, and a great flame arose, which drove

back the assailants, and gave warning of his danger to the Athenians in

the plain below, where the whole Syracusan army was now in full

retreat. Almost at the same moment the Athenian fleet was seen sailing

into the Great Harbour, and a strong contingent from the victorious

army came swarming up the hill to the rescue. Thereupon the storming

party from Syracuse turned and fled back to the city, where they found

the streets thronged by their beaten and dispirited comrades.

The result of this battle was to leave the Athenian in undisputed

possession of the whole country round Syracuse. Lamachus, indeed, had

fallen, and the loss of that daring and active spirit soon made itself

severely felt. But for the present the fortunes of Athens were in the

ascendant, and everything seemed to promise a speedy triumph. The

Syracusans were thoroughly cowed by their defeat, and looked passively

on, while a double wall of blockade crept steadily forwards from the

southern edge of Epipolae towards the Great Harbour, where the Athenian

fleet had now taken up its permanent station. The native Sicels, who

had hitherto held back through fear of Syracuse, now joined the

Athenians in great numbers. Even the distant Etruscans, the ancient

enemies of Syracuse, sent three war-galleys to take part in the sack of

the great Dorian city.

Day by day the spirits of the Syracusans sank lower and lower. They now

began to feel the actual pressure of a siege. Months had passed since

their envoys had sailed for Greece, and there was still no sign of help

from Corinth or Sparta. They had lost all hope of saving themselves by

their own unaided efforts, and no course seemed left to them but to

make the best terms they could with Nicias. Negotiations were

accordingly opened with the Athenian general, but after much discussion

no definite result was attained. In this hour of weakness and distress,

the Syracusans became divided against themselves, and every man

suspected his neighbour of treason. Then they turned upon their

generals, who, after holding out such high promises, had brought them

to this pass, either by mismanagement, or by deliberate treachery.

Hermocrates and his colleagues were deposed from their command, and

three other generals succeeded to their place.

In the eyes of all those who were watching the struggle, the fate of

Syracuse was sealed; she was destined to fall a prey to the devouring

ambition of Athens. But at this very moment a little cloud was

approaching from the east, which was fraught with disaster and ruin to

the besieging army.

VII

Just at the time when the Syracusans were brought to the brink of

despair, Gylippus, after so many months' delay, was on his voyage to

Sicily. While lying at Leucas, a Corinthian settlement in the Ionian

sea, he received the alarming intelligence that Syracuse was already

completely blockaded, and the report was confirmed by every vessel that

came in from the west. Deceived by these false rumours, he gave up all

hope of saving Sicily, but hoping still to forestall the Athenians in

Italy, he put out from Leucas with four ships, and steered a straight

course for Tarentum. From this city, which was friendly to Sparta and

Syracuse, he started on his mission among the Italian Greeks, and

putting in at Locri he heard for the first time that the Athenian wall

was still unfinished on the northern side of Epipolae, leaving a wide

gap, through which a relieving force might enter the town.

Two courses now lay open to Gylippus. He might sail southwards, and

make an attempt to run the blockade of Syracuse--or he might land on

the northern coast of Sicily, march across the island, and fight his

way into the city through the unwalled interval. In either case, the

enterprise seemed desperate enough. By a very moderate exertion on the

part of Nicias, employing only a fraction of the immense force at his

disposal, Gylippus might have been destroyed, before he had time to

become dangerous. But Nicias was lulled into a fatal confidence. He had

heard of the mission of Gylippus, but made no attempt to oppose his

voyage to Italy, regarding him as a mere free-booter, unworthy of

serious notice. At last, learning that Gylippus was at Locri, he was

induced to send out four triremes against him. They were instructed to

take station at Rhegium, and cut off the daring intruder as he passed

through the strait. But when they reached Rhegium, the wary Spartan was

already beyond their reach. He had decided to approach Syracuse by

land, and was now far advanced on his voyage to Himera, the only Greek

settlement on the north coast of Sicily. Himera, though an Ionic

colony, was attached to the Dorian interest, and her citizens gave a

hearty welcome to the Spartan deliverer. Before long, a little army of

about three thousand men was assembled at Himera, and ready to follow

the fortunes of Gylippus. Seven hundred of these were the sailors and

marines from his own vessels, armed as hoplites, and the Himeraeans

furnished a thousand infantry, light and heavy-armed, and a hundred

cavalry. Owing to the recent death of a powerful chieftain, who had

been a strong partisan of Athens, the northern Sicels had now changed

sides, and they sent a thousand men to serve under the Spartan leader.

Small contingents also arrived, in answer to the call of Gylippus, from

Gela and Selinus. With this little force, composed of such motley

elements, Gylippus started from Himera, and entered on his march for

the relief of Syracuse. The fate of Syracuse was already wavering in

the balance. As yet no news of approaching succour had reached the

beleaguered city, and the Syracusans had abandoned all hope. To save

themselves from a worse calamity, they resolved to surrender, and an

assembly was summoned to settle the terms of capitulation. But at this

very moment a message came to them by sea, which kindled their courage

afresh, and banished these counsels of despair. When Gylippus left

Leucas, a Corinthian fleet of some fifteen vessels was preparing to

sail from that port for Syracuse. One of the ships, commanded by a

certain Gongylus, was delayed in the harbour, and started after the

rest. But Gongylus, instead of steering the ordinary course, which

would have taken him first to Italy, made a bold dash, straight across

the sea, and just when the momentous decision was pending, his ship

came to anchor in the Little Harbour. Forthwith the joyful tidings

spread like wildfire through the city: Gylippus was coming, armed with

full authority from Sparta--Corinth had taken up their cause--Syracuse

was saved! All thought of surrender was instantly flung away, and news

arriving shortly afterwards that Gylippus was near at hand, the whole

Syracusan force marched out to meet him, and escorted him triumphantly

into the town.

Thus, without a blow being struck, an immense access of strength had

been brought to the besieged, and the grand condition of successful

resistance, on which Alcibiades had laid such weight, was fulfilled. A

Spartan officer of consummate ability was now in Syracuse, and he had

made his way into the city, not alone, not by stealth, but at the head

of an army, and before the very eyes of the enemy. Weeks must have

elapsed between the departure of Gylippus from Leucas, and his arrival

at Syracuse; and during all this time, with one trifling exception,

Nicias made no effort to oppose his progress. Prudent men might well

have regarded the enterprise of Gylippus as a wild and desperate

adventure; and such it must have proved, but for the astounding

blindness and apathy of Nicias.

At the time when Gylippus reached Syracuse the Athenian lines of

circumvallation were all but completed on the side of the Great

Harbour; but a wide interval was still left between the Circle and the

northern sea, and it was here that Gylippus had effected an entrance.

To keep this space open was a matter of supreme importance, and the

scene of action is now shifted again to the northern slope of Epipolae.

On the day after his arrival Gylippus succeeded in capturing the

Athenian fort at Labdalum, and the command of this position gave

increased facilities for the construction of a third counterwall, which

was forthwith taken in hand, and carried in the direction of Labdalum,

until it crossed the blockading line at its northern end.

If the Syracusans succeeded in completing and holding this counterwork,

the blockade of Syracuse would be rendered impossible. Yet for some

time Nicias made no attempt to interrupt its progress. As if already

convinced of his inferiority in the field, he took steps to keep his

communications open by sea, and with this object he employed a part of

his forces in fortifying the headland of Plemmyrium, which commanded

the entrance to the Great Harbour. Here he built three forts which

served as an arsenal for the Athenian stores; and henceforth Plemmyrium

became the chief station for his fleet. This removal had a disastrous

effect on the Athenian crews; for the place being almost a desert, and

the springs distant and scanty, they were compelled to go far from

their quarters in search of forage and water, and while thus engaged

they were cut off in great numbers by the Syracusan horse, who had been

posted at Polichne for this purpose. A rapid demoralization of the

crews was the consequence, and desertions became more frequent every

day.

Meanwhile the counterwall was advancing steadily up the hill, and every

day Gylippus drew up his army, to cover the operations of the workmen.

At last he determined to force on an engagement, and in the first

encounter the Syracusans, fighting in a confined space, which prevented

their cavalry from coming into action, suffered a defeat. In no wise

discouraged by this reverse, on the next day they took up a position in

the more open ground, and offered battle again. By this time the

Syracusan counterwork had almost passed the end of the Athenian wall,

and if it were carried a few yards further, the siege of Syracuse would

be brought to a standstill. Roused by the imminence of the crisis,

Nicias determined to make one more effort to regain his mastery in the

field, and led his troops to the attack. The main body of the hoplites

were soon hotly engaged on both sides, and in the midst of the action

Gylippus directed his cavalry and light-armed infantry to make a sudden

charge on the Athenian left. This movement was executed with so much

skill and resolution that the Athenians in that part of the line gave

way, and drew after them the rest of their comrades, who broke their

ranks, and fled for shelter behind the siege works.

The Syracusans lost no time in turning their victory to account. On the

very same night their wall was extended some distance beyond the

blockading line, and until this new barrier was overthrown, the

investment of Syracuse had now become impossible.

Whichever way he looked, Nicias saw himself menaced with failure and

defeat. He had sent twenty ships to intercept the Corinthian squadron

on its voyage from Leucas; but the little fleet of rescue succeeded in

avoiding the snare, and made its way into the port of Syracuse, thus

adding twelve fresh vessels to the defending force. Gylippus himself

was marching unhindered up and down the island, passing from city to

city, and raising reinforcements of ships and men; and a second embassy

had been despatched by the Syracusans, to carry the news of their

victory to Corinth and Sparta, and ask for further help. Another

ominous sign of coming events was the bustle and activity now visible

in the dockyards of Syracuse and the waters of the Little Harbour; for

the Syracusans had turned their attention seriously to their fleet, and

thought of nothing less than attacking the Athenians on their own

element.

These symptoms of renewed confidence and energy were observed by Nicias

with growing disquiet. And if he turned his eyes to his own camp, he

saw little to relieve his anxiety. For the predictions of Lamachus had

been fulfilled to the letter. By his fatal policy of procrastination

Nicias had frittered away the resources of the most splendid armament

that ever set sail from Peiraeus. His soldiers were infected by the

despondency of their leader, and many of them were stricken by the

marsh-fever which haunts the unwholesome district of the Anapus. Above

all the condition of the fleet showed the lamentable effect of long

inaction and delay. All the supplies of the Athenians came to them by

sea, and in order to keep their communications open, it was necessary

to keep the whole of the fleet on constant duty. In consequence of

this, the hulls of the triremes had become sodden with water, which

made them leaky, and difficult to row. Moreover the crews, which were

largely composed of foreign seamen, had grown restive and mutinous

under the severe strain of hardships and privation, so different from

the easy and lucrative service in the hope of which they had enlisted.

Some took the first opportunity of deserting to the enemy, while others

ran away to remote parts of Sicily; and there was no means of filling

the places thus left vacant.

Such was the burden of care and apprehension which lay heavy on the

feeble shoulders of the Athenian general. He was naturally a weak man,

haunted by superstitious terrors, irresolute, easily cast down; and

this infirmity of character was aggravated by a painful and incurable

disease. There was no longer any question of laying siege to Syracuse:

he himself was now besieged, and it was all he could do to maintain his

position within his defences, and keep the sea open for the conveyance

of supplies. In this desperate situation he determined to send a

written despatch to Athens. We are led to suppose that this was an

unusual proceeding, and that news from the seat of war was generally

sent by word of mouth. The document is given at full length, with all

its grievous confessions of incompetence and failure. After setting

forth the facts of the case as stated above, Nicias insists that one of

two things must be done: either the army now lying before Syracuse must

be recalled to Athens, or the Athenians must send out a second army,

equal in strength to the first, and a general to relieve him of his

command.

At the conclusion of his despatch Nicias peevishly complains of the

exacting temper of the Athenians, and their readiness to blame anyone

but themselves if anything untoward occurred. Whatever may be the truth

of the general charge, it was most ill-timed and ungrateful in his own

case. Towards him, at least, the conduct of his fellow-citizens was

marked by an excess of generosity, amounting to actual infatuation.

Nothing is more remarkable than the unshaken confidence of the

Athenians in their feeble general, after hearing this terrible

indictment, drawn up by his own hand. They refused to accept his

resignation, and passed a decree that large reinforcements should be

sent to Sicily, with Demosthenes and Eurymedon as generals; and in the

meantime they appointed Menander and Euthydemus, two officers already

serving before Syracuse, to share with Nicias the burden of command.

Before the winter was ended Eurymedon started with ten ships for

Sicily, to announce that effectual help was coming; while Demosthenes

was charged with the duty of enlisting troops and organizing a fleet.

Meanwhile new perils were gathering round the Athenians at home, which

should have warned them to abandon their wild plans of conquest, and

concentrate all their strength for their own defence. The Spartans had

long been restrained by a scruple of conscience from an open

declaration of war, wishing to avoid the guilt which is associated with

the first act of aggression. Eighteen years before they had refused all

offers of arbitration, and deliberately provoked an encounter with

Athens, in direct violation of the Thirty Years' Truce, which provided

for an amicable settlement of differences; and by so acting they had,

as they believed, incurred the anger of heaven, and brought on

themselves a long train of disasters. But now the position was

reversed: for in the previous year the Athenians had made descents on

the coasts of Laconia, and other districts of Peloponnesus; and they

had repeatedly turned a deaf ear to the friendly overtures of the

Spartans, who proposed to submit all disputed matters to a peaceful

tribunal.

Thus relieved of their scruples, the Spartans prepared to renew the war

in good earnest, and early in the following spring [Footnote: B.C.

413.] they summoned their allies to the Isthmus, and marched under Agis

their king into Attica. After ravaging the plain, they encamped at

Decelea, fourteen miles north of Athens, and here they established a

fortified post, which was garrisoned by contingents of the

Peloponnesian army, serving in regular order. Once more Alcibiades had

cause to exult in the success of his malignant counsels, which had sent

Gylippus to Syracuse, and had now planted this root of bitter mischief

on the very soil of Attica.

While the allies were thus engaged at Decelea, a considerable body of

troops had embarked at Taenarum and at Corinth, and sailed to take part

in the defence of Syracuse. In Greece, all the old enemies of Athens

were arming against her, and beyond the sea her prospects grew darker

and darker every day. Yet nothing, it seemed, could break the spell of

fatal delusion which rested on the doomed city. While Attica lay in the

grip of the enemy, a fleet of sixty-five triremes, carrying a great

military force, weighed anchor from Peiraeus, and steered its course,

under the command of Demosthenes, for Sicily.

VIII

We must now return to Syracuse, where fortune was preparing a new blow

for the ill-fated Athenian army. Gylippus came back from his mission at

the beginning of spring, bringing with him the reinforcements which he

had gathered from various parts of Sicily. At once resuming the

offensive, he planned an attack on the forts recently erected by Nicias

at Plemmyrium, and in order to divide the attention of the Athenians,

he determined to make a simultaneous movement against them by sea and

land. He himself took command of the army, and setting out at night,

made his way round to the rear of the Athenian position at Plemmyrium.

Meanwhile the Syracusan fleet lay ready in two divisions, one of which,

consisting of thirty-five vessels, was moored in the docks, within the

Great Harbour, while the other, to the number of forty-five, had its

station in the Lesser Harbour. At the hour appointed by Gylippus, just

as day was breaking, both squadrons got under weigh, and bore down upon

Plemmyrium, from the opposite sides of Ortygia. Though taken by

surprise, the Athenians put out in haste with sixty triremes, and a

sea-fight ensued, in which the Syracusans for some time had the

advantage. By this time Gylippus was at hand with his army, and by a

sudden assault on the Athenian forts he made an easy capture of all

three; for the greater part of the garrison had flocked down to the

sea, to watch the progress of the action in the Great Harbour.

Fortunately for these men, who had so grossly neglected their duty, the

Athenian fleet had now gained a decisive victory, and they were thus

enabled to make their escape by water, and cross over to the camp of

Nicias, on the other side of the bay.

By the capture of Plemmyrium a great treasure fell into the hands of

the Syracusans. The loss to the Athenians, in money, stores, and men,

was serious enough; but further consequences ensued, which were nothing

less than disastrous. The enemy now commanded both sides of the

entrance to the Great Harbour, and not a ship-load of provisions could

reach the Athenian camp without an encounter with the Syracusan

triremes. Well might despondency and dismay take possession of the

beleaguered army, cramped in their narrow quarters on the swampy flats

of the Anapus.

All Sicily, with one or two exceptions, had now declared for Syracuse,

and reinforcements came pouring in from every side. Gylippus was

resolved, if possible, to destroy the armament of Nicias, before the

fresh succours from Athens had time to arrive; and, as before, the

attack was to be made simultaneously by sea and land. Since the loss of

Plemmyrium, the Athenian fleet had been penned up in the confined space

at the head of the Great Harbour. Outside of these narrow limits, the

whole coast was in the hands of the enemy, and any Athenian trireme

which ventured out into open water ran the risk of being driven on a

hostile shore. Unless they chose to incur this great peril, the

Athenians would have to fight in close order, with the long, tapering

prows of their vessels exposed to collision.

The Syracusans skilfully availed themselves of the advantage thus

offered. The impact of prow with prow, which had hitherto been regarded

as a disgraceful evidence of bad seamanship, had now become the most

effective method of attack; and in order to execute this simple

manoeuvre without damage to their own ships, the Syracusans shortened

the prows of their triremes, and strengthened them with heavy beams of

timber, thus converting them into a broad and solid mass, which could

be driven with crushing force against the slender beaks of the Athenian

galleys.

When all was ready, Gylippus led out his troops, and assailed the

Athenian wall which faced towards Syracuse, and at the same time the

garrison stationed at Polichne left their quarters, and made another

attack on the opposite side. The assault had already commenced, when

the Syracusan fleet, which numbered eighty triremes, was seen advancing

towards the inner shore of the bay, where the ships of Nicias lay

moored; and the Athenian seamen, who had not expected to be called into

action, hastened in some confusion to man their ships, seventy-five of

which were presently engaged with the enemy. After a day passed in

irregular and desultory fighting, the battle ended slightly in favour

of the Syracusans. During the next day the Syracusans remained

inactive, and Nicias employed the interval in repairing the ships which

had suffered damage, and providing for the defence of his fleet. The

Athenian naval station was protected by a row of piles, rammed into the

bottom of the sea, forming a semi-circular breastwork, with an opening

about two hundred feet wide, where the ships passed in and out. On

either side of this entrance Nicias caused a merchant vessel to be

moored, and each vessel was provided with an engine called a dolphin, a

heavy mass of lead, suspended from the yard-arm, which could be dropped

on the deck of any hostile trireme attempting to pass.

Early on the following morning the Syracusans resumed hostilities both

by sea and land, and after several hours of desultory fighting, they

drew off their fleet, and sailed back to their station under the walls

of the city. The Athenians were well pleased by this sudden relief, and

concluding that their work was done for the day, they disembarked at

leisure, and began to prepare their midday meal. But before they had

time to snatch a mouthful, the whole Syracusan fleet was seen advancing

again from the opposite shore, and the hungry and weary Athenian crews

were summoned on board to repel a second attack. This crafty manoeuvre

was due to a suggestion of Ariston, the most skilful of the Corinthian

seamen, by whose advice provisions had been brought down to the beach,

so that the Syracusan crews were kept together, and ready to renew the

action, after a brief interval for repose and refreshment.

For a little while the two fleets faced each other, without venturing

to attack; then the Athenians, who were feverish with hunger and

fatigue, could restrain themselves no longer, but with one consent they

dashed their oars into the water, and with shouts of mutual

encouragement charged down upon the enemy. The Syracusans kept a firm

front, and opposing their massive prows to the rash assault, inflicted

great damage on the Athenian triremes, many of which were completely

wrecked by the shock of the collision. On every side the Athenians were

hard beset; the light-armed troops posted on the decks of the Syracusan

vessels, plied them with a shower of javelins, while the waters swarmed

with a multitude of boats, manned by daring adventurers, who rowed

boldly up to the sides of the Athenian triremes, broke the oars, and

hurled darts through the port-holes at the rowers. After fighting for

some time at a great disadvantage, with exhausted crews, and in a

narrow space, where they had no room to manoeuvre, the Athenians were

compelled to fall back, and sought refuge behind their palisade.

This important success raised the spirits of the Syracusans higher than

ever. They had gained a decisive victory over the greatest naval power

in Greece, sunk seven triremes, disabled many more, and slain or taken

prisoners a large number of men. Flushed with pride and hope, they

immediately began to prepare for a final attack, which was to end in

the complete destruction of their enemies both by sea and land. But

these high expectations received a sudden check; for on the day after

the battle, [Footnote: Or possibly two days.] the watchers on the walls

of Syracuse descried a great fleet on the northern horizon. Presently

the regular beat of ten thousand oars could be distinctly heard; it

grew louder and louder, and as the vanguard came into full view, the

alarmed Syracusans recognized the truth. There was no mistaking the

peculiar build and familiar ensigns of the renowned Athenian galleys.

This could be no other than the fleet of Demosthenes, arrived just in

time to save the shattered armament of Nicias, and once more turn the

tide of war against Syracuse. A great multitude rushed to the

battlements, and gazed with keen pangs of anxiety as the long line of

triremes, seventy-three in number, swept past the walls of Ortygia,

rounded the southern point, and crossing the Great Harbour, dropped

anchor at the naval station of Nicias. If anyone not concerned in the

struggle had been present, he might have admired the grand exhibition

of military pomp and power, the perfect trim and condition of the

triremes, the precision of the rowing, and the glittering ranks of the

hoplites, javelin-men, archers, and slingers, who thronged the decks.

But no such feeling could find room in the minds of the Syracusans.

After their long trials and sufferings, on the very eve of their

crowning triumph, a new host of enemies had sprung up against them, and

all their toils were beginning anew.

IX

When Demosthenes arrived at Syracuse, the position of affairs was as

follows: the blockading wall of the Athenians still extended in an

unbroken line from the circular fort on Epipolae to the camp and naval

station of Nicias at the head of the Great Harbour; but the Athenians

were cut off from access to the northern slope of Epipolae by the

Syracusan counterwall, which had been carried up the whole length of

the plateau as far as the hill of Euryelus. Along the northern edge of

the cliff the Syracusans had established three fortified camps, where

the defenders of the counterwall had their quarters, and on the summit

of Euryelus a fort had been erected, which held the key to the whole

system of defence.

Demosthenes saw at once that, before any progress could be made with

the siege of Syracuse, it was necessary to gain possession of the

counterwall, and confine the Syracusans within the limits of their

city. The sooner he made the attempt, the greater was his chance of

success; for every day wasted would give new confidence to the enemy,

and the condition in which he found the troops of Nicias was a visible

warning against the fatal consequences of delay. An attack made on the

cross-wall from its southern side ended in total failure; his

siege-engines were burnt, and the storming-parties repulsed at every

point. The only course which remained was to march round to the

north-western extremity of the plateau, carry the fort of Euryelus, and

assail the Syracusans within their own lines. After consulting with his

colleagues, Demosthenes determined to try the hazardous method of a

night-attack, hoping thus to take the garrison on Euryelus by surprise.

He himself, with Eurymedon and Menander, took the command, and the

whole Athenian army was engaged in the adventure, except those who

remained behind with Nicias to guard the camp. On a moonlight night in

August, at the hour of the first watch, the march began. Moving

cautiously up the valley of the Anapus, they turned the northern end of

the hill, and reached the path by which Lamachus had ascended in the

spring of the previous year. At first all seemed to promise success to

the Athenians unobserved by the enemy, Demosthenes ascended the hill,

stormed the fort, and, drove the garrison back on the three fortified

camps which flanked the Syracusan counterwall on its northern side. The

fugitives raised the alarm, and the call was promptly answered by a

picked troop of six hundred hoplites, who were stationed nearest to the

point of danger. These men made a gallant stand, but they were

overpowered by superior numbers, and thrust back on the main body of

the Syracusans, who were now advancing under Gylippus to the rescue.

They in their turn were forced to give ground before the impetuous

charge of Demosthenes, and a general panic seemed about to spread

through the whole Syracusan army. Already the Athenians had begun to

throw down the battlements of the counterwall, and if they were allowed

to proceed, Syracuse would once more be exposed to imminent danger.

But now occurred one of those sudden turns of fortune which were so

common in Greek warfare. As the soldiers of the Athenian van rushed

forward too hotly, wishing to complete the rout of the enemy they fell

into disorder, and in this condition they were confronted by a stout

little troop of Boeotian hoplites, who had found their way to Syracuse

earlier in the summer. This unexpected resistance checked the furious

onset of the Athenians, and the Boeotians, pursuing their advantage,

charged in solid phalanx and put them to flight. Once more the tide of

battle had turned against Athens. Restored to confidence by the steady

valour of their allies, the Syracusans closed their ranks, and advanced

in dense masses up the hill. A scene of indescribable horror and

confusion ensued, so that no one was afterwards able to give a clear

account of what had happened. On the narrow neck of land which forms

the western end of Epipolae two great armies were rushing to the

encounter. On one side was the main body of the Athenians, still

ignorant of the defeat of their comrades, and hurrying forward to share

in the victory. On the other side was the whole host of Syracuse,

advancing with deafening shouts to meet them; and in the middle were

the men of Demosthenes, flying in headlong rout before the conquering

Boeotians. In the uncertain light, the fugitives were at first mistaken

for enemies, and many of them perished miserably by the spears of their

own countrymen. On came the Syracusans, bearing down all before them;

but the Athenians, as they strove to escape, were flung back upon the

enemy by fresh bodies of their own men, who were still thronging by

thousands up the northern path of Euryelus. All semblance of order was

now lost in the Athenian army, which was broken up into detached

parties, some flying, some advancing, and shouting their watchword to

all whom they met, so as to learn whether they had to do with friend or

foe. But the Syracusans soon learnt the watchword, which thus became a

means of betraying the Athenians to their own destruction. To add to

the confusion, the Dorian allies of Athens raised a paean, or war-song,

so similar to that of the Syracusans, that the Athenians fled at their

approach supposing them to be enemies. The grand army of Demosthenes,

which had set out with such high hopes, was now no better than a mob of

wild and desperate men, friend fighting against friend, and citizen

against citizen. At length the whole multitude turned and fled, each

man seeking to save himself as best he could. Some, hard pressed by the

enemy, flung themselves from the cliffs, and were dashed to pieces on

the rocks below; others succeeded in reaching the plain, and found

their way back to the camp of Nicias; while not a few lost their way,

and wandered about the country until the following day, when they were

hunted down and slain by the Syracusan horseman.

Demosthenes had done all that a man could to recover the ground lost by

Nicias, and resume the aggressive against Syracuse. His well-laid

scheme had ended disastrously, and only one course remained, consistent

with public duty and common sense. To waste the blood and treasure of

Athens in Sicily any longer would be suicidal folly. The Athenians at

home were in a state of siege, and needed every man and every ship for

the defence of their own territory, and the maintenance of their empire

in Greece. Sickness and despondency had already wrought dire havoc

among the troops encamped before Syracuse. To remain was utter ruin,

both to themselves and their fellow-citizens. The sea was still open,

and the new armament, with what remained of the old, would be strong

enough to secure their retreat. Let them embark without delay, turn

their backs on the fatal shores of Sicily, and hoist sail for home.

These arguments were urged by Demosthenes with unanswerable force at a

private meeting of the generals which was held immediately after the

defeat on Epipolae But unhappily for all those most nearly concerned in

the debate, the influence of Nicias was still supreme in the Athenian

camp; and to spur that gloomy trifler into decisive action was beyond

the power even of Demosthenes. Nicias knew that, if he gave the word to

retreat, in a few weeks he would have to stand before the bar of his

countrymen, and give an account of the great trust which he had

betrayed. It would be better, he thought, to perish under the walls of

Syracuse, than to brave that stern tribunal, and read his doom on those

angry, accusing faces. And apart from these selfish terrors, he was

still in communication with his partisans in Syracuse, who encouraged

him to wait for a favourable turn of affairs. Thus fettered to the spot

both by his hopes and his fears, he obstinately refused to move.

While Demosthenes argued, and Nicias demurred, Gylippus had not been

idle. A day or two after the battle, he once more left Syracuse, and

traversed the whole length of the island, collecting troops on his way.

At Selinus he was joined by the Peloponnesian and Boeotian soldiers who

had sailed from Taenarum early in the spring, and had just reached that

port, after a long and adventurous voyage. With this welcome addition

to his forces, and thousands more who had answered his call from all

parts of Sicily, he returned to Syracuse, and prepared to put out all

his strength in a general assault on the army and fleet of Athens.

The Athenians had not yet abandoned their lines on the southern side of

Epipolae, and from this position they watched the arrival of the new

army raised by Gylippus, as it defiled down the slope, and poured

through the gates of Syracuse to swell the ranks of their enemies. In

their own camp the state of things was growing worse every day, and

even Nicias now became convinced that to remain any longer would be

sheer madness. With the hearty concurrence of his colleagues, he gave

his vote for immediate departure, and the order was secretly passed

round the camp that every man should hold himself in readiness to go on

board, as soon as the signal was given. It was necessary to proceed

with caution, for if the enemy were informed of their purpose, they

would have to fight their way through the Syracusan fleet. The

preparations were accordingly made with as little noise as possible and

in a short time all was ready for the voyage. Night sank down on the

Athenian camp, but among all that vast multitude no one thought of

sleep, for the whole host was waiting in breathless eagerness for the

signal to embark. Over the eastern waters the full moon was shining,

making a long path of silver and pointing the way to home. But suddenly

a dark shadow touched the outer rim of that gleaming disk, and crept

stealthily on, until the whole face of the moon was veiled in darkness.

A whisper, a murmur, a shudder went round among those anxious watchers,

and before the shadow had passed away, ten thousand tongues were

eagerly discussing the meaning of that mysterious portent. Most were

agreed that it was a warning from heaven, forbidding their departure

until the angry powers had been appeased by sacrifice and prayer. In

the mind of Nicias, enslaved by the grossest superstition, there was no

room for doubt. He was surrounded by prophets, whose advice he sought

on every occasion, and guided by them he proclaimed that for thrice

nine days, the time required for a complete circuit of the moon, there

could be no talk of departing.

But the Athenians were soon engaged in a sterner task than the vain

rites of propitiation and penitential observance. The news of their

intended retreat, and its untoward interruption, so raised the spirits

of the Syracusans, that they resolved to risk another sea-fight, and

after some days spent in training their crews, they sailed out with

seventy-six ships, and offered battle, and Gylippus at the same time

attacked the Athenian lines by land. The Athenians succeeded in

repulsing the assault on their walls, but in the encounter between the

fleets, though they out-numbered the enemy by ten ships, they suffered

a decisive defeat. Eurymedon was slain, and eighteen vessels fell into

the hands of the Syracusans, who put all the crews to the sword.

The pride and ambition of the Syracusans now knew no bounds. Relieved

from all fear for the safety of their city they began to take a loftier

view of the struggle, and to grasp the full compass and grandeur of the

issues involved. It was no mere feud between two rival states, but a

great national conflict, which was to end in the downfall of a

wide-spread usurpation, and the deliverance of a hundred cities from

bondage. The whole naval and military forces of Athens lay crippled and

helpless within their grasp; they would shatter to pieces the

instrument of tyranny, and win an immortal name as the liberators of

all Greece. Their first care was to prevent the escape of the

Athenians, and for this purpose they began to close the mouth of the

Great Harbour by a line of triremes and vessels of burden, anchored

broadside across the channel.

X

The Athenians were thus caught in a trap, and their only hope of saving

themselves was to force the barrier of the Great Harbour, and escape by

sea, or, failing that, to make their way by land to some friendly city.

As a last sad confession of defeat, they withdrew the garrison from

their walls on Epipolae, and reduced the dimensions of their camp,

confining it to a narrow space of the coast, where the fleet lay

moored. Every vessel which could be kept afloat was prepared for

action, and when the whole force was mustered, out of two great

armaments only a hundred and ten were found fit for service. A small

body of troops was left to guard the camp, and all the rest, except

such as were totally disabled by sickness, were distributed as

fighting-men among the ships. For the countrymen of Phormio had now

reverted to the primitive conditions of naval warfare, in which the

trireme was a mere vehicle for carrying troops, and not, as in the days

of that great captain, the chief weapon of offence. Every foot of

standing-room on the decks was occupied by a crowd of hoplites,

javelin-men, archers, and slingers, and on their prowess the issue of

the battle depended. To lay their vessels aboard the enemy with as

little delay as possible, and leave the rest to the soldiers, was now

the chief object of the Athenian captains; and the better to effect.

this, men were stationed on the prows, armed with grappling-irons, to

hold the attacking trireme fast, and prevent her from backing away

after the first shock of collision.

With hearts full of sad foreboding, the great multitude mustered on the

beach, and waited for the word to embark. On a rising ground, fronting

the camp, the generals; stood grouped in earnest consultation; then

every voice was hushed, as Nicias came forward, and beckoned with his

hand, commanding silence. The form of the general was bowed with years,

and his face lined with pain and sickness, but in his eye there was an

unwonted fire, and his tones rang clear and full, as he reminded his

hearers of the great cause for which they were to fight, and the mighty

interests which hung in the balance that day. "Men of Athens," he said,

"and you, our faithful allies, your lives, your liberty, and the future

of all who are dear to you, are in your own hands. If you would ever

see home again, you must resolve to conquer fortune, even against her

will, like seasoned veterans, inured to the perils and vicissitudes of

war. Hitherto we have generally got the better of the enemy on land and

we are now going to fight a land battle on the sea. As soon as you come

within reach of a Syracusan vessel, fling your grappling-irons, and

hold her fast, until not a man is left alive to defend her deck. This

will be the task of the soldiers, whom I need not tell to do their

duty. And you, seamen of the Athenian fleet, be not dismayed because we

have forsaken our former tactics, but trust to the strong arms of the

fighting men. Remember, those of you who are not of Attic descent, how

long you have enjoyed the high privileges of Athenian citizens, and the

honour reflected on you by your connection with Athens.

"My last word shall be spoken to you, fellow-citizens, Athenians born

and bred. You know what you have to expect from the Syracusans, if this

last struggle should end in defeat. But consider further what will be

the fate of your friends at home. Their docks are empty, their walls

are stripped of defenders, and if you fail them, Syracuse will unite

with their old enemies, and bear them down. Here, where we stand, are

the army, the fleet, the city, and the great name of Athens; go, then,

and fight as you never fought before, for never yet had soldier such a

prize to win, and such a cause to defend."

When Nicias had concluded his stirring appeal, the embarkation of the

troops began. As the fatal moment drew nearer and nearer, the anxiety

and distress of the Athenian general became unbearable. Feeling that he

had not said enough, he hurried to and fro, addressing each captain

with an agony of supplication, and imploring him by every sacred

name,--his wife, his children, his country, and his country's gods,--to

play a man's part, forgetting all thoughts of self. Having exhausted

every topic of entreaty, and seen the last man on board, he turned

away, still unsatisfied, and addressed himself to the task of drawing

up the troops left under his command for the defence of the camp. These

were disposed along the shore in as long a line as possible, that they

might encourage those fighting on the sea by their presence, and lend

prompt help in case of need. Behind them, every point of outlook was

held by a throng of anxious spectators,--the sick, the maimed, and the

wounded,--every man who had strength to crawl from his bed, and watch

that last desperate struggle for liberty and home.

And now the Athenian admirals, Demosthenes, Menander, and Euthydemus,

raised the signal, and the great fight began. The foremost ships

succeeded in reaching the mouth of the Great Harbour, and began to

break through the barrier, when the whole Syracusan fleet closed in

upon them on all sides, and forced them back Then the battle became

general, and soon the two fleets were scattered over the whole surface

of the bay in little groups, and each group engaged in a wild and

furious melee. There was no attempt to manoeuvre, but ship encountered

ship; as accident brought them together, and advanced to the attack,

under a shower of javelins and arrows. Then followed the dull crash of

collision, and the fierce rush of the fighting-men, as they endeavoured

to board. Here and there could be seen knots of three or four triremes,

locked together with shattered hulls and broken oars, while the

soldiers on the decks strove for the mastery. Nearly two hundred

triremes, and some forty thousand men, were engaged in that tumultuous

fight; and the thunder of the oars, the crash of colliding triremes,

and the yells of the assailants, raised an uproar so tremendous that it

was impossible to hear the voice of command. All order and method was

lost, yet still they fought on, the Syracusans with a savage thirst for

vengeance, the Athenians with the fury of despair; and for a long time

the issue remained doubtful.

All this scene of havoc and carnage was witnessed by the whole

population of Syracuse, who thronged the walls, or stood in arms along

the shore, and followed every incident with breathless interest. But

above all among the Athenians left behind in the camp excitement was

strained to the point of anguish. Here the view was more restricted,

and each group of spectators had its attention fixed on some one of the

many encounters which were raging in different parts of the bay. Some

who saw their friends conquering, shouted with joy and triumph; some

shrieked in terror, as an Athenian ship went down; and others, when the

combat long wavered, rocked their bodies to and fro in an agony of

suspense. Thus at the same moment every shifting turn of battle,

victory and defeat, panic and rally, flight and pursuit, was mirrored

on those pale faces, and echoed in a thousand mingled cries.

But at length these discordant voices were united in one general note

of horror, as the whole Athenian fleet, or all that was left of it, was

seen making in headlong rout for the upper end of the bay, with the

victorious Syracusans pressing hard behind. Then most of those who were

watching from the shore were seized with uncontrollable terror, and

sought to hide themselves in holes and corners of the camp; while a

few, who were more stout-hearted, waded into the water, to save the

ships, or rushed to defend the walls on the land side. But for the

present the Syracusans were contented with their victory, and after

chasing the fugitive triremes as far as their defences, they wheeled

and rowed back across the Great Harbour, through floating corpses, and

the wrecks of more than seventy vessels. On their arrival at Syracuse

they were hailed with such a burst of enthusiasm as had rarely been

witnessed in any Greek city. The victory, indeed, had been dearly

bought, but it was well worth the cost, and the power of Athens had

sustained a blow from which it could never recover. But among all the

thronging hosts of Syracuse, who now gave themselves up to revel and

rejoicing, there was one man at least who knew that even now the danger

was not yet past. Forty thousand Athenian soldiers were still encamped

within sight of the walls, and if they were allowed to escape, they

might establish themselves in some friendly city, and begin the war

again. All this was strongly felt by Hermocrates, and he lost no time

in imparting his cares and anxieties to the responsible leaders. The

Athenians, he urged, would be almost certain to decamp during the

night: let a strong force be sent out at once from Syracuse, to occupy

all the roads, and cut off their retreat. The advice was good, but in

the present temper of the army it was felt to be impracticable. The

whole city had become a scene of riot and wassail, and if the order

were given to march, it was but too evident that not a man would obey.

Baffled in this direction, the keen-witted Syracusan hit upon another

plan, which he at once proceeded to carry into effect.

Hermocrates was not mistaken in his conjecture. The beaten and

dispirited Athenians had now but one thought,--to break up their camp

with all despatch, and make their escape by land. They had still sixty

triremes left, and Demosthenes proposed to make one more attempt to

force the entrance of the Great Harbour; but when his suggestion was

made known to the crews, they broke into open mutiny, and flatly

refused to go on board. The generals were therefore compelled to adopt

the only alternative, and it was resolved to set out on that very

night. But Fortune had not yet exhausted her malice against the hapless

Athenians. The order to strike camp had been issued, and the soldiers

were busy preparing for the march, when a party of horsemen rode up to

the Athenian outposts, and hailing the sentinels, said that they had a

message to Nicias from his friends in Syracuse. "Tell him," said the

spokesman of the party, "That he must not attempt to stir to-night, for

all the roads are held by strong detachments of the Syracusans. Let him

wait until he has organised his forces, for a hasty and disordered

flight is sure to end in disaster."

The message, of course, came from Hermocrates, who had contrived this

trick to delay the departure of the Athenians, until time had been

gained to occupy the passes on their route. That Nicias should have

fallen into the snare is not surprising, but it is less easy to explain

how Demosthenes and the other generals came to be deceived by so

transparent a fraud. Yet such was in fact the case; the insidious hint

was accepted as a piece of friendly advice, and the march was

postponed. For a whole day and night the Athenians still lingered on

the spot, and thus gave ample time for their enemies to draw the net

round them, and block every avenue to safety.

On the third day after the battle, the order was given to march. As the

great army formed into column, the full horror of their situation came

home to every heart. This, then, was the end of those grand dreams of

conquest with which they had sailed to Sicily two years before! On the

heights of Epipolae their walls and their fort was still standing, a

monument of failure and defeat. Each familiar landmark reminded them of

some fallen comrade, or some disastrous incident in the siege. If they

glanced towards the Great Harbour, they could see the victorious

Syracusans towing off the shattered hull of an Athenian trireme, the

last sad remnant of two great armaments. If they turned their thoughts

towards Athens and home, they found no comfort there; for their beloved

city was beset with enemies, and in themselves, beaten and broken as

they were, lay her chief hope of salvation. The past was all black with

calamity, and the future loomed terrible before them, threatening

captivity and death; and the present, in that last hour of parting, was

full of such sights and sounds of woe as might have stirred pity even

in the breasts of their enemies. Around them, the camp was strewn with

the unburied corpses of brothers, comrades and sons, and thousands more

were tossing on the waves, or flung up on the shores of the bay. And

while the neglect of that sacred duty pressed heavily on their

conscience, still more harrowing were the cries of the sick and

wounded, who clung round their knees, imploring to be taken with them,

and when the army began to move followed with tottering steps, until

they sank down exhausted, calling down the curse of heaven on the

retreating host. Such was the anguish of that moment, that it seemed as

if the whole population of some great city had been driven into exile,

and was seeking a new home in a distant soil.

In this dire extremity, when the strongest spirits were crushed with

misery, one voice was heard, which still spoke of hope. It was the

voice of Nicias, who, when all others faltered, rose to a pitch of

heroism which he had never shown before. Bowed as he was with care, and

wasted by disease, he braced himself with more than human energy, and

moved with light step from rank to rank, exhorting that stricken

multitude in words of power. "Comrades," he said, "even now there is no

need to despair. Others have been saved before now from calamities yet

deeper than ours. You see in what state I am, cast down from the summit

of human prosperity, and condemned, in my age and weakness, to share

the hardships of the humblest soldier among you,--I, who was ever

constant in the service of the gods, and punctual in the performance of

every social duty. Yet have I not lost faith in the righteousness of

heaven, nor should you give up all for lost, if by any act of yours you

have fallen under the scourge of divine vengeance. There is mercy, as

well as justice, among the gods, and we, in sinking thus low, have

become the proper objects of their compassion. Think too what firm

ground of confidence we have, in the shields and spears of so many

thousand warriors. There is no power in Sicily which can resist us,

either to prevent our coming or to shorten our stay. A few days march

will bring us to the country of the friendly Sicels, who have already

received notice of our approach. Once there, we can defy all attack,

and look forward to the time when we shall see our homes again, and

raise up the fallen power of Athens."

These and similar exhortations were repeated by Nicias again and again,

as the army moved slowly forwards up the valley of the Anapus, keeping

a westerly direction, towards the interior of the island. The troops

were formed in a hollow oblong, with the baggage animals and

camp-followers in the middle, and advanced in two divisions, Nicias

leading the van, and Demosthenes bringing up the rear. The vigilance

and activity of Nicias never relaxed for a moment. Careless of his many

infirmities and exalted rank, he passed incessantly up and down the

column, chiding the stragglers, and attending to the even trim of his

lines. On reaching the ford of the Anapus, they put to flight a

detachment of the enemy which was stationed there to oppose their

passage, and crossing the river, continued their march. But now the

real difficulties of the retreat began to appear. The Syracusans had no

intention of hazarding a pitched battle, but their horsemen and light

infantry hung upon the flanks of the Athenian army, making sudden

charges, and keeping up a constant discharge of javelins.

At nightfall the Athenians encamped under the shelter of a hill, some

five miles from their starting-point, and setting out at daybreak on

the following day, they pushed on with pain and difficulty, harassed at

every step by the galling attacks of the Syracusan troops. [Footnote:

Thucydides, with characteristic brevity, leaves this to be inferred

from the slowness of their progress.] A march of two miles and a half

brought them to a village, situated on a level plain, and here they

halted, wishing to supply themselves with food, and replenish their

water-vessels; for the country which they had now to traverse was a

desert, many miles in extent. Directly in their line of route there is

a narrow pass, when the road, on entering the hill country, drops sheer

down on either side into a deep ravine, and if they could once cross

this dangerous point they would be within reach of their allies, the

Sicels. But it was too late to proceed further that day, and while they

lay encamped in the village, the Syracusans hurried on in advance, and

blocked the pass by building a wall across the road. When the Athenians

resumed their march next morning, they were fiercely assailed by the

enemy's light horse and foot, who disputed every inch of ground, and at

last compelled them to fall back on the village where they had encamped

the night before. Provisions were now growing scanty, and every attempt

to leave their lines in search of plunder and forage was baffled by the

Syracusan horse.

On the fourth day they broke up their camp early, and by incessant

fighting succeeded in forcing their way as far as the pass. But all

further advance was prevented by the wall, and the dense masses of

infantry posted behind it. In vain the Athenians flung themselves again

and again upon the barrier. The troops stationed on the cliffs above

assailed them with a shower of missiles, and the solid phalanx of

hoplites repulsed every assault. Convinced at last that they were

wasting their strength to no purpose, they desisted, and retiring from

the wall halted at some distance for a brief interval of repose. During

this pause a storm of rain and thunder broke over their heads; and to

the weary and disheartened Athenians it seemed that the very elements

were in league with the enemy against them. But they had little time to

indulge in these melancholy reflections; for while they were resting,

Gylippus stole round to their rear, and prepared to cut off their

retreat by building a second wall across the pass. The news of this

imminent peril roused the Athenians from their stupor, and they marched

back with all speed along the road by which they had come. A picked

body of troops, sent on in advance, scattered the soldiers of Gylippus,

and the whole army then emerged from that death-trap, and encamped for

the night in the open plain.

The next day was spent in a last desperate effort to reach the hill

country. But being now on level ground, they were exposed on all sides

to the attacks of the Syracusan horse, who charged them incessantly,

and slew their men by hundreds, with hardly any loss to themselves. The

hopeless struggle continued until evening, and when the enemy drew off,

they left the Athenians not a mile from the place where they had passed

the previous night.

The original plan of the Athenian generals had been to penetrate the

highlands of Sicily to the west of Syracuse, and then strike across

country, until they reached the southern coast, in the direction of

Gela or Camarina. [Footnote: I have followed Holm, as cited in

Classen's Appendix (Third Edition, 1908).] But after two days' fighting

they had utterly failed to force an entrance into the mountains. Many

of their soldiers were wounded, the whole army was weakened by famine,

and a third attempt, made in such conditions, must inevitably end in

utter disaster. They resolved therefore to change their route, and

march southwards along the level coast country, until they could reach

the interior by following one of the numerous glens which pierce the

hills on this side of Sicily. Having come to this decision, they caused

a great number of fires to be lighted, and then gave the order for an

immediate start, hoping by this means to steal a march on the enemy.

This sudden flight through the darkness, in a hostile country, with

unknown terrors around them, caused something like a panic in the

Athenian army.

Nicias, however, who was still leading the van, contrived to keep his

men together, and made good progress; but the division under

Demosthenes fell into great disorder, and was left far behind. By

daybreak, both divisions [Footnote: See note, p. 242.] were within

sight of the sea, and entering the road which runs north and south

between Syracuse and Helorus, they continued their march towards the

river Cacyparis. Here they intended to turn off into the interior, with

the assistance of the Sicels, whom they expected to meet at the river.

But when they reached the ford of the Cacyparis, they found, instead of

the Sicels, a contingent of Syracusan troops, who were raising a wall

and palisade to block the passage. This obstruction was overcome

without much difficulty, and the whole Athenian army crossed the river

in safety. But the presence of the enemy on this side of Syracuse was

sufficient to deter them from taking the inland route by the valley of

the Cacyparis, and following the advice of their guides, they kept the

main road, and pressed on towards the south.

We must now return for a moment to the Syracusans under Gylippus, who

remained in their camp all night, not far from the pass which they had

so successfully defended. When they found in the morning that the

Athenians had departed, they were loud in their anger against Gylippus,

thinking that he had purposely suffered them to escape. The tracks of

so many thousands left no room for doubt as to the direction which the

fugitives had taken, and full of rage at the supposed treachery of

their leader, the Syracusans set out at once in hot pursuit. About

noon, on the sixth day of the retreat, they overtook the division of

Demosthenes, which had again lagged behind, and was marching slowly and

in disorder separated from the other half of the army by a distance of

six miles. Deprived of all hope of succour from his colleague, and

hemmed in on all sides by implacable enemies, Demosthenes called a

halt, and prepared to make his last stand. But his men, who from the

first had held the post of honour and danger, were fearfully reduced in

numbers, faint with famine, and exhausted by their long march. Driven

to and fro by the incessant charges of the Syracusan cavalry, they

could make no effective resistance, and at last they huddled pell-mell

into a walled enclosure, planted with olive-trees, and skirted on

either side by a road. They were now at the mercy of the Syracusans.

who surrounded the enclosure, and plied them with javelins, stones, and

arrows. After this butchery had continued for many hours, and the

survivors were brought to extremity by wounds, hunger, and thirst,

Gylippus sent a herald, who was the bearer of a remarkable message.

"Let those of you," he said, "who are natives of the islands subject to

Athens, come over to us, and you shall be free men." The offer was

addressed to the Greeks from the maritime cities of the Aegaean, who

might be supposed to be serving under compulsion, and it speaks volumes

for the loyalty and attachment of these men to Athens that most of them

refused to accept their freedom from the hands of her enemies. At

length, however, the whole army of Demosthenes, which had now dwindled

to six thousand men, was induced to surrender, on condition that none

of them should suffer death by violence, by bonds, or by starvation. At

the command of their captors they gave up the money which they had with

them, and the amount collected was so considerable that it filled the

hollows of four shields. When the capitulation was concluded,

Demosthenes, who had refused to make any terms for himself, drew his

sword, and attempted to take his own life; [Footnote: This interesting

fact is recorded by Plutarch and Pausanias, who copied it from the

contemporary Syracusan historian, Philistus.] but he was prevented from

effecting his purpose, and compelled to take his place in the mournful

procession which was now conducted by a strong guard along the road to

Syracuse.

Meanwhile the vanguard under Nicias, in total ignorance of the fate

which had befallen their comrades, marched steadily forwards, and

crossing the river Erineus, encamped for the night on a neighbouring

hill. Here they were found next morning by Gylippus and the Syracusans,

who informed them that Demosthenes and his men had surrendered, and

called upon them to do the same. Doubting their good faith, Nicias

obtained a truce, while he sent a horseman to ascertain the facts; and

even when he had learnt the truth from his messenger, he still tried to

parley, offering, in the name of the Athenian state, to defray the

whole cost of the war, and to give hostages for payment, at the rate of

an Athenian citizen for each talent, on condition that he and his men

were allowed to go. But the Syracusans were in no mood to listen to

such proposals, even if Nicias had spoken with full authority from

Athens. Bare life they would grant, but no more, and as the Athenians

refused to yield on these terms, they closed in upon them, and the

cruel, hopeless struggle began again, and continued until evening. The

wretched Athenians lay down supperless to snatch a few hours of rest,

intending, when all was quiet, to steal away under cover of darkness.

But when they rose at dead of night, and prepared to march, a shout

from the Syracusan camp warned them that the enemy were on the alert,

and they were compelled to return to their comfortless bivouac. Three

hundred, however, persisted in their intention, and forcing their way

through the Syracusan lines, gained for themselves a brief respite from

capture.

A whole week had now elapsed since the ill-fated army left its quarters

on the shores of the Great Harbour, and a few thousand starving and

weary men were all that remained of that great host. At dawn on the

eighth day Nicias gave the word to march, and they pressed on eagerly

towards the Assinarus, a stream of some size, with high and precipitous

banks, not more than two miles distant from their last halting-place.

They had still some faint hope of making good their escape, if they

could but cross the river. So they fought their way onwards, through

the swarming ranks of the Syracusans, who closed them in on all sides,

and thrust them together into one solid mass. There was life, there was

freedom a little way beyond,--or, if that hope proved futile, at any

rate there was water; and every fibre in their bodies ached and burned

with intolerable thirst. They reached the river; both banks were

already lined by the Syracusan horse, who had ridden on before, and

stood guarding the ford: but there was no stopping the wild rush of

that maddened, desperate multitude. Down the steep bank they plunged,

trampling on one another, and flung themselves open-mouthed upon the

stream, with one thought, one wish, overpowering every other

impulse,--to drink, and then to die. Some fell upon the spears of their

comrades, and perished, others slipped on the floating baggage, lost

their foothold, and were swept away by the flood. Yet still they poured

on, by hundreds and by thousands, drawn by the same longing, and thrust

downwards by the weight of those behind, until the whole riverbed was

filled with a huddled, surging mob of furious men, who drank, and still

drank, or fought with one another to reach the water. All this time an

iron storm of missiles rained down upon them from the thronging hosts

of their enemies on the banks above, while some, in the midst of their

draught, were pierced by the spears of the Peloponnesians, who followed

them into the river, and slew them at close quarters. The water grew

red with blood, and foul from the trampling of so many feet, but the

thirsty multitude still came crowding in, and drank with avidity of the

polluted stream.

For a long time the slaughter raged unchecked, and the river-bed was

choked with heaps of slain. A few, who escaped from the river, were

pursued and cut down by the Syracusan horse. Nicias had held out until

the last moment; but when he perceived that all was lost, his men being

powerless either to fight or fly, he made his way to Gylippus, and

implored him to stop the useless carnage. "I surrender myself," he

said, "to you and the Spartans. Do with me as you please, but put an

end to this butchery of defenceless men." Gylippus gave the necessary

order, and the word was passed round to kill no more, but take captive

those who survived. The order was obeyed, though slowly and with

reluctance, and the work of capture began. But few of those taken in

the river ever found their way into the public gaol, where Demosthenes

was now lying, with the six thousand who had surrendered on the day

before. For, as there had been no regular capitulation, large numbers

of the prisoners were secretly conveyed away by the Syracusans, who

afterwards sold them into slavery for their own profit. As for the

three hundred who had broken out of camp on the previous night, they

were presently brought in by a party of cavalry despatched in pursuit.

When the first transports of joy and triumph were over, an assembly was

called to decide on the fate of the two Athenian generals, and of those

state prisoners, some seven thousand in number, who were the sole

visible remnant of two great armies. Then arose a strange conflict of

motives. The first who put forward his claims was Gylippus, to whose

genius and energy the victorious issue of the struggle was mainly due.

As a reward for his services, he asked that Nicias and Demosthenes

should be left to his disposal, for he wished to have the honour of

carrying home with him these famous captains, one the greatest friend,

the other the greatest enemy of Sparta. But the general voice of the

assembly was strongly against him. Nothing but the blood of the two

principal offenders could satisfy the vengeance of the Syracusans, and

those who had intrigued with Nicias were anxious to put him out of the

way, in fear lest he should betray them. Moreover the Corinthian allies

of Syracuse, who for some reason had a special grudge against Nicias,

demanded his immediate execution. In vain Hermocrates pleaded the cause

of mercy, [Footnote: Plutarch, \_Nicias\_, c. 28.] and urged his

fellow-citizens to make a generous use of their victory. Sentence of

death was passed, and these two eminent Athenians, so different in

character and achievement, were united in their end.

Far worse was the doom pronounced on the six thousand men of

Demosthenes, and the thousand more who were brought to Syracuse after

the massacre at the Assinarus. They were condemned to confinement in

the stone quarries, deep pits surrounded by high walls of cliff, under

the south-eastern edge of Epipolae. Penned together in these roofless

dungeons, they were exposed to the fierce heat of the sun by day, and

to the bitter cold of the autumn nights, and having scarcely room to

move, they were unable to preserve common decency, or common

cleanliness. Many died of their wounds, or of the diseases engendered

by exposure, and their bodies were left unburied, a sight of horror and

a source of infection to the survivors. To these frightful miseries

were added a perpetual burning thirst, and the lingering torture of

slow starvation, for each man received as his daily allowance a poor

half pint of water, and a mere pittance of food, just enough to avoid

breaking the letter of the conditions which Demosthenes had made for

his troops. In this state they were left without relief for ten long

weeks; then all except the Athenians themselves, and their allies from

the Greek cities of Sicily and Italy, were taken out and sold as slaves.

EPILOGUE

Such was the end of the Sicilian Expedition, which ultimately decided

the issue of the Peloponnesian War. Forsaking the wise counsels of

their greatest statesman, and carried away by the mad sophistry of

Alcibiades, the Athenians had committed themselves, heart and soul, to

a wild game of hazard, in which they had little to win, and everything

to lose. By this act of desperate folly they brought on themselves an

overwhelming disaster, from which it was impossible for them wholly to

recover. With wonderful vitality they rallied from the blow, and

struggled on for nine years more, against the whole power of

Peloponnesus, and their own revolted allies, backed by the influence

and the gold of Persia. They gained great victories, and under prudent

leaders they might still have been saved from the worst consequences of

their defeat in Sicily. But at every favourable crisis they wantonly

flung away the advantage they had gained, and abandoned themselves to

blind guides, who led them further and further on the road to ruin.

The history of Thucydides ends abruptly in the twenty-first year of the

war, and for an account of the closing scenes we have to go to the

pages of Xenophon. It will be convenient, therefore, to bring our

narrative to a close at the point which we have reached, for any

attempt even to sketch the events of this confused and troubled period

would carry us far beyond the limits of the present volume. And so for

the present we take leave of the Athenians, in the hour of their

decline. Their light is burning dim, and yet darker days are awaiting

them in the future. But they are still great and illustrious, as the

chief guardians of those spiritual treasures which are our choicest

heritage from the past.

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RETOLD BY H. L. HAVELL B. A.

FORMERLY SCHOLAR OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OXFORD

\_O my poor Kingdom, sick with civil blows!\_

SHAKESPEARE, \_Henry IV\_.

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

In a former volume we have traced the course of events which ended in

the complete overthrow of Xerxes and his great army. Our present task

is to describe the chief incidents in the cruel and devastating war,

commonly known as the Peloponnesian War, which lasted for twenty-seven

years, and finally broke up the Athenian Empire. The cause of that war

was the envy and hatred excited in the other states of Greece by the

power and greatness of Athens; and in order to make our story

intelligible we must indicate briefly the steps by which she rose to

that dangerous eminence, and drew upon herself the armed hostility of

half the Greek world.

We take up our narrative at the point of time when the Athenians

returned to their ruined homes after the defeat of the Persians at

Plataea. Of their ancient city nothing remained but a few houses which

had served as lodgings for the Persian grandees, and some scattered

fragments of the surrounding wall. Their first task was to restore the

outer line of defence, and by the advice of Themistocles the new wall

took in a much wider circuit than the old rampart which had been

destroyed by the Persians. The whole population toiled night and day to

raise the bulwark which was to guard their temples and their homes,

using as materials the walls of the houses which had been sacked and

burnt by the Persians, with whatever remained of public buildings,

sacred or profane, and sparing not even the monumental pillars of

graves in the urgency of their need.

But jealous eyes were watching them, and busy tongues were wagging

against that gallant race of Attica which had been foremost in the

common cause against the barbarian invader. "These Athenians are

dangerous neighbours," was the cry. "Let us stop them from building

their wall, or Athens will become a standing menace to ourselves."

Before long these murmurs reached the ears of the Spartans, and they

sent envoys to dissuade the Athenians from fortifying their city. Their

real purpose was disguised under the mask of anxiety for the general

safety of Greece. "It is not expedient," they urged, "that the

Persians, when next they come against us, should find fencéd cities

which they may make their strongholds, as they have lately done in

Athens and in Thebes. Cease, therefore, from building this wall, and

help us to destroy all such defences, outside of Peloponnesus. If we

are attacked again, we will unite our forces within the isthmus, and

meet the invader from there."

But Themistocles was not the man to be hoodwinked by the simple cunning

of the Spartans. By his advice the Athenians dismissed the envoys,

promising to send an embassy to discuss the matter at Sparta. As soon

as they were gone, Themistocles caused himself to be appointed as head

of the embassy, and set out at once for Sparta, instructing the

Athenians to keep his colleagues back until the wall had been raised to

a sufficient height for purposes of defence. Arrived at Sparta, he kept

himself close in his lodging, and declined all conference with the

authorities, alleging that he could do nothing without his colleagues.

Meanwhile the Athenians were making incredible efforts to carry on the

work which was essential to their liberty and prosperity. Men, women,

and children toiled without intermission, and the wall was rapidly

approaching a defensible height. The clamour of their enemies grew

louder and louder, and angry messages reached the Spartans everyday,

reproaching them with their supineness and procrastination. Being asked

the meaning of these reports, Themistocles professed total ignorance,

and bade the Spartans send men to Athens to see for themselves. The

Spartans did so, and when the men arrived at Athens the Athenians, who

had been privately warned by Themistocles, kept them in custody, as

hostages for their own representatives at Sparta. Themistocles had

meanwhile been joined by his partners in the embassy, and learning from

them that the wall was now of sufficient height, he spoke out plainly,

and let the Spartans understand what his true purpose was. "Athens," he

said, "is once more a fortified city, and we are able to discuss

questions of public or private interest on a footing of equality. When

we forsook all, and took to our ships to fight for the common weal, it

was done without prompting of yours; and that peril being past, we

shall take such measures as concern our safety, without leave asked of

you. And in serving ourselves, we are serving you also; for if Athens

is not free, how can she give an unbiased vote in questions which

concern the general welfare of Greece?"

It was impossible for the Spartans to express open resentment at a plea

so moderate and so reasonable. But they were secretly annoyed to find

that their malice had been detected and exposed; and by this incident

was sown the first seed of ill-will which was afterwards to bear such

bitter fruit for Athens and for Greece. For the present, however, the

affair was ended, and the first step secured for the Athenians in their

career of glory and power.

Themistocles was the first who clearly saw that the future of Athens

lay on the sea. But if Athens was to hold and extend her position as

the first naval power in Greece, it was above all things necessary that

she should have a strong and fortified station for her fleets, her

arsenals, and her dockyards. Nature had provided her with what she

needed, in the peninsula of Peiraeus, which juts out into the Saronic

Gulf, about five miles south-west of the inland town. As soon as the

city-wall was completed, fortifications of immense strength were

carried round the whole of Peiraeus; and within this vast rampart rose

a second city, equal in size to the old one, with streets laid out in

straight lines, and filled with the stir and bustle of a maritime

population. Three land-locked harbours gave ample room for the fleets

of Athens to lie in shelter and safety; and this great sea-port town

was afterwards united to the original city by two long walls, which met

the sea, one at the north-western corner of Peiraeus, and the other at

the south-eastern point of the Bay of Phalerum. Between these, at a

later period, a third wall was built, running parallel to the northern

wall at a distance of about two hundred feet, and known as the Southern

or Middle Wall.

Many years elapsed before these important works were completed; and in

the meantime great events had been happening in other parts of the

Greek world, tending more and more to realise the dream of

Themistocles, and make his beloved city the undisputed mistress of the

sea. After the defeat of the Persian armies and fleets at Salamis,

Plataea, and Mycale, much hard work remained to be done, in reducing

the outlying cities on the coasts of Thrace and in the eastern corners

of the Aegaean, which held out for the Great King. The Spartans were

still nominal leaders of the allied Greek navy; but after a year of

service they resigned this position, which they owed to their

acknowledged supremacy in land warfare, to the Athenians. They were

induced to take this step, partly by their own aversion to foreign

enterprises, and partly by the misconduct of their general Pausanias,

who had disgusted the allies serving under him in the fleet by his

intolerable arrogance and tyranny. The field was thus left open to the

Athenians, who willingly assumed the command offered them by the

maritime cities of Greece, with the object of prosecuting the war

vigorously against Persia. Each city was assessed to furnish a fixed

contribution of ships or money, and the sacred island of Delos was

appointed as the common treasury and meeting-place of the league. Thus

was formed the famous Delian Confederacy, with the avowed purpose of

making reprisals on the Great King's territory for the havoc which he

had wrought in Greece. For a time all went smoothly, and the various

members of the league fought under Athens as her independent allies.

But by degrees the Greeks from the islands and coast-lands of Asia

began to weary of their arduous duties, and murmured against the

Athenians, who proved hard task-masters, and compelled them by force to

perform their part in the bargain. One by one the cities revolted from

the leadership of Athens, were attacked by her navies, and reduced to

the position of subjects and tributaries. Others voluntarily withdrew

from all active co-operation in the war, agreeing to pay a fixed annual

sum as a substitute for service in the fleet. And before the outbreak

of the Peloponnesian War the two powerful islands of Lesbos and Chios

were the only members of the original league who still retained their

independence.

Such were the circumstances which led to the foundation of the Athenian

Empire, which grew up, by the force of necessity, out of the decay of a

confederacy born of a common need, and organised for the special

benefit of the Asiatic Greeks. For the names of the Greek cities on the

coasts of Asia Minor still figured in the Persian tribute-lists; and

the moment that the grasp of Athens relaxed on the confines of the

King's dominions, after the ruinous defeat in Sicily, Persian

tax-gatherers came knocking at the gates of Ephesus and Miletus,

demanding the arrears of tribute. So urgent was the need supplied by

the energy of Athens, and so blind were these Greeks of Asia Minor to

their own interests.

The visible sign of this momentous change, by which the Delian

Confederacy became merged in the Athenian Empire, was the removal of

the treasury from Delos to Athens. The Athenians now undertook the

whole administration of the common fund, using the surplus for the

adornment of Athens by magnificent public buildings. This appropriation

seems reasonable enough, when we consider that the whole burden of

defending the eastern Greeks against Persia, and keeping the barbarian

out of Greek waters, now lay upon Athens. This great public duty, which

had been thrown upon her by the indifference of Sparta, and the unmanly

sloth of her own allies, was faithfully performed; and she might well

ask why she should be called upon to lavish the blood of her own

citizens for nothing. That Athens should be great, splendid, and

powerful, was not only a reward due to her public spirit and devotion

to the common cause, but also a guarantee for the general dignity and

liberty of Greeks. And we, who have still before us the remnants of her

temples and statues, and learn from them what man can accomplish under

the inspiration of great ideals, need not scan too closely her claim to

appropriate the funds which she employed for so noble a purpose. For

this was the great age of Grecian art, the age of Phidias, Polycletus,

Myron, and Polygnotus. The greatest of these was Phidias; and in the

Parthenon, or Temple of the Virgin Goddess, [Footnote: Athene, the

patron goddess of Athens.] built under his direction on the Acropolis

at Athens, he has left the most enduring monument of his fame. He also

designed the Propylaea, a magnificent columned vestibule, fronting the

broad flight of steps which led up to the western entrance of the

Acropolis. But the most renowned of his works was the gigantic statue

of the Olympian Zeus, wrought in gold and ivory, which was the chief

glory of the temple at Olympia. Of this sublime creation, the highest

expression of divinity achieved by the ancients, only the fame

survives. These triumphs of art were not brought to completion until

nearly the close of the period of forty-eight years which separates the

Persian from the Peloponnesian War; and it is now necessary to glance

backward, and touch briefly on the principal events which occurred

after the formation of the Delian Confederacy. The war was carried on

with energy against Persia, and hostilities continued at intervals for

thirty years after the battle of Plataea. [Footnote: B.C. 479-449.]

The chief leader in these enterprises was the heroic Cimon, leader of

the conservative party at Athens, and the great rival of Pericles; and

his most brilliant exploit was a crushing defeat inflicted on the

Persian army and fleet at the mouth of the river Eurymedon in

Pamphylia. But the victorious career of the Athenians received a severe

check twelve years later in Egypt, where a large force of ships and men

was totally destroyed by the Persian general Megabyzus. The war dragged

on for five years longer, and peace was then concluded on terms highly

advantageous to the Greeks. Shortly before this, Cimon, who had been

the chief promoter of the war, died at Cyprus.

The same years which brought to a successful issue the long struggle

with Persia witnessed a renewal of those internal conflicts by which

the energies of Greece were finally exhausted, leaving her an easy prey

to the arms of Macedon. The guilt of renewing these suicidal quarrels

lies with the Spartans, who had long been nursing their grudge against

Athens, and were waiting for the opportunity to inflict on her a fatal

blow. Fifteen years [Footnote: B.C. 464. ] after the battle of Plataea

they seized the occasion when the Athenians were engaged with a large

part of their forces in carrying on operations against the revolted

island of Thasos to prepare an invasion of Attica. But at the very

moment when they were meditating this act of perfidy a double disaster

fell upon them at home, demanding all their exertions to save them from

ruin. Sparta was levelled to the ground by a terrible earthquake, in

which twenty thousand of her citizens perished; and in the midst of the

panic caused by this awful calamity the Helots rose in arms against

their oppressors, and forming an alliance with the Messenian subjects

of Sparta, entrenched themselves in a strong position on Mount Ithome.

Here they maintained themselves for two years, defying all the efforts

of the Spartans to drive them from their stronghold. In spite of their

recent treachery, the Spartans were not ashamed to apply to Athens for

help: and chiefly through the influence of Cimon, whose laurels from

the Eurymedon were still fresh, four thousand Athenian hoplites

[Footnote: Heavy-armed foot-soldiers.] were sent under his command to

aid in dislodging the Helots. The Athenians were famous for their skill

in attacking fortified places; but on this occasion they were

unsuccessful, and the Spartans, whose evil conscience made them prone

to suspicion, at once began to doubt the honesty of their intentions,

and dismissed them with scant ceremony. This unfriendly act helped to

embitter the relations between the two leading cities of Greece; and

two years later, when the Messenians were expelled from Ithome, and

driven into exile, the Athenians settled them with their families at

Naupactus, an important strategic position on the north of the

Corinthian Gulf, which has recently fallen into the hands of Athens.

Deeply offended by the affront received at Ithome, the Athenians now

formed an alliance with Argos, the ancient rival and bitter enemy of

Sparta. Thessaly, connected with Athens by old ties of friendship,

joined the league; and Megara, now suffering from the oppressions of

Corinth, made a fourth.

Within sight of the shores of Attica lies the island of Aegina, famous

in legend as the home of Aeacus, grandfather of Achilles, and

distinguished for its school of sculpture, and for its mighty breed of

athletes, whose feats are celebrated in the laureate strains of Pindar.

The Aeginetans had obtained the first prize for valour displayed in the

battle of Salamis, and for many years they had pressed the Athenians

hard in the race for maritime supremacy. They were now attacked by an

overwhelming Athenian force, and after a stubborn resistance were

totally defeated, and compelled to enroll themselves among the subjects

of Athens. A still harder fate was reserved for the hapless Dorian

islanders in the next generation.

In the following nine years [Footnote: B.C. 456-447.] the power of

Athens reached its greatest height, and for a moment it seemed as if

she were destined to extend her empire over the whole mainland of

Greece. By the victory of Oenophyta, gained over the Boeotians just

before the reduction of Aegina, Athens became mistress of all the

central provinces of the Greek peninsula, from the pass of Thermopylae

to the gulf of Corinth. The alliance of Megara, lately united by long

walls to its harbour of Nisaea, secured her from invasion on the side

of Peloponnesus. The great island of Euboea, with its rich pastures and

fruitful corn lands, had, since the Persian War, become an Athenian

estate, and was jealously guarded as one of her most valuable

possessions; and on the sea, from the eastern corner of the Euxine to

the strait of Gibraltar, there was none to dispute her sway.

But this rapid ascent was followed by no less speedy a fall, and one

act of indiscretion stripped the Athenians of all the advantages which

they had acquired on the mainland of Greece. In every city of Greece

there were always two parties, the wealthy and noble, called oligarchs,

and the demos, or commons; and according as Spartan or Athenian

influence was in the ascendant the balance of power in each city

wavered between the nobles and the people, the Athenians favouring the

Many, the Spartans the Few. Accordingly there was always a party living

in exile, and waiting for a turn of affairs which might enable them to

return to their city, and wrest the power from that faction which had

been the last to triumph. In the cities of Boeotia the leaders of the

oligarchs had been driven into banishment after the battle of

Oenophyta, and democracies were established under the control of

Athens. After nine years of banishment these exiles returned, and the

result was an oligarchical reaction in the chief cities of Boeotia. A

hastily equipped and ill-organised force was sent out from Athens to

put down the authors of the revolution, and in the battle which

followed, at Coronea, [Footnote: B.C. 447.] the Athenians sustained a

severe defeat, and a large number of their citizens were taken

prisoners by the Boeotians. To recover these prisoners the Athenians

consented to evacuate Boeotia, and by this surrender they lost their

hold on central Greece, as far as Thermopylae.

This heavy blow was followed two years later by the revolt of Megara

and Euboea; and in the midst of the alarm thus occasioned, the

Athenians heard that a powerful Spartan army was threatening their

borders. It was a terrible moment for Athens; but she was saved by the

prudence and energy of Pericles, whose influence in her councils was

now supreme. By some means or other--as the Spartans asserted, by a

heavy bribe--he induced the Spartan king Pleistoanax to draw off his

forces; and then crossing over into Euboea, he quickly reduced the

whole island to submission, and took severe measures to prevent any

outbreak in the future.

The exertions of the Athenians during the last thirty years had been

prodigious, and their efforts to found an empire in continental Greece

had ended in total failure. Discouraged by their reverses, they

concluded a thirty years' truce with the Spartans and their allies,

resigning the last remnant of their recent conquests, and leaving

Megara in her old position as a member of the Peloponnesian league

under Sparta. The loss of Megara was severely felt, and her conduct in

the late troubles was neither forgotten nor forgiven. The Megarians had

by their own free choice been admitted into the Athenian alliance, and

in an hour of great peril to Athens, without shadow of pretext they had

risen in arms against her. It was not long before they had to pay a

heavy penalty for their treachery and inconstancy.

The last event which we have to record, before entering into the main

current of our narrative, is the secession of Samos, the most important

member of the maritime allies of Athens. This wealthy and powerful

island had hitherto, with Chios and Lesbos, enjoyed the distinction of

serving under Athens as an independent ally. The Athenians, with a view

to their own interests, had recently set up a democracy in Samos, which

had hitherto been governed by an oligarchy. Incensed by this

interference, the Samian nobles, who had been driven into exile, hired

a mercenary force, and making a sudden attack from the mainland,

overthrew the democracy and raised the standard of revolt. The crisis

called for prompt and vigorous action on the part of Athens; for if

Samos had been successful in defying her authority, the other members

of the league would speedily have followed the example, and the whole

fabric of her empire might have been shattered to pieces. Pericles was

again equal to the emergency, and by employing the whole naval power of

Athens he was able, after a siege of nine months, to reduce the

refractory islanders to submission. The Samians were compelled to

surrender their fleet, to pull down their walls, to pay a heavy war

indemnity, and to give hostages as a security for their good conduct in

the future. And henceforward they became subjects and tributaries of

Athens.

We have now completed our review of the chief events which occurred

between the Persian and Peloponnesian wars. It was a period of rapid

development for Athens, of ceaseless activity at home and abroad, of

immense progress in all the arts of war and peace. The imperial city

had now risen to her full stature, and stood forth, supreme in

intellect and in action, the wonder and envy of mankind. Her mighty

walls bade defiance to her enemies at home, and she held in her hand

the islands and coast-districts of the Aegaean, where the last murmur

of resistance had been quelled. Her recent reverses on the mainland of

Greece had left the real sources of her power untouched; and taught

her, if she would but take the lesson to heart, the proper limits of

her empire. And she had risen to this height, not by the prevailing

force of any single mind, but by the united efforts of all her

citizens, working together for a whole generation, shunning no

sacrifice, and shrinking from no exertion, in their devotion to the

common mother of them all. Every Athenian, from the wealthiest noble to

the poorest rower in the fleet, felt that he had a stake in the

country, which to a Greek meant the city, where he was born. He gave

his vote in the Parliament [Footnote: Called the Ecclesia.] of Athens,

and served on the juries chosen by lot from the whole body of the

citizens, before whose judgment-seat, unassailable by bribery or

intimidation, the mightiest offenders trembled. He was a statesman, a

judge, a lawgiver, and a warrior, and he might even hope to climb to

the highest place in the State, and rule, like Pericles, as a prince of

democracy. Around him rose the temples and statues of the gods, fresh

from the chisel of the artist, the visible symbols of Athenian

greatness, and of the grand ideals which he served. The masterpieces of

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides opened to him the boundless realms

of the imagination, taught him grave lessons of moral wisdom, and

connected the strenuous present with the heroic past; and the Old

Comedy, the most complete embodiment of the very genius of democracy,

afforded a feast of wit and fancy for his lighter hours. If he had a

taste for higher speculation, he might hear Anaxagoras discoursing on

the mysteries of the spiritual world, or Zeno applying his sharp tests

for the conviction of human error. And when the assembly was summoned

to discuss matters of high imperial policy, he felt all the greatness

and majesty of the Athenian state, as he hung entranced on the lips of

Pericles.

Such was Athens in her prime, and such were the men who raised her to

the lofty eminence which she held among the cities of Greece. But the

years which had lifted her to that unparalleled height had raised up a

host of enemies against her, and it behoved her to temper ambition with

prudence if she would maintain the proud position which the held. The

scattered units which composed the Athenian empire were held together

by no tie of loyalty or affection to their common mistress, but solely

by the dread of her overwhelming naval power. Even in the noblest

spirits of ancient Greece, the feeling of patriotism, as we understand

it, was feeble and uncertain; when we speak of our \_country\_, the Greek

spoke of his \_city\_, and his love, his hopes, his highest aspirations,

were bounded by the narrow circuit of the walls which contained the

tombs of his ancestors and the temples of his gods. This feeling, the

most deeply-rooted instinct of Greek political life, had been

grievously offended by Athens, when she compelled the islanders of the

Aegaean, and the Greek cities of Asia, to serve in her navies, and pay

tribute to her exchequer.

Turning now to the mainland of Greece we find, in most of the leading

states, a sentiment of mingled fear and hatred against Athens, which

had been steadily increasing in volume in the course of the last thirty

years. The haughty Thebans had not forgotten their defeat at Oenophyta,

and their nine years of servitude to Athens. Aegina was groaning under

her yoke, and threatened with total political extinction. Megara

complained that her commerce was ruined by a decree which excluded her

merchants from the ports in the Athenian Empire. In the heart of

Peloponnesus the Spartans were hatching mischief against their hated

rival, who had robbed them of half their dignity as the acknowledged

leaders of the Greeks. Corinth, whose commerce was chiefly in the

western sea, outside the sphere of Athenian influence, was disposed to

be friendly, and had done the Athenians good service during the revolt

of Samos.[Footnote: See below, p. 31.] But five years later [Footnote:

B.C. 435.] an event occurred which changed this feeling into bitter

hatred against Athens, and drove the Corinthians into the ranks of her

most inveterate foes. And it is at this point that we take up the main

thread of our story.

STORIES FROM THUCYDIDES

CORINTH AND CORCYRA

I

It was in a remote corner of the Greek world that the trouble began

which was destined to breed such mischief and havoc for the whole of

Greece. At the beginning of the seventh century before our era the

island of Corcyra had been colonised by the Corinthians. The colony

grew and flourished, and in its turn founded other settlements on the

opposite coasts of Epirus and Illyria. Among these was Epidamnus,

called by the Romans Dyrrachium, and in Roman times the ordinary

landing-place for travellers from Italy to Greece. After many years of

prosperity the resources of Epidamnus were much crippled by internal

faction, and by wars with the neighbouring barbarians. Four years

before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, the nobles of Epidamnus,

who had been expelled in the last revolution, made an alliance with the

native tribes of Illyria, and by constant plundering raids reduced the

Epidamnians to such straits that they were compelled to apply to

Corcyra for help. But the Corcyraeans, whose sympathies were on the

side of the banished nobles, refused to interfere.

Epidamnus, as we have seen, was a colony founded by a colony, and

according to Greek custom the original settlers had been led by a

citizen of Corinth, the mother-city of Corcyra. Seeing, therefore, that

they had nothing to hope from the Corcyraeans, the distressed people of

Epidamnus began to turn their thoughts towards their ancient

metropolis, and considered whether they should appeal to her to save

them from ruin. But as this was a step of doubtful propriety, they

first consulted the oracle of Delphi, the great authority on questions

of international law. Receiving a favourable answer, they sent envoys

to Corinth, and offered to surrender their city to the Corinthians, in

return for their countenance and protection.

The Corcyraeans had long been in evil odour at Corinth, for they had

grown insolent in prosperity, and neglected all the observances which

were due from a colony to the mother-city. They were, in fact, superior

to the Corinthians in wealth and power, and their fleet, numbering a

hundred and twenty triremes, was second only to that of Athens. Corcyra

was famous in legend as the seat of the Phaeacians, a heroic sailor

race, whose deeds are sung by Homer in the \_Odyssey\_; and the

Corcyraeans regarded themselves as the lawful inheritors of their fame.

For all these reasons they despised the Corinthians, and made no secret

of their contempt. Remembering the many occasions on which they had

been publicly insulted by Corcyra, the Corinthians lent a favourable

ear to the petition of Epidamnus, and determined to appropriate the

colony to themselves. Accordingly they invited all who chose to go and

settle at Epidamnus, and sent the new colonists under a military

escort, with instructions to proceed by land to Apollonia, for fear

lest they should be obstructed by the Corcyraean fleet, if they went by

sea.

Great was the indignation at Corcyra when the news arrived that her

colony had been surrendered to Corinth, and a force of forty ships was

sent off in haste, bearing a peremptory demand to the Epidamnians that

they should receive back their exiles and send away the new colonists.

As the citizens refused to obey their mandate, they prepared to lay

siege to the town, which is situated on an isthmus.

When the Corinthians heard of the danger of Epidamnus, they began to

make preparations on a much larger scale, collecting a host of new

colonists, and a fleet of seventy-five ships to convoy them on their

passage to Epidamnus. Apprised of these proceedings, the Corcyraeans

sent envoys to Corinth, with a civil remonstrance against the arbitrary

interference with their own colony. They were willing, they said, to

submit the matter to arbitration, and in the meantime to suspend all

hostilities against the revolted city. But the Corinthians paid no

attention to their overtures, and all being now ready, the great

multitude, drawn from all parts of Greece, set sail for Epidamnus. When

they reached Actium, at the mouth of the Ambracian Gulf, they were met

by a herald, sent out from Corcyra in a skiff, to forbid their

approach. This was a mere manoeuvre, to throw the guilt of commencing

hostilities on the Corinthians; and meanwhile the Corcyraeans manned

their ships, to the number of eighty, and put out to meet the enemy's

fleet. In the sea-fight which followed the Corcyraeans gained a

complete victory, and on the same day Epidamnus was compelled to

capitulate to the besieging force.

By this victory the Corcyraeans gained complete command of the western

or Ionian sea, and for the rest of the summer they sailed from place to

place, plundering the allies of Corinth. The Corinthians, however, were

not at all disposed to acquiesce in their defeat, and during the whole

of the following year they were busy organising a fresh expedition on a

vast scale, being resolved at all costs to put down the insolence of

Corcyra. These preparations caused no small anxiety to the Corcyraeans.

Hitherto they had stood apart, and refused to take any share in the

complicated game of Greek politics. The course of affairs during the

last forty years had tended more and more to divide the Greek world

into two opposite camps, arrayed under the banners of Athens and

Sparta. As Dorians, the Corcyraeans would naturally have enrolled

themselves among the allies of Sparta,--as islanders and seamen, they

might have leaned to the side of Athens: but confident in their remote

situation, and in the power of their fleet, they had chosen to remain

neutral. But finding themselves threatened with destruction, they now

resolved to abandon their policy of selfish isolation, and sue for

admission into the Athenian alliance. Ambassadors were sent to Athens

to urge their plea; and the Corinthians, hearing of their intention,

sent representatives of their own to oppose the application.

The Athenians were fully alive to the gravity of the question which

they were called upon to decide, and after listening to the arguments

of the Corcyraean and Corinthian orators, they adjourned the debate

until the next day. To Corinth they were bound by old ties of

obligation; for on three distinct occasions the Corinthians had done

them signal service. More than seventy years before the date which we

have reached, the Spartans summoned their allies to consider whether it

was expedient to compel the Athenians to receive back the banished

tyrant Hippias; and it was chiefly by the eloquence of the Corinthian

speaker Sosicles, who drew a vivid picture of the miseries of

despotical government, that they were shamed out of their purpose. A

few years later, when the Athenians were at war with Aegina, they were

aided by twenty Corinthian ships. And quite recently, in the great

peril which menaced Athens at the revolt of Samos, Corinth had once

more shown herself a friend. At a congress of the Peloponnesian allies,

summoned to consider an appeal from the Samians for help, the

Corinthians had spoken strongly against interference with the revolted

allies of another city. Corinth was a place of old renown, the queen of

the Isthmus, a centre of civilisation; whereas Corcyra was a remote

island, and her people, though Greeks by descent, were in manners and

character more than half barbarians.

But there were two arguments put forward by the Corcyraean orator,

which outweighed all other considerations of policy or friendship. The

first was addressed to the fears of the Athenians, the second to their

ambition. War, he argued, was inevitable, and it was of the utmost

importance for Athens to secure the alliance of the Corcyraean fleet,

and prevent it from being added to the naval forces of her enemies. And

his concluding words struck a note which found a response among the

more daring spirits among his hearers, whose thoughts, as it would

seem, were already turning to the western colonies of Greece, as a new

field of enterprise and conquest. "It will not do," he said, "to be too

nice. While you are hesitating, and weighing nice points of

international right, you will be outdistanced in the race for power, if

you tamely give up a great naval station which holds the key to Italy

and Sicily."

Such reasoning, hollow and false as it was, turned the scale in favour

of Corcyra, and a defensive alliance was concluded, pledging the

Athenians and Corcyraeans to aid each other against any attack on the

territory or allies of either state. For the Athenians wished to avoid

breaking the Thirty Years' Truce, and therefore refrained from entering

into any agreement which might oblige them to acts of open aggression

against Corinth.

There can be little doubt that Pericles, who was mainly responsible for

this decision, committed a fatal error in advising the Athenians to

take up the cause of Corcyra. By this act Athens incurred the

implacable hostility of Corinth, and revived the old grudge which that

city had conceived against her when Megara joined the Athenian

alliance. In the constantly shifting currents of Greek politics, Athens

might well, under wise guidance, have steered her way safely through

the perils which surrounded her. The Corinthians had half forgotten

their grievance, as is proved by their conduct at the revolt of Samos;

and the tone of their representative at the Corcyraean debate is

decidedly friendly. The Spartans were sluggish and procrastinating by

nature, and required some powerful impulse to induce them to act with

vigour; and this impulse was now supplied by Corinth. By accepting,

therefore, the alliance of Corcyra, Athens barred the way to all

compromise, and gathered into one head all the scattered causes of

jealousy and hatred which had been accumulating against her in the last

fifty years.

Early in the following year the Corinthian fleet, numbering a hundred

and fifty sail, put to sea from Corinth, to renew the war with Corcyra,

and a battle was fought off the coast of Epirus. The engagement was

long and fierce, and the event was finally decided by a small squadron

of Athenian ships, which had been sent with instructions to hinder any

attempt of the enemy to land on the island Seeing that the Corcyraeans

were being forced back upon their own coast, the Athenian captains, who

had hitherto looked on, and taken no part in the battle, now assumed

the offensive, and lent such effectual aid that the Corinthians were

held in check until the sudden appearance of twenty additional ships

from Athens, which had been sent off immediately after the others, put

an end to the action. This timely interference saved Corcyra from ruin;

for next day the Corinthians, after a formal remonstrance, set sail for

home, taking with them two hundred and fifty prisoners, belonging to

the noblest families in Corcyra, whom they kept in safe custody, but

treated with great consideration, hoping by means of them at some

future time to recover their influence in the island.

II

It was not long before the effects of this impolitic breach with

Corinth were sensibly felt by Athens. In the course of the following

summer, Potidaea, a Corinthian colony, situated on the borders of

Macedon, and included in the Athenian alliance, openly raised the

standard of revolt, encouraged by promises from Sparta, and by the

presence of a strong body of hoplites, sent for its support from

Corinth. Potidaea was presently closely invested by an Athenian army

and fleet, and the Corinthians pretended to make this a fresh ground of

complaint, though they had themselves incited the city to throw off its

allegiance to Athens.

Feeling that matters were now approaching a crisis, the Spartans

summoned a congress of their allies, and invited all who had any

grievance against Athens to state their case. Then some spoke of the

wrongs of Aegina, formerly not the least among Greek cities, but now so

crushed under the yoke of Athens that she had not dared to raise her

voice openly against the tyrant-city. The Megarians complained of the

restrictions on their commerce, which threatened them with an empty

exchequer and a starving population; and others followed in the same

strain. When all the rest had spoken, the Corinthian orator, who had

reserved his eloquence till the end, came forward and delivered a

vehement harangue, containing hardly any specific charge against

Athens, but well calculated to inflame the passions and provoke the

pride of the Spartans. Though the acknowledged leader of Greece, and

champion of her liberties, Sparta, he said, had always been the last to

see the dangers which menaced the common country, and the last to take

measures for her defence. Spartan apathy and indolence had brought the

Greeks to the brink of ruin in the Persian War; and when that danger

was passed, the same fatal indifference had enabled Athens to advance

step by step on the path of aggrandisement; until now she had grown so

strong that the united force of the whole Peloponnesian league would be

required to put her down. Why had not the Spartans listened to the

warnings which they had heard, when the Athenians were rebuilding their

walls? Then they might have stopped the evil at its source, and saved a

multitude of cities from slavery and oppression. "Consider," cried the

orator, warming to his subject, "what manner of men these Athenians

are, and how vast is the difference between them and you. While you are

shut up in this inland valley, treading the dull round of mechanical

routine, they are continually pushing forward the boundaries of their

empire, toiling night and day to make their city great, never satisfied

with what they have, always thirsting for more. Cautious, timid, and

conservative as you are, hardly to be roused from your sloth by the

most imminent perils, how can you hope to curb the flight of Athenian

ambition, which knows no limit, and is checked by no reverse?

"Men of Sparta, I speak as a friend, and you will not take my candour

amiss. New times require new manners, and if you would maintain your

great position you must move with the march of events, and abandon your

old-fashioned ways. Do not mistake stagnation for stability, but learn

a lesson even from these hated Athenians, who have risen to their

present pitch of greatness by adapting themselves to every new need as

it arose.

"You know what you have to do, if you would wipe out the reproach which

rests upon you, and keep the respect of your faithful allies. Send an

army into Attica, and compel the Athenians to withdraw their forces

from Potidaea. And let it be done speedily, for while we are talking

our kinsmen are perishing."

It happened that an Athenian embassy was present in Sparta, having been

sent there on some other business, and not for the purpose of

representing Athens at the debate. But when they heard of the outcry

which had been raised against their city, the envoys asked permission

for one of their number to address the Spartan assembly, wishing to

explain the true character and origin of the Athenian Empire, and to

warn the Spartans against plunging the whole country into the horrors

of civil war. Leave being granted, the Athenian orator entered on his

subject by sketching the course of events for the last sixty years.

Athens, he said, had twice saved Greece, first at Marathon, and

afterwards at Salamis. On the first of these occasions she had stood

almost alone against an overwhelming force of Persians; and ten years

later, though betrayed by her allies, she had borne the brunt against

the navy of Xerxes. Who, then, was worthier than she to hold empire

over Greeks? That empire had been forced upon her by the inertness of

Sparta, and by the cowardice and sloth of her own allies in the Delian

league. The power thus gained had been used with moderation, in marked

contrast to the previous tyranny of Persia exercised over the same

cities, and the arrogance of Spartan officers when engaged on foreign

service. But a light yoke, it would seem, was harder to bear than a

heavy one; if Athens had openly oppressed her subjects, she would never

have heard a murmur.

Having thus tried to combat the prejudice against Athens, the orator

addressed himself directly to the Spartans, and said: "Consider the

awful responsibility which you will incur, if you suffer yourselves to

be carried away by the invectives of your allies, and drive us against

our will to tempt with you the dark uncertainties and perilous issues

of war. There is still time for an amicable settlement of our

differences: Athens is prepared to make all reasonable concessions, and

to submit to arbitration, as the terms of the treaty direct. And if you

decline to accept this offer, the guilt of the aggressor will lie with

you."

It is remarkable that the speaker, in tracing the later course of

Athenian policy, lays no claim to those high motives of patriotism

which had inspired his people with sublime self-devotion two

generations back. He boldly asserts the principle that it is lawful for

the stronger to rule the weaker, and claims merit for Athens in

abstaining from excessive abuse of her power. The Athenians, we may

believe, had been tainted by the baseness of their confederates. In the

early days of the Delian league they had not attempted to educate the

Greeks whom they led up to the standard of their own splendid

zeal,--or, if the attempt had been made, it was unsuccessful. They had

taken upon themselves the whole burden of a great public duty, and

standing alone, without moral support from their countrymen, they had

gradually fallen away from the pure and lofty virtues of their

ancestors. This decay of public morality proceeds with rapid strides in

the years which follow, and we shall presently hear the doctrine that

might is right proclaimed with cynical frankness by the lips of an

Athenian.

Having heard the complaints of their allies against Athens, and the

reply of the Athenian orator, the Spartans ordered all but those of

their own race to withdraw, and continued the debate with closed doors.

A great majority of the speakers were in favour of declaring immediate

war on Athens. But there was one important exception: the aged

Archidamus, who for the last fourteen years had been reigning as sole

king at Sparta, spoke strongly against the imprudence of assuming the

aggressive, before they had made adequate preparations to cope with the

offending city. It was an opinion generally held by the war-party that

the Athenians would be ready to make any concessions, in order to save

the land of Attica from ravage. This, said Archidamus, was a great

error; and the event proved that he was right. The Athenians, with

their great colonial empire, and complete command of the sea, were

quite independent of the products of their own estates in Attica. And

many years must elapse before the states of Peloponnesus could train a

fleet, and attack them on the sea, where alone they were assailable. It

was folly to suppose that such a contest could be decided by a single

summer campaign, as was commonly believed by the enemies of Athens. "I

fear rather," said the king, with prophetic foresight, "that we shall

leave this war as an inheritance to our children; such is the power,

and such the pride, of the state with which we have to contend." On the

other hand, the Spartans, as champions of the liberties of Greece, must

not allow the common oppressors of their countrymen to continue their

career of tyranny unchecked. Let them first, however, try what could be

effected by negotiation, and in the meantime prepare for war, by

building ships, and above all by collecting money, without which all

their valour would be useless. Then, if Athens still refused to listen

to reason, they might declare war with better hope of success.

The speech of Archidamus shows a true insight into the nature of the

crisis which the Spartans were called upon to face, and his views were

amply justified by subsequent events. His wise words were no doubt

applauded by the older and more sober-minded among his hearers. But

there was another and a much more numerous party at that time in

Sparta, filled with bitter envy and hatred against Athens. Their

passions had been inflamed by the invectives of the Corinthian orator,

and without counting the cost they were resolved to try the issues of

immediate battle. Their blind rancour found expression in the curt and

pithy harangue of Sthenelaidas, one of the five Ephors, a college of

magistrates which in recent years had greatly encroached on the

authority of the kings. Sthenelaidas spoke with true laconic brevity.

"I don't understand," he said, "all the fine talk of these Athenians.

They have told us a great deal about their own merits, but have not

said a word in answer to the charges brought against them. Even if we

accept their own account of themselves, their good conduct in the past

only lends a darker colour to their present crimes. We have one plain

duty to perform, and that is to save our faithful allies from

ill-treatment. The time for words is past--leave them to the

transgressor. Our part is to act, at once, and with all our might, and

put down the overwhelming insolence of Athens."

Then, in his capacity as Ephor, Sthenelaidas, without staying for

further argument, forthwith put the question to the Spartan assembly.

According to their ordinary procedure, the Spartans gave their votes by

cries of "Ay" and "No." But on this occasion Sthenelaidas pretended to

be unable to distinguish whether the "Ays" or "Nos" had it, and wishing

to encourage the war-party by showing how much they were in the

majority, he ordered the house to divide on the question whether the

treaty was broken, and whether the Athenians were in the wrong or not.

The division was made, and a great majority were in favour of the

motion, recording their votes against Athens. The allies were then

called in, and informed to the result of the private debate, and a day

was named for a general synod of the whole Peloponnesian league, to

reconsider the situation and decide whether war was to be declared.

In the interval, before the final assembly of the allies, the Spartans

sent to ask the oracle at Delphi whether it was expedient for them to

make war; and the answer, according to common report, was that if they

fought with all their might they would conquer, and that the god

[Footnote: Apollo.] would be on their side. The Corinthians were at the

same time carrying on an active canvass against Athens, sending their

agents from city to city to blow up the flames of war.

In the autumn of the same year the allies met in full synod at Sparta,

and once more the Corinthian speaker led the cry against Athens, and

called for a unanimous war-vote, flattering his hearers with hopes of a

speedy victory. The Spartans, he said, had at last set a good example

to their allies, and shown themselves convinced that imperial cities

had imperial obligations, by pronouncing in favour of war. Every member

of the league must join heartily in the struggle, whether he belonged

to an inland or to a maritime city; for if the seaports were closed by

the Athenian fleets, the inland towns would be prevented from exporting

their products, and importing what they wanted from abroad. War, then,

was in the interest of the whole body of allies. And on the moral side

their position was equally sound, for they were only acting on

desperate provocation, and the common god of Greece had promised

success to their arms. But to deserve that success, all must co-operate

heartily, contributing freely from their private purses to raise a

fleet which would make them a match for Athens on her own element. And

they must watch the course of events with a vigilant eye, and be ready

to seize any opportunity which might arise to aim a decisive blow at

their common enemy. Let them be warned by the experience of the

Ionians, and put out all their strength to save themselves from being

swallowed up by the devouring ambition of Athens. Justice, heaven's

favour, the good-will of all Greece, were on their side.

Others spoke to the same effect, and then the representatives of each

city were called up in turn to give their vote; and by far the greater

number voted for war. But many months elapsed before any overt act of

hostility occurred, and the time was occupied in preparations for an

invasion of Attica, and in a series of demands sent by Sparta to try

the temper of the Athenians, and put them in the wrong, if they refused

to comply. The first of these messages was conveyed in mysterious

terms, bidding the Athenians "to drive out the curse of the goddess."

The meaning of this was as follows: nearly two hundred years before a

certain Cylon tried to make himself tyrant of Athens: the attempt was

frustrated, and some of his adherents, who had taken refuge in the

sacred precinct of Athene, were put to death by the magistrates, after

they had surrendered under a solemn promise that their lives should be

spared. The illustrious family of the Alcmaeonidae was especially

concerned in this act of murder and sacrilege, and the Spartans, in

reviving the memory of an ancient crime, were aiming a blow at

Pericles, who was descended on his mother's side from the Alcmaeonidae.

For the Athenians were highly sensitive in all matters of religion, and

it was possible that they might even banish Pericles, if their

consciences were suddenly alarmed. And though this was not likely, the

Spartans hoped at any rate to lessen his influence, which was adverse

to themselves, and fasten on him the odium of being, in some sense, the

cause of the war. But their manoeuvre was unsuccessful, and the

Athenians retorted by bidding the Spartans drive out the curse of

Taenarus, in allusion to the murder of certain Helots who had taken

sanctuary in the temple of Poseidon at Taenarus. And they further

charged the Spartans to rid themselves of the curse of Athene of the

Brazen House. This was a holy place in Sparta, where Pausanias, when

convicted of treasonable correspondence with Persia, had sought refuge

from the vengeance of the Spartans. He was kept a close prisoner in the

temple by the Ephors, who set a watch on him, to prevent him from being

supplied with food, and when he was reduced to the last extremity,

brought him out to die. But though his death occurred outside the

temple, this did not save them from the sin of sacrilege, and a public

reprimand by the Delphic God.

The game of diplomatic fencing went on for some time, and envoys were

continually passing to and fro between Athens and Sparta. The Athenians

were required to raise the siege of Potidaea--to allow the Aeginetans

to govern themselves--to rescind the decree against Megara; and when

all these demands were met by a firm refusal, the Spartans sent two

ambassadors, bearing their ultimatum, which was worded as follows: "The

Lacedaemonians wish that there should be peace, and war may be averted

if ye will let the Greeks go free." Knowing that the decisive moment

had now arrived, the Athenians met together in full assembly, to decide

on their final answer. There were many speakers on either side, some

arguing for peace, others for war: and then was heard that majestic

voice, which, for more than thirty years, had guided the counsels of

Athens--the voice of the Olympian Pericles. He had chosen his line of

policy a year before, in the fatal affair of Corcyra, and it was now

too late to draw back: peace with honour was no longer possible for

Athens. The furious zeal of Corinth had united her enemies against her,

and they were bent on her ruin. The demands put forward by Sparta were

a mere pretext, and if the Athenians had yielded the smallest point,

new concessions would have been required of them, until they were

stripped of all that had been won by the strenuous toil and devotion of

two generations. "We must listen," said Pericles, in the course of a

long speech, "to no proposal from Sparta which is not made as from an

equal to an equal. Dictation is not arbitration. If we are to fight at

all, the occasion matters little, be it small or great. What right has

Sparta to require of us that we should rescind the decree against

Megara, when her own laws jealously exclude all strangers from entering

her streets? Or why should we relax our hold upon our allies, or break

off the relations with them which were sanctioned by the Thirty Years'

Truce? No, all this is a mere pretence, and if we are deceived by it,

we shall be led on step by step to deeper and still deeper humiliation.

It may seem a hard thing to give up the fair land of Attica to pillage

and devastation. But think how far greater was the sacrifice made by

our grandsires, who refused the fairest offers from Persia, and gave up

all they had, rather than betray the common cause. Athens and Attica

were then all the country they had, and these lost they had nothing

left but their ships, their strong arms, and their stout hearts. In our

case, on the other hand, all the essential elements of our power--our

city, our fleet, our colonial empire--remain untouched. Shall we, then,

sell our honour to save a few vineyards and olive-grounds from

temporary damage? That would be a short-sighted policy indeed, and in

the end would involve not only dishonour, but the loss of our whole

empire. Let us act, then, in the spirit of our fathers, and send away

the Spartan ambassadors with the only answer which is consistent with

our dignity and our interest."

The reply to the Spartan ultimatum was framed as Pericles had directed,

and from this moment all negotiations ceased. And here we close our

account of the events which led to the Peloponnesian War.

THE SURPRISE OF PLATAEA

I

On the northern slope of Cithaeron, the mountain range which divides

Attica from Boeotia, lies the little town of Plataea. By race and by

geographical position the Plataeans were naturally included in the

Boeotian confederacy, under the leadership of Thebes. But nearly a

century before the time of which we are now speaking they had deserted

the Thebans, whose rule was harsh and overbearing, and enrolled

themselves among the allies of Athens. On the eve of the battle of

Marathon, they had joined the Athenians with their whole force, a

thousand strong, and shared the peril and the honour of that glorious

day. Ten years later their city was laid in ruins by the army of

Xerxes, at the instigation of the Thebans; and in the following year

the great battle which ended the long struggle between Greece and

Persia was fought within sight of their shattered walls. In gratitude

for this great victory, the confederate Greeks under Pausanias declared

that the Plataean territory should be hallowed ground, and swore a

solemn oath to maintain the independence of the city. But the Thebans

had never forgotten or forgiven the secession of Plataea from the

confederacy of which they were the leaders; and seizing the opportunity

while the Athenians were occupied with measures for their own safety,

they made a treacherous attempt to gain possession of the town.

On a dark and moonless night in the early spring three hundred armed

Thebans appeared before the gates of Plataea, which were opened to them

by a party of the citizens who favoured their design. Marching in a

body to the market-place, they made proclamation by a herald, inviting

all who chose to return to their allegiance, and take sides with their

lawful leaders, the Thebans. For they wished, if possible, to gain over

the place without bloodshed, and before the war had actually broken

out; otherwise, they might have to give it up again on the conclusion

of peace.

The Plataeans, being wakened out of their first sleep, and thinking

that the Thebans were in much greater force than was really the case,

at first attempted no resistance, but were disposed to accept the terms

offered them. But perceiving by degrees that their enemies were far

weaker in numbers than themselves, they changed their minds, and

resolved to attack them. For the party which had betrayed the town was

but small, and the general body of the citizens detested the thought of

falling once more under the supremacy of Thebes. Their measures were

taken with great secrecy and despatch: to avoid exciting the suspicions

of the Thebans, they broke down the dividing walls of their houses, and

passed to and fro unobserved, until they had completed their

preparations. To embarrass the movements of the Thebans, they

barricaded the streets with waggons, and then, just before daybreak,

they poured out of their houses, and fell upon the enemy, who were

still stationed in the market-place. Though taken by surprise, the

Thebans defended themselves stoutly, and standing shoulder to shoulder

repulsed the assault of the Plataeans two or three times. But they were

greatly inferior in numbers, wearied by their long vigil, and soaked

with the heavy rain which had fallen in the night; the Plataeans

returned again and again to the attack, assailing them with furious

cries; and the women and slaves who crowded the roofs added to their

discomfiture, pelting them with tiles and stones, and stunning their

ears with a frightful uproar of yells and shrieks; so that at last

their hearts failed them, and breaking their ranks they fled wildly

through the streets. Some succeeded in reaching the gate by which they

had entered, but only to find that their escape was cut off in this

direction; for one of the Plataeans had closed the gate, using the

spike of his javelin to secure the bolt. Others lost their way in the

narrow and muddy streets, and wandered up and down until they were

slain by the Plataeans. A few contrived to escape by an unguarded

postern-gate, having cut through the bolt with an axe given them by a

woman. Others, in despair, flung themselves from the walls, and for the

most part perished. But a good number, who had kept together, were

caught in a trap; for coming to a large building which abutted on the

wall, and finding the doors open, they thought that they had reached

the town-gate, and rushed headlong in. The pursuers, who were close at

their heels, made fast the doors, and then the question arose what they

should do with their captives. Some proposed to set fire to the

building, and to burn it down, with the Thebans in it; but at last

those who were thus taken, and the few who were still straggling in the

town, were allowed to surrender at discretion.

Meanwhile a strong reinforcement of Thebans, who had started after the

three hundred, were on the way to Plataea; but being delayed by the

state of the roads, and the swollen condition of the Asopus, which they

had to cross, they arrived too late. Being informed of what had

happened, they prepared to plunder the property of the Plataeans

outside the walls, and seize any of the citizens who crossed their

path, to serve as hostages for their own men in the town. The

Plataeans, perceiving their intention, sent a herald to remonstrate,

threatening that unless they desisted, all the Theban prisoners should

at once be put to death. And they promised further, under an oath, that

if the Thebans would withdraw their forces, the captives should be

restored--at least this was the account which was afterwards current at

Thebes, though the Plataeans denied that they had made any such promise

unconditionally, and declared that they had sworn no oath. It seems

probable that the Thebans had received some such explicit assurance as

they asserted; for, on receiving the answer from Plataea, they marched

away without doing any harm. No sooner were they gone than the

Plataeans made all haste to get their property within the walls, and

then put all their prisoners to death. The day was not far distant when

they were bitterly to rue this act of passion, which was not only

cruel, but grossly impolitic; for the Thebans thus slain in cold blood,

a hundred and eighty in number, would have been invaluable as hostages,

whereas the Plataeans had now cut themselves off from all hope of

reconciliation with Thebes, and virtually sealed their own fate.

Two messengers had been despatched from Plataea to Athens, one after

the first entrance of the Thebans, and the second after their defeat

and capture; and the Athenians, on receiving the second message, sent

off a herald bidding the Plataeans to wait for further instructions,

before taking any steps against the prisoners. When the herald arrived,

he found the men already slain, and the Athenians then proceeded to

place the town in a state of defence, removing the women and children

and all those who were unfit for military service, to Athens, and

leaving a small body of their own citizens to direct operations.

II

The surprise of Plataea was the first open violation of the Thirty

Years' Truce, and from this time forward all Greece was involved for

many years in civil war. Public opinion was strongly on the side of the

Spartans, who stood forward as champions of the liberties of Greece;

but there was great enthusiasm on both sides, and the popular

imagination was much excited by the approaching struggle between the

two imperial cities. Both in Sparta and in Athens there was a younger

generation, who had grown up during a long period of peace, and now

entered gaily into the contest with all the light-hearted ignorance of

youth. Old prophecies current among the people, foretelling a great war

of Greeks against Greeks, passed from mouth to mouth, and the

professional soothsayers, whose business it was to collect and expound

such sayings, found eager hearers. The gods themselves could not be

indifferent on the eve of such mighty events, so deeply affecting the

destiny of the nation which worshipped them in a thousand temples; and

an earthquake, which had recently occurred at Delos, the sacred island

of Apollo, where such a visitation had never been known before, was

interpreted as a portent of great things to come.

While the Peloponnesians were mustering their forces at the Isthmus,

the rural population of Attica were breaking up their homes, and

flocking by thousands into the city. A constant stream of waggons

passed along the roads, loaded with furniture, household utensils, and

even the woodwork of the farm-buildings; and many a little group of

women, children, and servants set out on that sorrowful journey,

leaving their fields, their gardens, and their vineyards, to be

trampled down and laid waste by the ruthless invader. Athens, indeed,

was the common mother of them all, their glory, their strength, and

their pride; for since the days of Theseus the scattered rural

communities of Attica had been united under the Aegis of Athene, and

acknowledged Athens as the head and centre of their civic life. But a

large proportion of the Athenian citizens still continued to reside in

the country, and all their dearest associations were connected with the

little spot of earth where they and their fathers were born. Here were

the graves of their ancestors, and the temples of the heroes who were

the guardian spirits of each little aggregate of families. It was

therefore with bitter and resentful feelings that they left these happy

scenes behind them, and turned their steps towards the gates of the

city, through which many of them were never to pass again. For all of

them it was a grievous change from the free and careless life of the

country-side to the confined space, polluted air, and jostling

multitudes of the town, now crowded to overflowing. Some few found

shelter in the houses of friends or relations; but by far the greater

number were obliged to encamp in the open spaces of the city, in the

precincts of temples, or in the narrow room between the Long Walls.

Even a place beneath the Acropolis, called the Pelasgic Field, was now

covered with the huts of the immigrants, though an ancient oracle had

forbidden its occupation under a curse. From day to day new crowds kept

flocking in, and the later comers were obliged to take up their

dwelling in Peiraeus, which was soon almost as much overcrowded as the

upper city.

And now the younger generation of Athenians, who had entered so

cheerfully into the conflict, were to have their first taste of the

grim realities of war. The Peloponnesian army advanced leisurely, and

proceeded at first to Oenoe, an outlying fort near the borders of

Boeotia; for Archidamus, who held the chief command, still hoped that

the Athenians, when they saw the enemy on the confines of Attica, would

make some concessions, to save their farms from destruction. For this

reason he had long delayed his march from the Isthmus, and now wasted

more time in fruitless operations at Oenoe, until the allies began to

murmur against him, and suspected him of receiving bribes from the

Athenians to spare their lands. At last, being unable to put off the

fatal moment any longer, he turned southwards, and after ravaging the

plain of Eleusis, advanced to Acharnae, one of the most fertile and

prosperous districts of Attica, about seven miles north of Athens. Here

the Peloponnesians encamped, and applied themselves systematically to

the work of pillage and havoc.

Great was the rage of the Acharnians, a hardy race of farmers and

charcoal-burners, when they saw the smoke rising from their ruined

homesteads; and their feelings were shared by the general body of the

citizens, who had watched the advance of Archidamus from Eleusis, and

had now no hope of saving their estates. Little knots of angry

disputants were seen in the streets and public places, for the most

part clamouring against Pericles, and demanding to be led against the

invader, while some few argued for the more prudent course. But

Pericles, who knew the fickle temper of the multitude, turned a deaf

ear to all this uproar, and steadily refused to summon an assembly,

lest some hasty resolution should be passed, which would lead to

useless loss of life. In order, however, to relieve the public

excitement, he sent out a body of horsemen to skirmish with the enemy,

and despatched a fleet of a hundred triremes to ravage the coasts of

Peloponnesus.

When the first invasion of Attica was over, two cities, which had been

foremost in stirring up war against Athens, were made to feel the full

weight of her resentment. The unhappy Aeginetans were expelled from

their island, and the land of Aegina was distributed among Athenian

citizens. And later in the same summer the Athenians marched in full

force into the territory of Megara, which was laid waste from end to

end. This proceeding, which afforded a pleasant summer excursion to the

Athenians, was repeated annually for the next seven years. The banished

Aeginetans found an asylum at Thyrea, a coast district of eastern

Peloponnesus, which was assigned to them by Sparta. And so the first

year of the war came to an end; for, except on extraordinary occasions,

no military operations were undertaken during the winter.

THE PLAGUE AT ATHENS

I

At the beginning of the next summer the Peloponnesians again entered

Attica, and resumed their work of devastation, destroying the young

crops, and wrecking whatever had been spared in the previous year.

Before they had been many days in Attica, a new and far more terrible

visitation came upon the Athenians, threatening them with total

extinction as a people. We have seen how the whole upper city, with the

space between the Long Walls, and the harbour-town of Peiraeus, was

packed with a vast multitude of human beings, penned together, like

sheep in a fold. Into these huddled masses now crept a subtle and

unseen foe, striking down his victims by hundreds and by thousands.

That foe was the Plague, which beginning in Southern Africa, and

descending thence to Egypt, reached the southern shores of the

Mediterranean, and passed on to Peiraeus, having been carried thither

by seamen who trafficked between northern Africa and Greece. From

Peiraeus it spread upwards with rapid strides, and before long the

whole space within the walls presented the appearance of a vast

lazar-house.

From the description of the symptoms we may conclude that this epidemic

was similar to that dreadful scourge of mankind which has been almost

conquered by modern science, the small-pox. The patient who had taken

the infection was first attacked in the head, with inflammation of the

eyes, and violent headache. By degrees the poison worked its way into

the whole system, affecting every organ in the body, and appearing on

the surface in the shape of small ulcers and boils. One of the most

distressing features of the disease was a raging thirst, which could

not be appeased by the most copious draughts of water; and the internal

heat, which produced this effect, caused also a frightful irritability

of the skin, so that the sufferer could not bear the touch of the

lightest and most airy fabrics, but lay naked on his bed, in all the

deformity of his dire affliction. Of those who recovered, many bore the

marks of the sickness to their graves, by the loss of a hand, a foot,

or an eye; while others were affected in their minds, remaining in

blank oblivion, without power to recognise themselves or their friends.

The healing art had made great progress in Greece in the course of the

last generation; and in this, as in all else, the Greeks remained the

sole teachers of Europe for ages after. But against such a malady as

this, the most skilful physicians could do nothing, and those who

attempted to exercise their skill caught the plague themselves, and for

the most part perished. Still less, as we may well suppose, was the

benefit derived from amulets, incantations, inquiries of oracles, or

supplications at temples; and at last, finding no help in god or man,

the Athenians gave up the struggle, and resigned themselves to despair.

It is recorded as a curious fact, showing the strange and outlandish

character of the pestilence, that the birds and animals which feed on

human flesh generally shunned the bodies of those who died of the

plague, though they might have eaten their fill, for hundreds were left

unburied. The very vultures fled from the infected city, and hardly one

was seen as long as the pestilence continued.

The fearful rapidity with which the infection spread caused a panic

throughout the city, and even the boldest were not proof against the

general terror. If any man felt himself sickening of the plague, he at

once gave up all hope, and made no effort to fight against the disease.

Few were found brave enough to undertake the duty of nursing the sick,

and those who did generally paid for their devotion with their lives.

In most cases the patient was left to languish alone, and perished by

neglect, while his nearest and dearest avoided his presence, and had

grown so callous that they had not a sigh or a tear left for the death

of husband, or child, or friend. The few who recovered, now free from

risk of mortal infection, did what they could to help their suffering

fellow-citizens.

The mischief was aggravated by the overcrowded state of the city,

especially among those who had come in from the country, and were

living in stifling huts through the intense heat of a southern summer.

Here the harvest of death fell thickest, and the corpses lay heaped

together, while dying wretches crawled about the public streets, and

encumbered the fountain-sides, to which they had dragged themselves in

their longing for drink. All sense of public decency, all regard for

laws, human or divine, was lost. The temples in which they had made

their dwellings were choked with dead, and the sacred duty of burial,

to which the conscience of antiquity attached so high an importance,

was performed in wild haste and disorder. Sometimes those who were

carrying out a corpse found a vacant pile prepared by the relatives of

another victim, flung their dead upon it, set fire to the pile, and

departed; and sometimes, when a body was already burning, others who

were seeking to dispose of a corpse forced their way to the fire, and

threw their burden upon it.

In the general relaxation of public morality all the dark passions of

human nature, which at ordinary times lurk in secret places, came forth

to the light of day, and raged without restraint. Some, who had grown

rich in a day by the death of wealthy relatives, resolved to enjoy

their possessions, and indulge every appetite, before they were

overtaken by the same fate. Others, who had hitherto led good lives,

seeing the base and the noble swept away indifferently by the same

ruthless power, began to doubt the justice of heaven itself, and rushed

into debauch, convinced that conscience and honour were but empty

names. For human laws they cared still less, for in the universal panic

there was none to enforce them, and before the voice of public

authority could be heard again, both judge and transgressor, as they

believed, would be involved in a common doom. All shame and fear were

accordingly thrown aside, and those whom the plague had not yet touched

seemed possessed by one sole desire--to drown thought and care in an

orgy of fierce excess, and then to die.

II

The second invasion of the Peloponnesians was prolonged for forty days,

and the whole Attic territory was laid waste. Pericles again refused to

venture a pitched battle against them, knowing well that the Athenian

army was no match for them in the open field. But a powerful fleet was

sent to cruise round Peloponnesus, which inflicted much damage on the

coast districts. It was a welcome relief to the Athenians selected for

this service to escape for a time from the plague-stricken city; but

unhappily they carried the infection with them, and the crews were

decimated by the same disease. Nor did the evil stop here: for the same

armament being afterwards despatched to Potidaea, to reinforce the

blockading army and fleet, caused a virulent outbreak of the plague

among the forces stationed there, which up till then had been healthy.

After some fruitless operations against the town this second armament

was withdrawn, and returned to Athens with the loss of more than a

thousand men.

After all these disasters the reaction against Pericles, which had

begun with the first invasion of Attica, reached a climax, and on all

sides he was loudly decried by the Athenians, as the author of all

their miseries. Envoys were sent with overtures of peace to Sparta, and

when these returned with no favourable answer, the storm of popular

fury grew more violent than ever. Pericles, who knew the temper of his

people, and had foreseen that some such outbreak would occur, remained

calm and unmoved. But wishing to allay the general excitement, and

bring back the citizens to a more reasonable view of their prospects,

he summoned an assembly, and addressed the multitude in terms of grave

and dignified rebuke. He reminded them that they themselves had voted

for war, and remonstrated against the unfairness of making him

responsible for their own decision. If war could have been avoided

without imperilling the very existence of their city, then that

decision was wrong; but if, as was the fact, peace could only have been

preserved by ruinous concessions, then his advice had been good, and

they had been right in following it. The welfare of the individual

citizen depended on the welfare of the community to which he belonged;

as long as that was secured, private losses could always be made good,

but public disaster meant private ruin. On this principle they had

acted two years before, when they determined to reject the demands of

Sparta. Why, then, were they now indulging in weak regrets, and turning

against him whom they had appointed as their chosen guide and adviser?

Was there anything in his character, any fact in his whole life, which

justified them in suspecting him of unworthy motives? Was he the man to

lead them astray, in order to save some selfish end--he, the great

Pericles, whose loyalty, eloquence, clear-sightedness, and

incorruptibility, had been proved in a public career of more than

thirty years? If any other course had been open to them, he would have

been to blame in counselling war; but the alternative was between that

and degradation. The immediate pressure of private calamity was

blinding them to the magnitude of the interests at stake--Athens, with

all her fond traditions, and all the lustre of her name. That they were

sure of victory he had already declared to them on many infallible

grounds. But seeing them so sunk in despair, he would speak in a tone

of loud assurance, and boldly assert a fact which they seemed to have

overlooked. They were lords of the sea, absolute masters, that was to

say, of half the world! Let them keep a firm grasp on this empire, and

they would soon recover those pretty ornaments of empire--their gardens

and their vineyards--which they held so dear: but, that once

relinquished, they would lose all. Surely this knowledge should inspire

them with a lofty contempt of their foes, a contempt grounded, not on

ignorance or shallow enthusiasm, but on rational calculation. They

could not now descend from the eminence on which they stood. Athens,

who had blazed so long in unrivalled splendour before the eyes of the

world, dared not suffer her lustre to be abated: for her, obscurity

meant extinction. Let them keep this in mind, and not listen to

counsels of seeming prudence and moderation, which were suicidal in a

ruling state. All their calamities, except the plague, were the

foreseen results of their own decision. Now was the time to display

their known courage and patience. Let them think of the glory of

Athens, and her imperial fame.

This memorable speech, the last recorded utterance of Pericles, had the

desired effect. It was resolved to continue the war, and no further

embassies were sent to Sparta. But resentment still smouldered in the

hearts of the Athenians against their great statesman. How fearful was

the contrast between the high hopes with which they had embarked in

this struggle, and the scenes of horror and desolation which lay around

them! From the walls they could see their trampled fields, their

ravaged plantations, and the blackened ruins of their homes. Within,

the pestilence still raged undiminished, and the city was filled with

sounds and sights of woe. Under the pressure of these calamities the

ascendency of Pericles went through a brief period of eclipse, and he

was condemned to pay a fine. Soon, however, he recovered all his

influence, and remained at the head of affairs until his death, which

occurred in the autumn of the following year.

Pericles is the representative figure in the golden age of Athenian

greatness, the most perfect example of that equable and harmonious

development in every faculty of body and mind which was the aim of

Greek civic life at its best. As an orator, he was probably never

equalled, and the effect of his eloquence has found immortal expression

in the lines of his contemporary Eupolis. Persuasion, we are told, sat

enthroned on his lips; like a strong athlete, he overtook and outran

all other orators; his words struck home like the lightning, while he

held his audience enchained, as by a powerful spell; and among all the

masters of eloquence, he was the only one who left his sting behind

him. As a statesman, it was his object to admit every freeborn Athenian

to a share of public duties and privileges; and for this purpose he

introduced the system of payment, which enabled the poorer citizens to

perform their part in the service of the state. His military talents,

though never employed for conquest or aggression, were of no mean

order; and on two occasions of supreme peril to Athens, the revolt of

Euboea, and the revolt of Samos, it was his energy and promptitude

which saved his city from ruin.

But it is as the head of the great intellectual movement which

culminated in this epoch, as the friend of poets, philosophers, and

artists, that Pericles has won his most enduring fame. By his liberal

and enlightened policy the surplus of the Athenian revenues was devoted

to the creation of those wonders of architecture and sculpture, whose

fragments still serve as unapproachable models to the mind of modern

Europe. And under his rule Athens became the school of Greece, the

great centre for every form of intellectual activity, a position which

she maintained until the later period of the Roman Empire.

If, however, we would understand the character of Pericles, and the

spirit of the age which he represents, we must never forget that this

aspect of Athenian greatness, to us by far the most important, was not

the aspect which awoke the highest enthusiasm in him and his

contemporaries. Those things which have made the name of Athens

immortal, her art and her literature, were matters of but secondary

importance to the Athenian of that age. He worshipped his city as a

beloved mistress, and, like a lover, he delighted to adorn her with

outward dignity and splendour. But to lavish all his thought and care

on these external embellishments would have been, in his estimation, a

senseless waste of his highest faculties, as if a lover should make the

robes and jewels of his mistress the objects of his highest adoration.

To make Athens the mightiest state in Greece, to build up the fabric of

her material greatness--these were the objects for which he was ready

to devote the best energies of heart and brain, and if need were, to

lay down his life. He might be skilled in every elegant accomplishment,

an acute reasoner, an orator, a musician, a poet; and to some extent he

was all of these. But before all else he was in the highest sense a

practical man, finding in strenuous action his chief glory and pride.

And such a man was the last to melt into ecstasies over the high notes

of a singer, or dream away his life in the fairyland of poetry.

We have dwelt at some length on the work and character of Pericles, as

his death marks a turning point in Athenian history. From that day

onward the policy of Athens takes a downward direction, denoting a

corresponding decline in Athenian character and aspiration. Pericles

had been able, by his commanding talents and proved integrity, to

exercise a salutary check on the restless energies and soaring ambition

of his countrymen. He had been a true father and ruler of his people,

in evil times and in good, curbing them in the insolence of prosperity,

comforting and exalting them in the dark hour of disaster. But the

government now passed into the hands of weaker men, who, since they

were incapable of leading the people, were compelled to follow it, and

to maintain their position by pandering to the worst vices of the

Athenian character. Rash where they should have been cautious, yielding

where they should have been resolute, they squandered the immense

resources of Athens, and led her on, step by step, to humiliation and

defeat. The course of our narrative will show how easily the Athenians

might have emerged triumphant from the struggle with their enemies, if

they had followed the line of conduct marked out by Pericles. They

might, indeed, have avoided the occasion of offence which led

immediately to the war, and thus have escaped the necessity of fighting

altogether; and this, as we have seen, was the one fatal mistake made

by Pericles. But, once launched in the conflict, they were sure of an

easy victory, if they had only shown a very moderate degree of prudence

and self-restraint. And we need not blame the great statesmen too

harshly for not foreseeing the wild excesses of folly and extravagance

which we shall have to record in the following pages.

INVESTMENT OF PLATAEA

In the third year of the war the usual invasion of Attica was omitted,

and the Peloponnesian army under Archidamus marched against Plataea.

Having pitched their camp before the walls they prepared to lay waste

the territory; but before the work of havoc began, the Plataeans sent

envoys to remonstrate. "Unrighteous are your deeds," said the spokesman

of the embassy, "ye men of Sparta, and unworthy of the men whose sons

ye are. After the victory of Plataea, which ended the struggle against

Persia, Pausanias, the chief captain of the confederate Greeks, offered

sacrifice and thanksgiving at Plataea to Zeus the Liberator, and swore

a solemn oath, both he, and all the Greeks whom he led, to maintain the

independence of our city against all who should assail it. This they

did as a recompense for our valour and devotion in our country's

service. But ye, in direct violation of that oath, have made common

cause with our worst enemies, the Thebans, and have come hither to

enslave us. In the name of the gods who witnessed that covenant, in the

name of every power worshipped alike at Plataea and at Sparta, we

adjure you not to commit this sacrilege, but to leave us in peaceful

possession of the privileges vouchsafed to us on that memorable day."

Such were the words of the Plataeans, to which Archidamus replied as

follows: "Ye say well, men of Plataea, if ye act in the spirit of the

compact to which ye have appealed. The oath which Pausanias swore was

taken in defence of the common liberties of Greece. Against those

liberties a new enemy has arisen, Athens, who holds half our nation in

bondage, and threatens to lay her yoke upon us all. To put down that

tyranny has this great coalition been called together, and if ye are

true men, ye will enlist in the same cause, and take up arms for the

relief of your distressed countrymen. Or at least, if ye cannot do

this, then stand apart from this conflict, helping neither one side nor

the other; and with this we shall be satisfied."

Having heard the answer of Archidamus, the Plataean envoys went back,

and reported his words to their fellow-townsmen. But the Plataeans

replied that, without the consent of the Athenians, they dare not

accept his proposal, as their wives and children had been removed to

Athens. Moreover, they feared that if they remained neutral the Thebans

would seize the opportunity to make another attempt on their town.

"Well, then," answered Archidamus, "we make you this second offer: Hand

over your town and your dwellings to us, the Spartans; keep a strict

account of all your trees, [Footnote: Vines and olive-trees] and of all

else that can be numbered, and retire yourselves to some safe retreat,

as long as the war continues. When it is over, we will restore all your

property, and meanwhile keep the land in cultivation, and pay you a

fixed rent, such as may suffice you."

The offer was fair, and even generous; but the Plataeans were powerless

to act, without the consent of the Athenians, who held their families

as hostages. Accordingly they asked for a truce, to enable them to lay

the proposal before the authorities at Athens, and this being granted,

they sent envoys to Athens, who speedily returned with this answer: "We

have never left you at the mercy of your enemies in the past, since ye

became our allies, nor will we do so now, but will help you to the best

of our power; and we charge you by the oath which your fathers swore

not to depart from your allegiance to Athens."

It was a cruel alternative which was offered to the hapless Plataeans:

either they must leave their wives and children to the vengeance of

Athens, or face the whole power of the confederates, led by Sparta.

True to their character, they chose the nobler part, and determined to

stand by the Athenian alliance. Henceforth no one was allowed to leave

the town, and their final answer was delivered from the walls. They

were unable, they said, to accept the terms offered by Archidamus.

On hearing their decision, the Spartan king made a last solemn appeal

to the powers who presided over the territory of Plataea, a hallowed

precinct, now about to be given up to plunder and ravage: "Ye gods and

heroes, who keep the land of Plataea, bear witness that we had just

cause from the first for marching hither, since the Plataeans had

forsaken the alliance, and that if we do aught against them, we shall

still be justified. For we have made them the fairest offers, but they

would not be persuaded. Therefore let those with whom the guilt lies be

punished, and prosper ye the cause of righteous vengeance."

The siege of Plataea now began in earnest. First the town was

surrounded with a palisade, to prevent anyone from escaping, the

materials being taken from the plantations in the neighbourhood of the

town. Then they raised a mound against the wall, expecting that with so

large a force as theirs they would easily carry the place by storm.

Timber was brought from Cithaeron, and with this they set up two stout

buttresses of cross-beams, at right angles to the town-wall, to serve

as a support on either side of the mound. Within this framework they

piled up fascines, stones, earth, and whatever else was at hand. The

whole army was employed in this task, which was continued for seventy

days and nights without intermission, the men working in regular spells.

Meanwhile the Plataeans had not been idle. First they built a wall of

bricks and timber opposite to the point where the mound was rising, and

resting on the ramparts, in order to raise the height of their

defences. The new wall was covered with hides, raw and dressed, to

protect the timber and the workmen from being injured by burning

arrows. And while this structure was in progress, they made a breach in

the old wall, and carted away the earth from the bottom of the mound.

To prevent this, the Peloponnesians filled up the space thus caused

with heavy masses of clay, rammed tightly into baskets of osier, which

made a solid structure, much harder to remove than the loose earth.

Then the Plataeans had recourse to another device: marking carefully

the position of the mound, they ran a mine from the city under it, and

as fast as the earth fell in, they carried it away. This continued for

a long time, for the Peloponnesians, who saw their mound rising no

higher, for all their labour, but rather growing less, did not guess

the cause, but went on heaping up materials, which were swallowed up as

fast as they were brought.

Still the Plataeans feared that in spite of these counterworks they

would at length be overpowered by numbers, unless they contrived some

better means of defence. So they left off building the wall of bricks

and timber, and beginning at either end of it, they built a

crescent-shaped wall, curving inwards towards the city. Thus the

Peloponnesians, if they succeeded in carrying the first wall, would

find themselves confronted by a second line of defence, and would have

all their work to do over again, besides being exposed to a cross-fire.

While the Plataeans were thus vigorously defending themselves, and

before the mound was completed, the Peloponnesians brought

siege-engines to bear on the wall, one of which greatly alarmed the

besieged garrison, by severely shaking their wall of timber and bricks.

But this new mode of attack was frustrated, like the rest, by the

ingenuity of the Plataeans, who dropped nooses over the ends of the

battering-rams, and drew them up just before the moment of impact.

Moreover they suspended heavy beams of wood at intervals along the

wall, each beam hanging by long chains from two cranes which rested on

the wall and projected outwards from it; and whenever a ram was being

brought up, they drew up the beam at right angles to it, and then,

letting go the chains, dropped the ponderous timber, which came

crashing down on the ram, and broke off its head.

Thus baffled at every point, the Peloponnesians began to despair of

taking the town by assault, and thought that they would be compelled to

form a blockade. But before being driven to this costly and tedious

operation, they determined to try and set fire to the place, which

seemed possible, as it was but small in extent. So they waited till the

wind was in the right direction, and then brought vast quantities of

faggots, and threw them into the space between the mound and the wall;

and this being soon filled up, they piled up more faggots as far as

they could reach within the city itself, and then throwing in lighted

torches, with brimstone and pitch, they set fire to the whole mass.

Then arose a great sheet of flame, such as had never been raised by

human hands, though not, of course, to be compared to the vast

forest-fires, produced by natural means; yet it was sufficient to cause

a panic among the Plataeans, and bring their town to the verge of

destruction. The heat was so intense that a whole quarter of the place

was cleared of its defenders, and if a wind had arisen to drive the

flame inwards, nothing could have saved the whole town from

destruction. [Footnote: Thucydides seems to imply that there was a

wind, though a slight one.] But fortunately the breeze was but slight,

and it is said also that a heavy fall of rain came on, and quenched the

conflagration.

Having failed in their last attempt, the Peloponnesians sent away part

of their army, and employed those who remained in building a blockading

wall round Plataea. The work was completed towards the end of

September, and they then disbanded their army, leaving a force

sufficient to guard half the wall; for the Thebans, relentless in their

zeal against Plataea, took charge of the other half. The number of the

besieged was four hundred and eighty, of whom eighty were Athenians,

and a hundred and ten women to make bread for the garrison.

NAVAL VICTORIES OF PHORMIO

I

During the last half-century the art of naval warfare had made great

progress in Greece. The Greek war-galley, or trireme, a vessel

propelled by three banks of oars, had always been furnished with a

sharp-pointed prow, for the purpose of ramming an opponent's ship; but

many years elapsed before the Greeks attained genuine skill in the use

of this formidable weapon. According to the ordinary method of

fighting, after the first shock of collision the affair was decided by

the hoplites, or heavy-armed infantry, stationed on the decks of the

two contending ships; and in this manner was fought the engagement

between the Corcyraean and Corinthian fleets which occurred in the

year before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. There the ship was

simply a vehicle, which served to bring the antagonists together, and

the rest was left to the prowess of the hoplites.

The Athenians were the first to abandon this crude and clumsy style of

fighting, and in the course of two generations their seamen had become

renowned throughout Greece for the unrivalled skill which they showed

in working and manoeuvring the trireme. A few hoplites were still

carried, to serve in cases of emergency; but by far the most important

part in the encounter was played by the trireme itself, with its long,

tapering, sharp-pointed prow. To use this deadly but delicate

instrument with effect required great coolness, dexterity, and

judgment, on the part of the steersman, and a crew under perfect

command. The tactics usually employed were as follows: watching his

opportunity, the captain gave the order "full speed ahead!" and darting

rapidly through the enemy's line, wheeled suddenly round, and drove the

beak of his galley with terrible force against the stern or side of the

vessel selected for attack. One blow from the long lance-like point,

propelled by the whole weight and impetus of the trireme, was

sufficient to sink or disable an enemy's ship, and the attacking galley

was then backed away from the wreck, and directed against another

victim.

The incessant practice of nearly half a century had enabled the

Athenians to attain consummate mastery in this new method of naval

warfare; and they were now to give signal proof of their immense

superiority over the other maritime powers of Greece.

In the same summer which witnessed the investment of Plataea, the

Spartans planned an expedition against Acarnania, the westernmost

province of Greece, which they wished to detach from the Athenian

alliance. A Spartan officer, named Cnemus, was sent off in advance,

with a thousand hoplites, to raise the wild mountain tribes, and led an

attack against Stratus, the capital of Acarnania; and in the meantime

orders were sent round to equip a numerous fleet, which was to support

the operations of Stratus by harassing the coast districts.

The attack on Stratus failed altogether, chiefly in consequence of the

impetuosity of the rude mountaineers serving under Cnemus, who advanced

unsupported against the town, and meeting with a severe repulse

embarrassed the movements of their Greek allies. About the same time

the Peloponnesian fleet, consisting of forty-seven ships, was sailing

down the Corinthian Gulf to co-operate with Cnemus. It was known that

Phormio, the Athenian admiral, was stationed at Naupactus with a

squadron of twenty vessels; but the Peloponnesian captains never

dreamed that he would venture to attack them with so small a force, and

they pursued their voyage along the southern shore of the gulf, without

making any preparations for a battle. Phormio, however, had other

intentions: keeping close to the opposite shore, he followed their

movements, and allowed them to pass through the narrow strait which

divides the inner from the outer gulf, wishing to avoid an engagement

until they reached the open water. The Peloponnesians dropped anchor

for the night at Patrae in Achaia, and Phormio took up his station at

Chalcis, a harbour-town of Aetolia, at the mouth of the Evenus. Being

now convinced that Phormio meditated an encounter, for which they had

little inclination, the Peloponnesian admirals made an attempt

[Footnote: I have adopted the reading of Bloomfield, approved by

Classen (4th Edition).] to steal across under cover of darkness. But

this manoeuvre was detected, and they found their way barred by the

Athenian squadron in the middle of the channel. Being thus driven to

bay the Peloponnesians drew up their ships in a circle, with their

prows turned outwards, like a flock of sheep assailed by a dog. Within

the circle were placed the smaller vessels accompanying the fleet, and

five of the swiftest galleys, which were intended to lend assistance

against any attack of the enemy.

To keep a large flotilla in such a position, even in a calm sea, where

no hostile movement was made against them, would have been a task to

try the skill of the most accomplished mariners. But the Peloponnesian

crews were untrained, the decks of their ships were crowded with

soldiers, and they were hampered by the crowd of smaller craft. Worst

of all, they were threatened in every direction by the agile Athenian

galleys, which, moving in single file, swept round and round them,

approaching closer and closer at every circuit, so that they were

penned together in an ever-narrowing space, and in danger of fouling

one another. To complete their confusion, the morning breeze began to

blow from the gulf; and Phormio, who had been waiting for this, now

gave the signal for attack. The Peloponnesians hardly attempted any

defence; for the unskilful crews of the galleys could not manage their

oars in the rising sea, and the steersmen had consequently no control

of their vessels. All their efforts were employed in keeping clear of

one another, warding off a collision with long poles, amid a hubbub of

curses and abuse. Into this huddled, swaying mass of war-galleys and

merchant-craft mingled together now dashed the Athenian triremes,

wrecking every vessel which they met. A wild panic ensued among the

Peloponnesian crews, and as fast as they could extricate themselves

they rowed off and sought shelter in the harbour of Patrae. From here

they afterwards sailed to Cyllene, the dockyard of Elis, where they

were joined by Cnemus with the troops from Acarnania. Twelve ships fell

into the hands of the Athenians, and taking these with them they sailed

first to Rhium, a level headland on the Locrian Coast, on which stood a

temple of Poseidon. Having left one of the captured ships as a

thank-offering to the god of the sea, they made their way back to the

original station at Naupactus.

II

The authorities at Sparta were highly indignant at the failure of their

expedition in Acarnania, and the defeat of the Peloponnesian fleet by

so inferior a force. For this was their first experience of a sea-fight

since the outbreak of the war, and they made no allowance for the want

of skill in their own crews, attributing the disaster to mere

cowardice. They did not reflect how vast was the difference between raw

sailors, lately transferred from the plough to the oar, and the veteran

seamen of Athens, trained under a system which had been slowly

perfected in the course of half a century. So they sent three

commissioners to Cnemus, with peremptory orders to prepare for another

sea-fight, and not allow himself to be shut up in harbour by the feeble

squadron of Phormio. One of these commissioners was Brasidas, a

brilliant young officer, who had gained distinction two years before by

saving the harbour-town of Methone, on the coast of Messenia, from

being captured by the Athenians. We shall hear much more of him in the

sequel.

On the arrival of Brasidas and his colleagues, the ships lying at

Cyllene were made ready for immediate service, and orders were sent

round to the allied cities for other ships. Phormio also sent an urgent

despatch to Athens announcing his victory, and asking for

reinforcements; and the Athenians sent twenty triremes to his aid.

These vessels, however, arrived too late, for the admiral, acting on

instructions from Athens, sailed first to Crete, where he was delayed a

long time by contrary winds. Phormio, with his twenty triremes, was

therefore compelled to engage the whole Peloponnesian fleet, numbering

seventy-seven ships, which had now sailed round from Cyllene, and taken

up its station just within the strait, close to the Achaean town of

Panormus. A strong force of Peloponnesian soldiers was encamped on the

shore, to co-operate with the fleet. Phormio anchored his ships just

outside the strait, being resolved, if it were in any way possible, not

to fight the Peloponnesians in the narrow waters. As the

Peloponnesians, on their side, were equally determined not to be lured

out into the open sea, the two fleets remained confronting each other

for a whole week, without attempting any aggressive movement. At last

the Peloponnesian leaders decided to give battle with Phormio at once,

fearing that if they delayed any longer he would be reinforced from

Athens.

It was the universal custom of Greek commanders to wind up the courage

of their men on the eve of a battle by a short and pithy address,

calculated to inspire them with confidence, by giving them a reasonable

hope of victory. Such a practice, strange as it may seem to us, was

natural among a people whose armies and fleets were recruited from the

general body of the citizens, accustomed to free speech in their public

assemblies. They were not men of war by profession, trained in habits

of blind obedience, but sensitive Greeks, who carried into the camp the

noble freedom of civic life, and were not prepared to shed their blood

without sufficient cause, and a fair prospect of success.

Seldom was there greater need of this sort of military eloquence than

on the present occasion. On both sides there was much discouragement,

and a general reluctance to begin the fight. The Peloponnesians were

cowed by their recent defeat, and dreaded the naval skill of the

Athenians, which seemed to them almost supernatural; and Phormio's men

shrank from an encounter with such enormous odds. Accordingly the

Peloponnesian captains on one side, and Phormio on the other, did what

they could to argue their crews into a more hopeful frame of mind. The

Peloponnesian seamen who had taken part in the first battle were

reminded that they had been caught unprepared, and assured that this

time every precaution would be taken to prevent a second reverse. They

were flattered by the confident assertion that the superior skill of

the Athenians was far outweighed by their own superior courage. "Look,"

said one of the admirals, speaking to his own division, "at this

powerful armament, outnumbering the enemy by four to one--look at the

army drawn up on the shore, ready to lend aid to any who are hard

pressed--and you will see that with such advantages defeat is

impossible. Do your duty like men, and expect to be rewarded or

punished according to your deserts." Similar addresses, combining

encouragement with threats, were heard in the other parts of the fleet.

Among the Athenian sailors there had been much jesting about the

land-lubbers of Peloponnesus, and in the first flush of their victory

they had been ready to face any odds on the sea. But now, seeing

themselves confronted by such overwhelming numbers, they had lost heart

for the moment, and were seen standing about in little groups, shaking

their heads and whispering fearfully together. It was an anxious moment

for Phormio; he knew the immense importance of maintaining, at any

cost, the naval reputation of Athens, and if his men went into battle

in their present temper, they were certain to suffer a crushing defeat.

Determining, therefore, if possible, to allay the panic which was fast

spreading throughout the fleet, he summoned the crews into his

presence, and harangued them as follows:--

"Comrades, I have called you hither to assure you that you have no

cause for alarm. The numbers of the enemy, which seem to you so

formidable, should, if properly considered, be a ground of confidence;

for this unwieldy armament is a sign that they are thoroughly

terrified, and seek safety in a huge crowd of ships. The firmness and

discipline which they have acquired by long experience of land warfare

will avail them little on the sea For courage is largely a matter of

habit, and the bravest landsman is a mere coward when he is taken away

from his own element, and set down on the heaving deck of a war-galley

where he can hardly keep his feet. The disorganized multitude with

which we shall have to deal is a mere mob, held together by the

authority of Sparta, demoralized by their late defeat, and forced to

fight against their will. Face them boldly, and our very audacity in

assailing such numbers will sink them still deeper into helpless

terror, for they will think that we must be invincible, or we should

never run such risks. It shall be my business to bring on the

engagement in blue water, where we shall have them at our mercy. Now

every man to his station; be prompt, and be silent, and attend to the

word of command. Remember your old spirit, and reflect that the honour

of Athens is in your hands to-day."

The great object of the Peloponnesian leaders was to compel Phormio to

give battle in the confined space of the strait. With this intention

they determined to make a sudden movement towards the northern coast of

the gulf, threatening an attack on Naupactus. At daybreak they drew up

their ships in four lines, with the coast of Peloponnesus behind them,

and with twenty fast-sailing triremes stationed on the right wing, to

cut off Phormio's fleet, if, as they anticipated, he advanced to the

defence of Naupactus. Wheeling then to the right, the ships sailed some

distance, four abreast, towards the inner gulf; and when they came

opposite to Naupactus, they changed their course, and moved in column,

with the right wing leading towards the northern shore.

The manoeuvre, so far as concerned its immediate purpose, was

completely successful. Phormio, much against his will, was obliged to

leave his station outside the strait, and go to the aid of Naupactus,

which had been left undefended. Great was the delight of the

Peloponnesian captains when they saw the little Athenian squadron

creeping close, in single file, along the northern side of the gulf,

for they thought that not one of the twenty would escape them. At a

given signal, the whole fleet formed into line, resuming its original

order, four deep, and bore down upon the Athenians. Eleven of Phormio's

triremes succeeded in clearing the strait, and getting into the open

waters in the direction of Naupactus; but the remaining nine were

overtaken and driven aground, and their crews, except those who escaped

by swimming, were put to the sword. Some of these vessels were towed

off as prizes by the Peloponnesians, and one they captured with all her

crew. The rest were saved by the valour of the Messenian soldiers, who

had followed the movements of Phormio's vessels along the shore, and

now did good service by boarding the stranded triremes, and hauling

them to land, after a sharp tussle with the enemy.

Meanwhile the eleven ships which had eluded the attack were hotly

pursued by the twenty fast-sailing vessels on the Peloponnesian right

wing. All but one got through in safety, and took refuge in the harbour

of Naupactus, and drawing up in line, with their prows outwards,

prepared to defend themselves if the enemy advanced further against

them. But the rearmost vessel was hard pressed by a Leucadian ship, and

the rest of the pursuers followed at a considerable distance, singing

the paean [Footnote: A song of victory.] as they rowed, and expecting

an easy victory. Now, however, occurred one of those sudden turns of

fortune so frequent in the course of a sea-fight. The Athenian trireme

which had been left far behind in the chase, made a sudden sweep round

a merchant-vessel anchored at the mouth of the harbour, struck her

pursuer amidships, and sank her.

This splendid feat of seamanship filled the Peloponnesians, who were

advancing in disorder, with amazement and terror. On every trireme the

cry of "Hold her!" [Footnote: This was done by thrusting the oars, with

the blades held flat, deep into the water] was heard, and some of the

vessels, losing way suddenly, ran aground on the shallows. The others

hung back, waiting until the main body of the fleet should come to

their support. Seeing them drifting thus, stupefied and helpless, the

Athenians took heart again, and raising a shout rowed swiftly from

their station within the harbour, and charged down upon them. The

Peloponnesians, after a feeble attempt at resistance, took to flight,

heading for their original station on the opposite coast. Six of their

vessels were captured, and the Athenians, not content with this, fell

upon the main body of the fleet, and recovered their own ships which

had been taken in the strait. The victorious crews of Phormio then

returned to Naupactus, and set up a trophy at the place where they had

been moored when this splendid rally was made, opposite to the temple

of Apollo. The Peloponnesians also raised a trophy, to commemorate

their first success, and then, fearing the arrival of the fresh ships

from Athens, they sailed off to Lechaeum, the northern harbour of

Corinth.

III

In strange contrast with the disgraceful exhibition of cowardice and

incompetence which we have just witnessed, we have now to record a

daring attempt, undertaken shortly afterwards, to strike at the very

heart of the Athenian power. While the beaten crews of the

Peloponnesian fleet were waiting to be paid off at Lechaeum, they

suddenly received orders to take their oars and rowing-cushions, and

proceed to Nisaea, the port of Megara. The plan was to embark them on

forty vessels, which were lying in the dockyards, and make a

night-attack on Peiraeus. The suggestion came from the Megarians, but

in carrying it out the Peloponnesians were probably influenced by the

bold and enterprising spirit of Brasidas. And in fact, the meditated

descent on Peiraeus was neither so wild nor so rash as it may at first

sight appear. For the Athenians, never dreaming that they might be

taken by surprise, had not taken the precaution to close the entrance

of their harbour, or to station guard-ships for its defence.

Without delay, the officers in charge of the expedition mustered their

crews at Nisaea, and embarking by night, got their ships under way. But

at the last moment their hearts failed them, and instead of sailing to

Peiraeus, they landed on the island of Salamis, and after attacking a

sea-side fort, and capturing three triremes which were riding at anchor

near it, they spread themselves out, and began ravaging and plundering

the country.

Meanwhile fire-signals had been raised, conveying the alarm to Peiraeus

and Athens. A wild panic ensued, and a rumour ran through the upper

city that the enemy had sailed into Peiraeus, while in the harbour-town

it was generally supposed that Salamis was lost, and Peiraeus on the

point of being invaded. The Peloponnesians employed in this adventure

afterwards pretended that they had been hindered by contrary winds from

carrying out their original design. But this was a mere excuse, and if

they had chosen they might have sailed unopposed to Peiraeus, and

inflicted terrible injury on Athens. But it was now too late, for the

Athenians, as soon as the news was brought, had marched down with their

whole military force to Peiraeus, and occupied every assailable point

in the harbour, while at the same time every ship in the docks was

launched and manned, and sent off in headlong haste to Salamis.

By this time it was broad daylight, and the Peloponnesians, being

warned that a rescue was on the way from Peiraeus, made off with their

booty, and getting, on board their ships, sailed back to Nisaea. They

had the more reason for hastening their departure, as the Megarian

ships which had carried them to Salamis, having lain a long while in

dry-dock, were leaky and unseaworthy; for the harbour of Megara had for

some time past been kept in close blockade by the Athenians.

This memorable incident, following close on the brilliant victories of

Phormio, taught the Athenians to take better precautions for the

future. Hitherto they would have scoffed at the suggestion that their

own arsenals and dockyards were exposed to attack. But now they

provided for the safety of Peiraeus by closing the harbours and keeping

a vigilant watch. And that terrible night left an impression on their

minds which was not soon forgotten.

THE REVOLT OF LESBOS

I

We have already traced the steps by which the various cities composing

the Confederacy of Delos gradually became subjects and tributaries of

Athens. After this great change was effected, the only members of the

original league who retained their independence were the wealthy and

powerful communities of Chios and Lesbos. These two islands were

allowed to retain undisturbed control of their own affairs, with the

sole obligation of sending a fixed quota of ships to serve in the

Athenian Navy. It does not appear that the performance of this duty was

felt as a grievance, and no act of oppression had been committed by

Athens, such as might have provoked her allies in Lesbos or Chios to

turn against her. In both islands the general body of the citizens were

on the whole friendly to the Athenians, who afforded them an effectual

means of protection against the tyranny of the nobles, by summoning

high-born offenders to be tried before the Athenian tribunals.

[Footnote: The evidence for this statement will be found in Thucydides,

viii. 48.] It was therefore not among the people at large, but among

the privileged few, that any movement of revolt against Athens was to

be expected.

Some years before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War the Lesbian

malcontents had solicited the Spartans to help them in throwing off the

yoke of Athens. This application, which was probably made at the time

of the revolt of Samos, found no favour with Sparta, and nothing

further was attempted on that occasion. But in the fourth year of the

war alarming rumours were brought to Athens from Tenedos, a small

island included in the Athenian alliance, whose inhabitants were

jealous of the threatened ascendancy of Lesbos in the eastern districts

of the Aegaean. There was a design, it was said, among the leading

citizens of Mytilene, the principal city of Lesbos, to unite the

inhabitants of the island by force under their rule, and renounce their

allegiance to Athens. Help was expected from Sparta, and the Boeotians,

who were of the same race as the Lesbians, were also in the plot. This

statement was confirmed by envoys from Methymna, the second city of

Lesbos, which stood apart from the conspiracy, and by certain citizens

of Mytilene, who had turned informers from motives of private revenge.

Among the Athenians at this time there was a general feeling of

despondency and exhaustion. The full hardship of the war pressed

heavily upon them, and their population was thinned by the ravages of

the plague. In such a mood the thought of undertaking a campaign

against a great island like Lesbos, then at the height of her power,

filled them with dismay. Was it possible that a favoured and privileged

ally had taken up arms against them in the hour of their distress? It

was a slander, they could not, they would not believe it. At any rate,

before proceeding to extremities, they would try the effect of a

friendly remonstrance. So they sent envoys with a pacific message to

the Mytilenaeans, hoping by fair words to deter them from their

purpose. In this, however, they were disappointed, and being at last

convinced that the Lesbians were on the brink of revolt, they sent off

forty triremes without delay, in order, if possible, to catch them

unawares. For they had been informed that the Mytilenaeans were about

to celebrate the festival of Apollo, in which the whole population took

part, outside the city walls; and if the triremes arrived in time,

there would be a fine opportunity for a surprise. At the same time they

took possession of ten Mytilenaean triremes, which had been sent to

serve in the Athenian fleet, and imprisoned the crews.

But now was seen one of the weaknesses inherent in the nature of the

Athenian constitution. These measures could not be taken without public

debate in the popular assembly, and such a method of procedure rendered

secrecy impossible. The Mytilenaeans received timely warning of their

danger, and keeping close within their walls, repaired the weak places

in their defences, and set a careful watch. Shortly afterwards the

Athenian fleet hove in sight. As the Mytilenaeans refused to obey the

summons delivered to them in the name of the imperial people,--that

they should raze their walls, and surrender their ships,--hostilities

commenced. But on neither side was much vigour displayed, for the

Athenian officers thought themselves too weak to undertake any decisive

operations with their present force, and the Mytilenaeans desired to

obtain a respite, to enable them to obtain aid from Sparta. Accordingly

they asked for an armistice, pretending that they wished to plead their

cause by their own representatives before the Athenian assembly; and

their request being granted, they sent envoys to Athens, who made a

show of carrying on negotiations. And in the meantime a trireme was

despatched in all haste to carry their petition to Sparta.

On the return of the Mytilenaean envoys from Athens, where of course

they had accomplished nothing, the siege of Mytilene began in earnest.

The city was situated on a promontory facing the Asiatic coast on the

south-eastern side of the island, and had two harbours, on its northern

and southern side. Both of these harbours were now held in close

blockade by the Athenians, who established two camps, one on either

side of the town, and patrolled the harbour-mouths with their ships.

But on the land side the investment was not yet completed, so that

supplies could still be brought into the town from the island.

Reinforcements, however, came pouring into the Athenian quarters in

answer to a summons sent to the cities of the Athenian alliance, who

were the more willing to lend help, as the Lesbians made no vigorous

effort in their own defence.

While the prospects of Athens were thus brightening, the Mytilenaean

envoys, after a stormy voyage, arrived at Sparta, and laid their

petition before the authorities. It happened that the Olympic festival

was close at hand, where representatives would be present from all the

cities of the Peloponnesian league; so the envoys received orders to go

to Olympia, and state their case in the presence of the Spartan allies.

They went, therefore, to Olympia, and when the festival was over, the

Mytilenaean orator addressed the confederates as follows:--

"Before we urge our claim for assistance we wish to combat a prejudice

which we know to be general in Greece against those who desert their

allies in time of war. For we wish not only to obtain your countenance

and support, but also to preserve your respect. To abandon an ally

without just cause in a time of peril is justly regarded as an act of

treason. But then the alliance must be a fair and equal relation

voluntarily assumed on both sides, based on mutual esteem and parity of

power. Can anyone assert that our connexion with Athens answers to this

description? Have we not seen how the confederacy of maritime cities

formed against Persia was gradually converted into an Athenian empire?

And though we and the Chians enjoyed nominal independence, we had good

reason to fear that this was only a temporary concession, which would

be withdrawn as soon as the Athenians felt themselves strong enough to

attack us. We were allowed to retain our liberty, partly because they

feared our navy, and partly because they wished to make us accomplices

in their own aggressions, and lend an appearance of equity to the acts

of violence in which we were compelled to take part. Having swallowed

up the smaller states, they were ready to pounce upon us, and were only

prevented by the outbreak of the present war. Who, then, can blame us,

if we seized the opportunity when they were weakened to repudiate this

false alliance, and anticipate the blow which they were preparing for

us? Athens, we repeat, has no just title to our allegiance; the bond

which held us together was fear on our side and interest on theirs. We

are natural enemies; and when your foe is disabled, then is the time to

strike.

"Having thus cleared ourselves from the imputation of disloyalty, we

will now make plain to you the advantages which you will gain by

espousing our cause. If you wish to inflict irreparable injury on

Athens, you must promote every hostile movement against her in those

regions which contain the sources of her power, that is to say, the

islands and coast-lands of the Aegaean. For if our revolt is

successful, others will follow our example, and the Athenians will be

stripped of their revenues, the mainstay of their empire. You can lend

us aid most effectually by summoning your allies for a second

[Footnote: Attica had already been invaded earlier in the summer.]

invasion of Attica, and thus preventing the Athenians from sending

reinforcements to Lesbos. You have a rare opportunity, for their city

is wasted by the plague, and their navies are dispersed on foreign

service. Remember, then, your proud position as champions of Greek

liberty, and put away the reproach which you have sometimes incurred by

leaving the revolted subjects of Athens to fight their battles alone.

[Footnote: As in the case of Samos.] For the cause of Lesbos is the

cause of all Greece."

It will be observed that the greater part of this remarkable speech

consists of an elaborate endeavour on the part of the Mytilenaeans to

justify themselves. The arguments employed were entirely sophistical,

for the Lesbians had no real grievance--and the statement that they

were in danger of losing their independence was a pure invention. But

they spoke to a partial audience, and the Spartans had already

prejudged the case in their favour. It was therefore decided to receive

them into the Peloponnesian alliance, and orders were issued to the

allies to assemble at the Isthmus with two-thirds of their forces for

an immediate invasion of Attica. The Spartans, acting with unusual

vigour, were the first to appear at the Isthmus, where they made

preparations for hauling ships overland from the northern harbour of

Corinth, intending to attack Athens by sea and land. But the rest of

the confederates came in but slowly, as they were engaged in getting in

their harvest, and had little inclination for a second campaign.

The Spartans soon found out that they were mistaken in supposing the

energies of Athens to be exhausted. Without moving their fleet from

Lesbos, the Athenians manned a hundred triremes, raising the crews from

the whole body of the citizens, with the exception of the knights and

the wealthiest class of the Solonian census, and pressing even resident

foreigners into the service; and with this imposing force they made an

armed demonstration before the eyes of their enemies at the Isthmus,

and then, coasting along Peloponnesus, made descents wherever they

pleased. This spirited conduct produced the desired effect. For the

Spartans, who were still waiting for their allies at the Isthmus, saw

themselves baffled in all their calculations, and concluded that they

had been misinformed by the Lesbians as to the state of affairs at

Athens; and hearing that their own coast-lands were being ravaged by

the Athenian fleet, they hastily decamped, and the plan of a second

invasion came to nothing.

The summer was now drawing to a close, and as yet no progress had been

made with the siege of Mytilene. The town was still blockaded by sea,

but the Mytilenaeans had free egress on the land-side, and marched up

and down the island, confirming the other towns which had joined in the

revolt, and threatening Methymna, which still remained loyal to the

Athenian alliance. When the Athenians were informed of this state of

things, they sent a thousand hoplites under Paches to reinforce the

besieging army; and on their arrival the investment of Mytilene was

completed by a wall drawn from sea to sea, and cutting off the town

from the rest of the island. The Mytilenaeans now began to despair, for

their supplies were failing, and there seemed no hope of relief. But

during the winter a ray of hope reached them from outside, and

encouraged them to persevere in their resistance. There was a weak

point in the Athenian wall, where it closed a ravine; and through this

interval a Spartan named Salaethus, who had sailed to Lesbos in a

trireme, and crossed the island on foot, succeeded in making his way

into the town. Salaethus announced himself as an agent sent from

Sparta, to inform the distressed garrison that, as soon as the season

permitted, forty triremes would be sent to their assistance, and that

Attica would be invaded at the same time, to keep the enemy occupied at

home. At this welcome news the hopes of the Mytilenaeans revived, and

all thoughts of surrender were laid aside.

II

As soon as spring arrived, the Spartans, true to their promise, sent

off forty triremes, commanded by Alcidas, to raise the siege of

Mytilene, and marched in full force into Attica, thinking thus to

divert the attention of the Athenians, and prevent them from

interfering with the voyage of Alcidas. They remained a long time in

Attica, waiting for news from their fleet, and employing the time in a

systematic ravage of the whole territory. But time passed, and no

message arrived from Alcidas, who seemed to have disappeared with all

his ships; so that at last, as their expectations were disappointed,

and their supplies exhausted, they broke up their army and returned

home.

The position of Mytilene was now growing desperate. Nothing more was

heard of the relieving squadron, and the scanty store of provisions was

rapidly failing; for, owing to the betrayal of their design, the

Mytilenaeans had been hurried into revolt before their preparations

were completed, and had had no time to lay up a sufficient stock of

food. Salaethus, therefore, determined to make a sudden sally, and

break out of the town; and the better to effect this purpose, he

furnished the common people, who had hitherto served as light-armed

soldiers, with the full equipment of heavy infantry. But this

proceeding brought on a catastrophe, for the commons no sooner found

themselves in possession of better weapons than they turned upon their

masters, and accused them of secreting supplies of corn for their own

use. "Bring out your corn," they cried, "and divide it equally, or we

will go out and make terms with the Athenians for ourselves." Alarmed

at this threat, which if carried out would leave them exposed as the

sole objects of Athenian vengeance, the nobles sent a message to

Paches, on behalf of the whole city, offering to surrender, on

condition that their case should be tried by the tribunals at Athens,

and stipulating that, while the decision was pending, no violence

should be offered to any of the inhabitants. The proposal was accepted,

and Paches marched his forces into the town. In spite of the

convention, the leaders of the revolt took sanctuary in the temples,

being in dread of summary execution. Paches reassured them, and sent

them in safe custody to Tenedos.

We must now turn back a little, and follow the movements of Alcidas.

The Spartan admiral, it would seem, had small stomach for the bold

adventure on which he was bound--no less than to rob the Athenians of

one of their most important possessions, and defy the redoubtable

captains of Athens on their own element. After loitering for some time

off the coast of Peloponnesus, he sailed on slowly as far as Delos, and

then, touching at Icarus, he heard that Mytilene was already taken.

Wishing, however, to inform himself with certainty, he pushed on as far

as Erythrae, on the mainland of Asia, which he reached seven days after

the fall of Mytilene. Being now assured that the report was true, he

called a council of war to decide what was to be done. Then a certain

Greek of Elis, named Teutiaplus, made a bold suggestion: "Let us," he

said, "sail straight to Mytilene, and make an attempt to recapture the

town by surprise. Most likely the Athenians, flushed with success, will

be taken unawares, and we shall find the harbour open, and the land

forces dispersed, and if we make a sudden onfall, under cover of

darkness, we shall probably succeed."

The prudent Alcidas found this proposal little to his taste; nor was he

better pleased by another plan, put forward by the Lesbian envoys who

were returning on board the Peloponnesian fleet, and seconded by a

party of exiles from the cities of Ionia. These men tried to persuade

Alcidas to establish himself in some city of Asia Minor, and raise a

revolt among the allies of Athens in these parts. He had, they said,

every prospect of success, for his arrival was welcomed on all sides.

Let him seize the opportunity of attacking the Athenians in their most

mortal part, first by withdrawing the tribute of Ionia, and secondly by

putting them to the expense of a blockade.

This daring scheme might have led to something important, if the fleet

had been commanded by Brasidas. But Alcidas was a man of very different

temper, and having arrived too late to save Mytilene, he had now but

one thought,--to return to Peloponnesus as fast as he could, and get

out of the reach of the terrible Athenian triremes. So he set his fleet

in motion, and sailing along the coast in a southerly direction put in

at Ephesus. On the voyage he showed himself to be as cruel as he was

cowardly, by capturing and putting to death the crews of the vessels

which came in his way. These were not a few, for the ships which

crossed his path approached fearlessly, under the impression that his

fleet was from Athens; for no one dreamed that a Peloponnesian squadron

would dare to enter these waters. For this senseless barbarity he was

severely rebuked by a deputation of Samian exiles, now living on the

mainland, who met him at Ephesus. His was a strange method, they

remarked with bitter irony, of helping the Ionians to recover their

liberty--to butcher defenceless men, who had done him no harm, but

looked to him for rescue from their bondage to Athens! If he continued

to behave thus, he would make the name of Sparta detested throughout

Ionia. Dull as he was, Alcidas could not but feel the justice of this

reprimand, and he let the rest of his prisoners go.

The presence of a Peloponnesian fleet had caused great alarm among the

inhabitants of Ionia, and urgent messages came in daily to Paches at

Mytilene, summoning him to their aid. For even though Alcidas had

declined to take up a permanent station on the coast, as the exiles had

suggested, it was apprehended that he would pillage the sea-side towns,

which were unfortified, on his homeward voyage. At last two state

triremes, the \_Paralus\_ and \_Salaminia,\_ which had been sent on public

business from Athens, came into Mytilene with the news that they had

sighted the fleet of Alcidas lying at anchor off Clarus. [Footnote: A

little town, north-west of Ephesus.] Thereupon Paches put to sea at

once, and gave chase. But Alcidas had got wind of his danger, and was

already on the high seas, making all speed for Peloponnesus. Paches

pursued him as far as Patmos, and then turned back. He would gladly

have caught the Peloponnesians in blue water, where he could have sent

all their ships to the bottom; but as it was he thought himself

fortunate to have escaped the necessity of forming a blockade, as he

must have done if he had come up with them near land, and driven them

ashore. As for Alcidas, he fled in wild haste, keeping the open sea,

being resolved not to touch land, if he could help it, until he reached

the shelter of a Peloponnesian harbour.

III

On his return to Lesbos, Paches despatched to Athens the prisoners who

had been sent to Tenedos, among whom was the Spartan Salaethus. When

they arrived the Athenians immediately put Salaethus to death, and then

met in full assembly to decide on the fate of the rest. They had just

been delivered from a fearful danger, and in the natural reaction of

vindictive rage which had now set in they came to the horrible

resolution of putting all the adult male population of Mytilene to the

sword, and selling the women and children as slaves. The Mytilenaeans,

they argued, were without excuse: they were not subjects of Athens, who

might wish to escape from their burdens, but free and privileged

allies. They had treacherously plotted against Athens, when she was

sunk deep in calamity, and brought a Peloponnesian fleet within the

sacred circle of her empire. For a long time past they had evidently

been hatching a vile conspiracy against the very existence of Athens.

Having once come to this decision, the Athenians lost no time, but sent

off a trireme on the same day, with orders to Paches to carry the

decree into effect.

But after a night of cool reflection they began to repent of their

haste. It was a cruel and monstrous thing, they now thought, to butcher

the population of a whole city, innocent and guilty alike. The

Mytilenaean envoys, who had been sent to Athens on the surrender of the

city, perceived that there was a change in the public temper, and

acting in concert with influential Athenians who were in their

interest, they induced the magistrates to summon a second assembly, and

re-open the debate.

It is on this occasion that we first catch sight [Footnote: That is, in

the narrative of Thucydides.] of the notorious demagogue Cleon, who for

the next six years will be the most prominent figure in Athenian public

life. This man belongs to a class of politicians who had begun to

exercise great influence on the affairs of Athens after the death of

Pericles. That great statesman had really led the people, checking

their excesses, setting bounds to their ambition, and guiding all the

moods of the stormy democracy. But the demagogues were lowborn

upstarts, who, while seeming to lead the people, really followed it,

and kept their position by pandering to the worst passions of the

multitude. It must, however, be mentioned that the two contemporary

writers from whom we draw our materials for the portrait of Cleon, the

historian Thucydides and the comic poet Aristophanes, were both

violently prejudiced against him. Aristophanes hated him as the

representative of the new democracy, which was an object of abhorrence

to the great comic genius; and Thucydides, a born aristocrat, of strong

oligarchical sympathies, looked with cold scorn and aversion on the

coarse mechanic, [Footnote: Cleon was a tanner by trade.] who presumed

to usurp the place, and ape the style, of a true leader like Pericles.

In the previous debate Cleon had been the chief promoter of the

murderous sentence passed against Mytilene; and when the question was

brought forward again, he made a vehement harangue, the substance of

which has been preserved by Thucydides. In this speech he appears as a

practised rhetorical bravo, whose one object is to vilify his

opponents, and throw contempt on their arguments, by an unscrupulous

use of the weapons of ridicule, calumny, and invective. He reproaches

the magistrates for convening a second assembly, in a matter which had

already been decided; and this was, in fact, strictly speaking, a

breach of the constitution. He laughs at the Athenians as weak

sentimentalists, always inclined to mercy, even when mercy was

suicidal. Of the subject communities he speaks as if they were mere

slaves and chattels, outside the pale of humanity, to be kept down with

the scourge and the sword. "Let the law prevail," cries this second

Draco. "The law is sacred, and must not be moved. You are so clever

that you will not live, by fixed rule and order, and you deride the

approved principles of political wisdom. Every one of you wants to be a

lawgiver, a statesman, and a reformer, and to manage the public affairs

in his own way. We, who understand your true interests, are bound to

resist this mood of lawless extravagance, and keep you in the right

path, whether you will or no."

Then preserving the same tone, as of one who is exposing an outrageous

paradox, Cleon proceeds to deal with the actual subject of debate. To

massacre a whole population, was, in his view, a commonplace and

ordinary proceeding; and, in the present instance, the only course

consistent with prudence and common sense. Those who maintained the

contrary were either flighty enthusiasts, whose opinion was not worth

considering, or venal orators, who had sold their country for a bribe.

"Will you suffer yourselves," asked the indignant moralist, "to be

blinded by these corrupt advocates, who amuse you with their eloquence,

and then pocket the price? But it is your own fault: you have no sense

of public responsibility--you are like clever children, playing at a

game of politics. While you sit here, listening to your favourite

speakers, and sharpening your wits against theirs, your empire is going

to ruin. Plain fact is too simple a diet for your pampered appetites;

you must have it hashed and served up with a fine flavouring of fancy

and wit. In short, you have lost all hold upon reality, you live in an

intellectual Utopia, and treat grave matters of public interest as

though they were mere themes in a school of declamation."

In drawing this remarkable picture of Athenian character, which, though

strangely out of place, really contained a large element of truth,

Cleon overreached himself, and was caught in his own snare. It was he,

and not his opponents, who was diverting attention from facts, and

involving a plain issue in a cloud of wordy rhetoric. He has no

arguments, worthy of the name, but tries to carry his case by playing

on the passions of the people, and blowing up the flames of their

anger, which was beginning to cool. But though the more discerning

among his audience must have seen through his sophistries, to a large

proportion of his hearers his speech no doubt seemed a masterpiece of

eloquence. The Athenians, who, like all people of lively talent, were

fond of laughing at themselves, would be especially amused by his

humorous description of their own besetting weakness, their restless

vanity, and inordinate love of change.

The chief advocate for mitigating the sentence against Mytilene was a

certain Diodotus, who had taken a leading part in the previous debate,

and now stood up again to oppose the blood-thirsty counsels of Cleon.

The speech of Diodotus is calm, sober, and business-like. After a

dignified remonstrance against the vile insinuations of Cleon, by whom

all who differed from him were decried as fools or knaves, Diodotus

proceeded to argue the question from the point of view of expediency.

He was not there, he said, to plead the cause of the Mytilenaeans, or

to discuss abstract questions of law and justice. What they had to

consider was what course would be most conducive to the interests of

Athens. According to Cleon, those interests would be best served by a

wholesale massacre of the inhabitants of Mytilene, which would strike

terror into the other subjects of Athens, and prevent them from

yielding to the same temptation. But, reasoned Diodotus, experience had

shown that intending criminals were not deterred from wrongdoing by the

increased severity of penal statutes. For a long time lawgivers had

framed their codes in this belief, thinking to drive mankind into the

path of rectitude by appealing to their terrors. Yet crime had not

diminished, but rather increased. And what was true of individuals, was

still more true of cities, where each man hoped to be concealed among

the crowd of transgressors. Criminals, whether they acted singly, or in

large numbers, were only rendered desperate, if all degrees of crime

were confounded in one common penalty of death.

Such were the enlightened principles of jurisprudence set forth by an

Athenian of the fifth century before Christ--principles which were

first recognised in modern Europe within the memory of men still

living. Then, bringing his theories to a practical test, he pointed out

the gross impolicy of driving a revolted city to desperation, by

excluding all rebels from the hope of pardon. This, he said, would be

the effect on the subjects of Athens, if they passed the same sentence

on the Mytilenaeans, without distinction between the innocent and the

guilty. At present the commons in every city were loyal to Athens; and

though they might be beguiled or coerced into rebellion, they would, if

assured of fair treatment, take the first opportunity of returning to

their allegiance, as the commoners of Mytilene had done. "Do not,

therefore," concluded Diodotus, "destroy this, the strongest guarantee

of your security, but punish the ringleaders of the revolt, after due

deliberation, and leave the rest in peace."

The arguments of Diodotus were unanswerable, and it might have been

supposed that the Athenians, in their relenting mood, would have

carried the amendment by a large majority. But this was not the case.

The debate was keenly contested, and when the president called for a

show of hands, the more merciful decree was only passed by a few votes.

There was no time to be lost, for the first trireme was already a day

and a night on her voyage, and the fate of Mytilene hung by a hair. A

second trireme was launched with all speed, and the Mytilenaeans

present in Athens promised large rewards to the crew if they arrived in

time. With such inducements the rowers toiled day and night, taking

their meals, which consisted of barley-meal kneaded with wine and oil,

at the oar, and sleeping and rowing by turns. Happily there was no

contrary wind to retard their progress, and the crew of the first

vessel, bearing that savage mandate, made no efforts to shorten their

passage. As it was, they were not an hour too soon: for when they

arrived, Paches had already received the decree, and was preparing to

carry it out. Thus Mytilene escaped destruction by a hair's-breadth,

and Athens was saved from committing a great crime. But even the

modified sentence, which was passed directly afterwards on the motion

of Cleon, condemning more than a thousand Mytilenaean citizens to

death, was sufficiently ferocious, and was remembered against the

tyrant city in the days of her humiliation.

ESCAPE OF TWO HUNDRED PLATAEANS FALL OF PLATAEA

I

The siege of Plataea had now lasted for more than a year, and the brave

garrison began to be in sore straits, for their supplies were giving

out, and they had no hope of rescue from outside. In this desperate

situation they resolved to make an attempt to break through the

besieging lines, and make their escape to Athens. All were to take part

in the adventure, leaving the Peloponnesians in possession of an empty

town. But when the time came for carrying out this bold design, half of

the garrison drew back, thinking the risk too great. The other half,

numbering about two hundred and twenty, persisted in their purpose, and

forthwith fell to work on their preparations. They began by making

ladders for scaling the enemy's wall; and in order to ascertain the

proper length of the ladders, they counted the courses of bricks in a

part of the wall facing the town, which happened to have been left

unplastered. Many counted the courses together, and by repeating the

process over and over again, and comparing the result, they at last hit

upon the right number. When once this was known, they could easily

calculate the length of their ladders, for the bricks were all of the

same dimensions, and they knew the thickness of a single brick.

The Peloponnesians had built a double line of wall round Plataea, the

two lines being separated by a distance of sixteen feet. The whole of

the space within this double wall was covered by a flat roof, so as to

present the appearance of a single thick wall, with battlements on

either side; and this covered space, which was divided into rooms by

partition-walls, served as barracks for the besiegers. Along the top

were high towers, with intervals of ten battlements between them, and

built flush with the wall on both sides, so as to leave no passage,

except through the middle of the tower. These served as guard-rooms,

where the soldiers on duty took shelter on wet and stormy nights. For

the distance between the towers was very small, and they could rush out

and man the walls at a moment's notice.

The Plataeans omitted no precaution which might secure success for

their hazardous enterprise. Every man understood exactly the part which

he had to play, and knew that his own life, and the lives of his

comrades, depended on his courage and coolness. They had chosen their

time well, for it was now mid-winter. So they waited for a night of

storm and rain, when there was no moon, and sallying forth from the

town crossed the inner ditch, and came up to the inner wall,

unperceived by the enemy; for the noise of their footsteps was drowned

by the roaring of the wind, and they were careful to advance in open

order, so as not to be discovered by the clashing of their arms. The

whole troop was lightly equipped, and they walked with their right foot

unsandalled, to give them a firmer hold on the muddy ground. Choosing

one of the spaces between two towers, they adjusted their ladders, and

began to ascend the wall. The first to mount were twelve picked men,

armed with breastplates and daggers, who as soon as they reached the

top, rushed to the towers, six men to each, and having overpowered the

guard, stood ready to defend the passage. These were followed by

others, armed with javelins, whose shields were handed up to them from

below as they ascended, to enable them to climb the more easily.

Several of this party had got up in safety, when one of those who were

following dislodged a tile as he grasped the battlements. The sound of

the falling tile alarmed the guards in the towers, and soon the whole

besieging force was in a commotion. But being bewildered by the

darkness, and deafened by the tempest which was blowing, they knew not

which way to turn, and remained at their quarters, waiting for orders.

And at the same time the Plataeans left in the town made a feigned

attack on the Peloponnesian wall at the opposite side to divert the

attention of the enemy. In the general confusion thus created the

besiegers were at a loss what to do, and three hundred of their men,

who were kept together for prompt service on any pressing occasion,

took up their station before the outer wall, thinking that the

Athenians had come to relieve the town. Fire-signals were now kindled

by the Peloponnesians, to summon help from Thebes; but the Plataeans

were prepared for this also, and they kindled other beacons which had

been raised for the purpose on their wall, so as to obscure the meaning

of the enemy's signals, and delay the march of the Thebans, until their

own comrades had had time to escape.

The way was thus left clear for the gallant two hundred. Those who led

the party had secured possession of the passages through the towers,

and stood ready to bar the way against all assailants. Others who

followed brought ladders, and planting them at the foot of the towers,

mounted to the top, and kept off the Peloponnesians, when they

attempted to force an entrance, with a shower of javelins. Over the

intervening space now swarmed the main body of the Plataeans; and each

man, as he got over, halted at the edge of the outer ditch, and kept up

a hot fire of javelins and arrows, to cover the retreat of his

comrades, and repel any attack from below. When all the rest had

crossed the wall, those who held the towers began to descend; and this

was the most perilous part of the adventure, especially for those who

came last. All, however, succeeded in joining their comrades by the

ditch, and just at this moment the picked troop of three hundred, who

carried torches, came upon them. But fortune still favoured the

Plataeans; crouching in the deep shadow thrown by the high banks of the

ditch, they plied the enemy, who with their blazing torches afforded an

easy mark, with darts and arrows. And thus, fighting and retreating at

the same time, they made their way gradually across the ditch, but not

without a severe struggle, for the water was swollen by the snow which

had fallen in the night, and covered with rotten ice. Their best friend

was the tempest, which raged with extraordinary violence throughout the

night.

When their last man had crossed, the Plataeans went off at a run in the

direction of Thebes, being assured that no one would expect them to

take the road which led to their worst enemy. And the prudence of this

course soon appeared, for looking back they saw the Peloponnesians

hurrying with lighted torches along the road to Athens. Then after

marching towards Thebes for about a mile, they doubled back, and taking

to the mountains soon reached the friendly territory of Attica. They

received a kind welcome at Athens, where it was found that out of the

original two hundred and twenty, only eight were missing. Seven of

these had lost heart at the last moment, and returned to Plataea, where

they announced that all the rest of the party had been slain. One only,

an archer, was taken prisoner at the outer ditch.

On hearing the report of those who had turned back, the Plataeans

applied for a truce to bury their dead; and when their herald came back

from his useless errand, they learned to their delight that this

gallant enterprise, so ably planned, and so boldly executed, had been

crowned with complete success.

II

Well would it have been for the Plataeans who remained in the town if

they had stood by their first purpose, and shared the fortunes of their

brave comrades. Better far to have died, sword in hand, than to meet

the ignoble fate which was now reserved for them. It was in the

following summer, two years after the beginning of the siege, that the

crisis arrived. The Plataeans had come to the end of their provisions,

and were suffering severely from want of food. In this state of

weakness they were suddenly attacked by the besiegers, who might easily

have carried the town by storm. But the Spartan general wished, if

possible, to avoid this, as all places taken by assault would have to

be given back to their original owners on the conclusion of peace,

whereas those which had voluntarily surrendered might be retained.

Accordingly he sent a herald, and summoned the Plataeans to surrender,

promising that they should have a fair trial by Spartan judges; and

they, being actually on the point of starvation, accepted the terms

offered, and laid down their arms. They were kept in custody and

supplied with food until the judges, five in number, arrived from

Sparta. On the arrival of the judges no express charge was made against

them, but they were called up one by one, and asked this simple

question: "Have you done any service to the Spartans or their allies in

the course of the present war?"

The Plataeans saw the snare which was set for them, and seeking to

evade it they asked permission to plead their cause at length. Leave

being given, the Plataean advocate rose to address the court, and made

a most moving and eloquent appeal, which well deserves to be reproduced

in its main outlines.

"Men of Sparta," began the orator, "we surrendered our city on the

faith of your promise that the innocent should be spared, and only the

guilty condemned. But we fear that our confidence has been misplaced.

That our doom is already pronounced we have but too plain evidence, in

your sinister question, in your cold, condemning looks, in the gloomy

faces of our enemies, who have poisoned your ears against us. We have

but little hope of turning you from your purpose by anything that we

can say. Nevertheless we have resolved to speak, lest in the hour of

death we should be tormented by the thought that a word might have

saved us, and that word remained unspoken.

"In the history of the last fifty years no city in Greece has a fairer

record than ours. Though not trained to the sea, we served in the fleet

at Artemisium; we fought under Pausanias in the great battle which

decided the fate of Greece, and took part beyond our strength in all

the trials and perils of our common country. On the gratitude of Sparta

we have a special claim, for in the day of her direst extremity, after

the earthquake, when the Helots were in arms against her, we sent a

third part of our citizens to her aid. Since then we have been found in

the ranks of your enemies; but this was your fault, not ours. Who drove

us into the arms of Athens, when we were hard pressed by the tyranny of

Thebes? We joined the Athenian alliance at your bidding; they defended

us against our enemies, and admitted us to the rights of Athenian

citizenship. We were bound, therefore, by every tie of honour and duty

to stand by them, whether their cause was just or unjust.

"What, then, is the meaning of your question, whether we have done you

or your allies any service during this war? If you ask as foes, how can

you claim any service? And if you ask as friends, you have done us

bitter wrong, by attacking us unprovoked.

"The Thebans seized our city in time of peace, and at a holy season,

and we were justified by the laws of nature and of nations in wreaking

vengeance upon them. It may seem to your interest to pay court to them

now; but think how different was our conduct from theirs when the

Persian was at our doors, threatening slavery to us all. We were among

the few who obeyed the call of honour, while Thebes and all the other

towns of Boeotia took sides with the Barbarian.

"Hitherto Sparta has been called the glass of honour in Greece. What,

then, will men say, if Spartan judges are guilty of blotting Plataea

out of the map of Greece, and of the judicial murder of her citizens?

Strange, indeed, and terrible has been the fate of our city, both now

and in the past. Our fathers were brought to the brink of ruin by their

valour and devotion; we, their sons, have just passed through all the

horrors of a siege, and now we are forced to plead for our lives.

Outcasts from our fatherland, spurned and rejected of all, we are

thrown upon your mercy; and much we fear that your hearts are hardened

against us.

"We adjure you, then, by the memory of those times, and of the part

which we took in the salvation of Greece, not to betray us to our worst

enemies, the Thebans. Do not win their gratitude by murder, but ours by

mercy. Forget the cold calculations of policy; think of the everlasting

infamy of such a deed. Your fathers are buried in our land, and we have

been constant in paying all honour and service to their tombs. Will ye

give up the land in which they rest to the men [Footnote: The Thebans,

who fought on the side of the Persians at Plataea.] who are guilty of

their blood? Will ye enslave those fields which saw the triumph of

Greek liberty, and dishonour the gods by whose favour the victory was

won? By your own renown, by the conscience of Greece, by the memory of

your sires, we adjure you, men of Lacedaemon, not to do this deed.

"But it is time to make an end. If we have spoken in vain, and you are

resolved on our death, we have still one request. Send us back into our

city, and keep us there immured until we have perished of hunger. Any

fate is better than falling into the hands of the Thebans, the enemies

of Plataea, and of all Greece."

The orator had indeed spoken in vain, or if his words had made any

impression on the minds of the judges, it was speedily obliterated by a

fierce and bitter tirade which was delivered by a Theban speaker in

reply. As soon as he had finished his harangue, the prisoners were

called up again in turn, and questioned as before. When each of them

had answered, in the only manner possible, he was led away and put to

death; and not one of them was spared. The number of those slain was

two hundred and twenty-five, and of these twenty-five were Athenians.

The city was then levelled to the ground, and the territory left at the

disposal of the Thebans. Thus was this brave little community

sacrificed to the rancour of Thebes, and the selfish policy of Sparta.

CAPTURE OF A HUNDRED AND TWENTY SPARTANS AT SPHACTERIA

I

The result of six years of desultory fighting had fully justified the

forebodings of Archidamus, and the sanguine anticipations of Pericles.

In spite of the terrible ravages of the plague, Athens had easily held

her own against the whole power of the Peloponnesian league. As yet,

however, no decisive advantage had been gained on either side. But in

the seventh year of the war an event occurred which would have enabled

the Athenians, but for their own folly, to conclude an honourable peace.

The ablest of the Athenian generals at this time was Demosthenes,

[Footnote: To be carefully distinguished from the great orator, born

about forty years after the date reached in this chapter (425 B.C.).]

who in the previous year had greatly distinguished himself by a

brilliant campaign in Aetolia. In the following summer he obtained

permission to take passage on board a fleet which was bound on a voyage

to Corcyra and Sicily. He sailed in a private capacity, but he was

authorized to use the ships against the coasts of Peloponnesus, if he

saw any opening which might be utilized in the interests of Athens.

On a rocky promontory, at the northern end of the spacious bay of

Navarino, lies the little town of Pylos, generally believed to have

been the home of the Homeric Nestor. Since the conquest of Messenia by

the Spartans, the town had remained in ruins, and the country for some

distance round was a desert. The natural advantages of the adjacent

coast had already caught the keen eye of Demosthenes, and he had formed

the plan of raising a fortified outpost on the spot, to be held by a

picked troop of the banished Messenians, and thus planting a thorn in

the side of Sparta.

Fortune favoured his design. For on rounding the western headland of

Peloponnesus, the fleet encountered a storm, and was compelled to seek

shelter at Pylos. Demosthenes now urged the admirals to employ their

enforced leisure in fortifying the place. But they repulsed him rudely,

and treated his suggestion with contempt. He next tried to interest the

inferior officers in his project, but meeting with no better success,

he began to fear that this grand opportunity would be thrown away. The

discussion, however, had reached the ears of the soldiers, and having

nothing else to do, they agreed among themselves to pass the time by

building a fort. Choosing a place of great natural strength, where the

rocky coast descends abruptly to the open sea, they went to work with a

will. As they had no tools for stone-cutting, they picked out the

stones, and fitted them together according to their shape; and for want

of hods they carried the mortar, wherever it was required, on their

backs, stooping forward and clasping their hands together behind them,

to prevent it from slipping off. They carried out their self-imposed

task with great energy, and after six days of vigorous labour the fort

was completed, for the natural defences of the site were so strong that

in most places there was no need of a wall. As the weather was now

favourable, the fleet proceeded on its voyage, leaving Demosthenes with

five ships to garrison the fort.

The news of the occupation of Pylos soon reached the Spartans, but at

first they paid little heed, thinking that they could expel the

audacious intruders whenever they chose to exert themselves. Moreover,

they were just then engaged in keeping one of those religious festivals

of which the Spartan calendar was so full, and a good part of their

army was absent in Attica. Agis, however, the Spartan king, and those

under him who were commanding in Attica, took a wiser view of the

situation, and cutting short their operations they led their forces

with all speed back to Sparta. They were the more inclined to do this

as the season was yet early, the weather inclement, and, the corn being

still green, they wanted means to nourish their troops. Thus the

inventive genius of Demosthenes had already proved of signal service to

his country; for this was the shortest of all the Peloponnesian

invasions, lasting only fifteen days.

On the return of their troops from Attica the Spartans sent a small

force to commence the attack on Pylos, and ordered the main body of

their army to follow. There was some discontent among those who had

already been serving abroad at this second levy, and the full muster of

the troops was consequently delayed. In the meantime a message was

despatched to a Peloponnesian fleet then sailing to Corcyra, which at

this time was in a state of revolution, with orders to return at once,

and assist in the campaign against Pylos. Demosthenes was now in

imminent danger, being threatened with an immediate assault by sea and

land, which he had no adequate means of repelling. Having sent off two

of his ships to recall the Athenian squadron from its voyage to

Corcyra, he prepared to defend himself, until the arrival of succour,

as best he could.

The Peloponnesian fleet was the first to arrive, and the Spartans, who

were now present in full force with their allies, determined to make

the most of their time. They hoped, by a simultaneous onslaught of

their army and fleet, to carry the fort before the Athenian ships had

time to return. But in case they should fail in this, they intended to

cripple the movements of the relieving squadron, by blocking the

entrances to the bay. For the long, narrow island of Sphacteria forms a

natural break water, converting the harbour of Navarino into a

land-locked basin, with two narrow passages at the northern and

southern end. [Footnote: The description of Thucydides does not

correspond to the picture of the harbour given in our modern maps. But

in the course of twenty centuries great changes may well have

occurred.] These inlets the Spartans proposed to close, by anchoring

triremes close together, with their prows turned seawards, which they

could easily have done, for at the southern entrance there was only

room for eight or nine vessels to sail abreast, and at the northern

entrance only room for two. This precaution, however, was never carried

out; and the Spartans, as if blinded by fate, adopted another measure,

which led to fatal consequences for themselves. Wishing to keep command

of every spot of land in the neighbourhood of Pylos, they landed a body

of their own men, numbering four hundred and twenty, with the usual

proportion of Helots, on the island, and the same time posted troops at

every assailable point on the opposite coast.

Thinking now that the little garrison at Pylos, surrounded on all sides

by enemies, would fall an easy prey, they sent orders to the fleet to

get under way, and prepared to attack the fort on the land side.

Meanwhile Demosthenes had not been idle: having drawn his three

remaining ships under the shelter of the fort, and protected them in

front by a stockade, he armed the crews with such weapons as he had,

including a number of wicker-shields, taken from a thirty-oared

Messenian galley which had recently come to his assistance with a force

of forty hoplites. Then, having posted the greater part of his troops

for the defence of his position against the Peloponnesian army, he

himself descended with a picked body of sixty hoplites, and took up his

station on the rocky shore. For on this side the defences were weakest,

as the Athenians, in building the fort, had never anticipated an attack

from the sea.

Demosthenes had just time to address a few words of caution and

encouragement to his men, assuring them of victory, if they would only

stand fast, when the Peloponnesian fleet was seen bearing down upon

them; and at the same moment a loud shout from the fort announced that

the garrison was already engaged behind them. The assault was fiercest

at the point where Demosthenes and his men were stationed, and the

Peloponnesians made desperate efforts to effect a landing. But they

were embarrassed by the difficult and rocky coast, which only allowed a

few ships to approach at a time. As fast as one division was beaten

back, another came on, with the white foam spouting round the prows,

and the waters roaring and eddying to the strokes of the gigantic oars,

while the cliffs resounded with the shouts of their comrades in the

ships behind, cheering them on to the attack.

Conspicuous among those who fought on the ships was seen the gallant

figure of Brasidas, who exerted himself, by voice and by example, to

infuse his own heroic spirit into the rest of the crews and their

officers. His ringing tones were heard above the tumult, urging on the

captains and steersmen, when they hung back in fear lest their ships

should be shattered on the rocks. "Spare not these timbers," he cried,

"but let every hull among them go to wreck, rather than suffer the

enemy to violate the soil of Lacedaemon. Where is your loyalty to

Sparta? Have you forgotten the debt which you owe to her? Have at them,

I say, and hurl this fort with its defenders into the sea." Saying this

he ordered the master of his own trireme to beach the vessel, and stood

ready on the gangway, that he might be the first to leap on shore. But

as he attempted to land he was hurled back by the Athenians, and fell

fainting, covered with wounds, on the deck. His shield slipped off his

arm, and dropped into the sea, and having been washed ashore, was

picked up by the Athenians, who used it to adorn the trophy which they

afterwards erected.

After the fall of Brasidas the Peloponnesians still continued their

efforts to effect a landing, but they were baffled by the obstinate

defence of the Athenians, and the rugged and inhospitable coast. It was

a strange reversal of affairs which had been brought about by the

fortune of war. On one side were the Spartans, trained to military

service on land, but now compelled to serve on board a fleet, in order

to obtain a footing on their own territory, and on the other side the

Athenians, whose natural element was the sea, drawn up on land to repel

a naval attack.

Next day the assault was repeated, but again without success. The

Spartans sent for a supply of timber, to construct siege engines,

intending to try and batter down the Athenian wall where it overlooked

the harbour, as at this point there was a better landing-place for the

ships. In this task, however, they were interrupted by the sudden

appearance of the Athenian fleet, now numbering fifty vessels, having

been reinforced by four Chian ships, and six from Naupactus. Finding

the harbour occupied by the Peloponnesians, and the whole coast lined

with troops, they retired for the night to the little island of Prote.

Next day they weighed anchor early, and dividing their fleet, sailed

into the harbour of Navarino by both entrances at once. Though taken by

surprise, the Peloponnesians manned their ships, and as fast as they

were ready put out to meet them; but before their array was complete

they were attacked by the Athenians, who disabled many of their

vessels, captured five, and drove the rest ashore. So complete was the

rout that the Athenians pursued the flying ships into the very interior

of the harbour, and rammed some of them after they had been brought to

land. Others they charged while the crews were still getting on board,

and began to tow off the disabled hulls. But in the heat of victory the

Athenians had pushed their advantage somewhat too far, and they paid

for their audacity by the loss of a considerable number of their men.

For the Lacedaemonians, in wild dismay at the defeat of their ships, by

which their comrades on the island would be cut off from all help, made

desperate exertions to save their fleet, wading into the water in their

heavy armour, and hauling back the vessels as they were being towed

off. In the confined space manoeuvring was impossible, and the

sea-fight had now become a furious hand to hand encounter, as between

two armies on land. After a prolonged struggle, in which both sides

suffered severely, the Spartans succeeded in saving their ships, except

those which had been taken at first, and the Athenians then retired to

their station.

The result of this battle was to give the Athenians complete command of

the sea, for the Peloponnesian fleet was in no condition to renew the

engagement. From their camp on the mainland the Spartans could see the

Athenian triremes rowing round and round the island, and keeping

vigilant watch, to prevent those who were confined there from escaping.

News of the disaster was sent without delay to Sparta, and the

magistrates, recognising the gravity of the crisis, proceeded at once

to Pylos, wishing to inform themselves on the spot, and then decide

what was best to be done. Finding on their arrival that there was no

prospect of rescuing their men on the island, they applied to the

Athenian commanders for a truce, to enable them to send envoys to

Athens, and arrange some terms for the recovery of the imprisoned

Spartans. The Athenians consented, and a truce was made on the

following conditions: The Spartans were to surrender all their fleet,

including any ships of war on the coast of Laconia, to the Athenians,

and to refrain from any attack on the fort, until the return of the

envoys. The Athenians, on their part, agreed to allow provisions to be

sent to the Spartans on the island, all such provision being conveyed

thither under their own inspection, and none by stealth. They further

agreed to carry the envoys to Athens in one of their own triremes, and

to suspend all hostilities until the expiration of the truce. When the

envoys returned, the Peloponnesian ships were to be given back.

It was a proud moment for Athens when the Spartan envoys appeared

before the assembly, bearing the humble petition from her great enemy.

The terms offered by the spokesman of the embassy in the name of Sparta

were simple and concise, peace and friendship with Sparta, in return

for the men shut up on the island. The rest of his speech was made up

of grave moral reflections, such as are generally paraded by those on

the losing side. Let the Athenians beware of abusing their advantage;

though they had the upper hand to-day, they might be brought to their

knees to-morrow. War was a game of hazard, in which the luck was always

changing. Now they had an opportunity of concluding an honourable

peace, and establishing a lasting claim to the gratitude of Sparta. And

if the two leading states of Greece were once united, they could

dictate what terms they pleased to the rest.

The notorious selfishness of Spartan policy is glaringly manifested in

this speech. In their anxiety to recover their own citizens, the

Spartans completely ignored the interests of their allies, and held out

the right hand of fellowship to the people whom they had lately branded

as the oppressors and spoilers of Greece. The Athenians might well

distrust the professions of these perfidious statesmen, who repudiated

their sworn obligations with such cynical levity. The Spartans in

Sphacteria were already, they thought, prisoners of Athens, to be dealt

with as they pleased; and were they to resign this costly prize, in

return for a vague promise of friendship from Sparta? Their answer was

framed on the advice of Cleon: they could not, they said, enter into

any discussion, until the men on the island had surrendered themselves,

and been brought to Athens. Then, if the Spartans agreed to restore to

the Athenians Nisaea and Pegae, [Footnote: The harbour-towns of

Megara.] and some other places which they had held before the Thirty

Years' Truce, peace might be made, and the prisoners restored. The

Spartan envoys were somewhat startled by these demands, which involved

a gross breach of faith to their own allies; so they affected to ignore

the proposal, and suggested a private conference between themselves and

select Athenian commissioners. It is not impossible that the terms

offered, infamous as they were to Sparta, might have been accepted; but

the whole negotiation was frustrated by the violence of Cleon, who, on

hearing the suggestion of the envoys, overwhelmed them with abuse,

accusing them of double-dealing and bad faith. The envoys were

confounded by this specimen of Athenian manners, and seeing that they

were wasting their time to no purpose, they turned their backs on the

city of free speech.

On their return to Pylos the truce expired, and the Spartans demanded

back their ships, but the Athenians refused to restore them, on the

ground of some alleged violation of the conditions laid down. Thereupon

hostilities were resumed with vigour on both sides. The Spartans made

repeated attacks on the fort, and watched for an opportunity of

bringing off their men from the island: and the Athenians kept a

vigilant guard to prevent their escape. During the day two triremes

sailed continually round Sphacteria in opposite directions, and at

night their whole fleet, now raised to the number of seventy by the

arrival of twenty fresh ships, was moored about the island, except on

the exposed side in windy weather.

Before long the Athenians began to feel the difficulties of their

position. They were but scantily supplied with food, and had much

trouble in obtaining water. The only spring to which they had access,

and even that by no means abundant, was in the citadel of Pylos, and

most of them were reduced to scraping the shingle, and thus obtaining a

meagre supply of brackish water. On land their quarters were straitened

and uncomfortable, and they had no proper anchorage for their ships, so

that the crews had to go ashore in turns to get their meals. They were

greatly disappointed to find their task thus prolonged, for they had

supposed that a few days' siege would suffice to starve the imprisoned

Spartans into a surrender, as the island was barren and ill-furnished

with water. But day followed day, and still they waited in vain for any

sign of yielding. For the Spartan magistrates had offered large rewards

to anyone who succeeded in conveying wine, meal, or other portable

provisions, to the island, and many were tempted to run the risk,

especially among the Helots, who were offered their liberty in return

for this service. They put out from various points of the mainland, and

landed under cover of night on the seaward side of the island, choosing

their time when the wind was blowing strong from the sea, which made it

impossible for the Athenian triremes to keep their exposed anchorage.

The Spartan hoplites stood ready on the rocks to help them; and so long

as they could get ashore with their freight, they cared nothing what

happened to their boats, for if they were wrecked, the Spartans had

pledged themselves for the full value. Others, still bolder, swam,

across the harbour, dragging after them leather bags filled with a

mixture of poppy-seed or linseed and honey, [Footnote: Poppy-seed was

valued in ancient medicine as an antidote against hunger, and linseed

against thirst.] and attached to a cord. These were soon detected; but

the other source of supply remained open, and it seemed likely that the

siege would be protracted till winter, when it would have to be given

up.

The Athenians at home were much concerned when they were informed of

this state of affairs, and they began to regret that they had not

accepted the terms offered by Sparta. They were suspicious and uneasy,

and Cleon, on whose advice they had acted, saw himself in danger of

falling a victim to their resentment. But his boundless self-confidence

served him well in this crisis. At first he affected to disbelieve the

report sent from Pylos, and proposed to send commissioners to inquire

into the true state of the case. His motion was carried, and he himself

was nominated as one of the commissioners. Cleon was now placed in an

awkward position: either he would have to confirm the statement of the

messengers from Pylos, and thus make himself ridiculous, or, if he

contradicted them, he would be convicted of falsehood. So he turned

round again, and advised the Athenians, if they believed the report, to

waste no more time, but to order an immediate attack on the island. "If

I were general," [Footnote: The chief civil and military magistrate at

Athens, corresponding to the Roman consul.] he said, with a meaning

glance at Nicias, who was then holding that office, "it would not be

long before these Spartans were brought in chains to Athens. The

Athenians want a \_man\_ to lead them."

This Nicias, on whom the demagogue had so scornfully reflected, was a

great noble, and the chief political opponent of Cleon. When he heard

the boastful words of his rival, it struck Nicias that there was a fine

opportunity of bringing him to ruin, by thrusting upon him a command

for which he was totally unqualified. Encouraged by the shouts of the

multitude, who were crying to Cleon, "Why don't you go and do it?" he

rose from his place, and proposed that the tanner should be sent in

charge of an expedition to take the men at Sphacteria. At first Cleon

agreed to go, thinking that Nicias was jesting; but when he saw that

the proposal was made seriously, he began to draw back. "It is your

business, not mine," he said to Nicias. "I am not general--you are; why

should I do your work for you?" "Never mind the title," answered

Nicias; "I resign my office on this occasion to you." The dispute grew

hotter and hotter, much to the amusement of the Athenians, who fell

readily into the humour of the situation, and loudly applauded the

proposal of Nicias. The more Cleon objected, the more they shouted that

he should go. Finding that he must make good his words, Cleon at last

plucked up a spirit, and accepted the honour thus contemptuously forced

upon him. "I am not afraid of the Spartans," he declared valiantly.

"Give me the contingent of soldiers from Lemnos and Imbros, the

Thracian peltasts, [Footnote: Light-armed soldiers.] and four hundred

archers, and without taking a single Athenian from the city, within

three weeks I will either bring those Spartans as prisoners to Athens,

or kill them where they are."

There was some laughter among the Athenians at Cleon's vain-glorious

promise; but the more sober-minded were not displeased at his

appointment, expecting that, if he failed, they would be rid of a

nuisance; while, if he succeeded, they would gain an immense advantage

over their enemies. Such, at least, is the comment of the historian;

but he makes no remark on the incredible levity of the Athenians, to

whom the gravest interests of state were matter for mirth and pastime;

and he has not a word of censure for Nicias and his "sober-minded"

partisans, who, in their eagerness to ruin a political opponent, showed

a criminal disregard for the welfare of Athens.

II

When Cleon arrived at Pylos with his forces, he found Demosthenes

engaged in active preparations for an attack on the island. For his

troops were growing impatient, and clamouring to be led into action,

and a happy accident had recently occurred, which greatly increased the

prospect of success. Till quite lately Sphacteria had been covered with

a dense growth of underwood, and Demosthenes knew by his experience in

Aetolia that an attacking force would be at a great disadvantage in

marching against an enemy who fought under cover, and knew every inch

of the ground. But a party of Athenian soldiers, who had landed on the

island to cook their breakfast, accidentally set fire to the brushwood,

and a wind springing up, the flames were carried over the greater part

of the island, leaving it a blackened waste. Demosthenes now discovered

that the besieged Spartans were more numerous than he had supposed,

having hitherto believed that their number had been purposely

exaggerated, to give an excuse for sending more food; and the main

obstacle being now removed, he issued the welcome order to make ready

for an immediate assault.

When he received his commission, Cleon had prudently stipulated that

Demosthenes should be associated with him in the command. The two

ill-assorted colleagues--the turbulent demagogue, and the veteran

general--now took counsel together, and after a last fruitless attempt

at negotiation, they set sail at night with a force of eight hundred

hoplites, and disembarking just before dawn on both sides of the island

at once, led their men at a run against the first guard-station of the

Spartans. They found the enemy posted in three divisions: the first,

consisting of thirty hoplites, formed an advanced guard; some distance

behind these, where the ground forms a shallow basin, containing the

only spring in the island, was stationed the main body, commanded by

Epitadas; and at the extreme north, opposite Pylos, there was a small

reserve force, left to guard a sort of natural citadel, which would

serve as a last retreat, if Epitadas and his men were overpowered.

The thirty Spartans in the outpost were taken by surprise, and cut down

to a man; for though they had seen the Athenian ships putting out, they

had no suspicion of what was intended, supposing that they were merely

proceeding to their anchorage for the night. At daybreak the rest of

the fleet put in at the island, bringing the whole of the forces which

Demosthenes had at his disposal, except a few, who were left to

garrison the fort at Pylos. They were a motley host, armed for the most

part with slings, javelins, and bows, but admirably suited for the work

which was to be done. Swarming over the island by hundreds and by

thousands they took up their stations on every piece of rising ground,

threatening the enemy in front, in the rear, on the right flank, and on

the left. The Spartans, in their heavy armour, were helpless against

these agile foes, who eluded every attempt to come to close quarters,

and kept up a continual shower of arrows, javelins, and stones. Such

had been the orders of Demosthenes, which were now carried into effect.

When the Spartans under Epitadas saw their advanced guard cut up, and

the Athenians marching against them, they drew up in order, and tried

to come within spear-thrust of the enemy; but they were unable to

effect their purpose, for the Athenian hoplites kept their ground, and

at the same moment they themselves were assailed on both flanks and in

the rear by a cloud of light infantry. It was a kind of warfare to

which the Spartans were totally unaccustomed: if they attempted to

advance, their nimble assailants drew back, and pursuit was impossible

on the rocky and broken ground. For a time the light-armed troops

approached them with caution, being somewhat cowed in spirit when

brought face to face with the renowned warriors of Sparta, hitherto

supposed to be invincible. But seeing how the Spartans were

embarrassed, they took courage, and came on in a roaring multitude,

surrounding them on all sides, and leaving them not a moment to take

breath. The air was darkened by a tempest of missiles; and a fine dust,

caused by the ashes of the late fire, rose in choking clouds from the

trampling of many feet. Exhausted by their violent exertions, stunned

by the uproar, and blinded by the dust, the Spartans began to give

ground, and closing their ranks fell back on the stronghold where their

reserve was stationed. They were hotly pursued, and some few were cut

off in the retreat, but the greater part succeeded in reaching the

fort, where they turned at bay, and prepared to defend themselves to

the last. Until a late hour in the day the Athenians made vain attempts

to dislodge them from their position, which was only assailable in

front. At last, when both sides were sorely distressed by the long

conflict under a burning sun, an officer who was in command of the

Messenian troops came to the generals, and offered, if they would place

a few light-armed soldiers at his disposal, to lead them up the

precipitous cliffs at the northern end of Sphacteria, and take the

Spartans in the rear. Permission being readily granted, he chose his

men, and taking care that his movements were not perceived by the

enemy, made his way with them along the perilous and slippery face of

the cliffs to the rear of the beleaguered garrison, scaled the steep

ascent, and suddenly appearing on the heights, struck terror into the

Spartans, and gave fresh courage to their assailants.

The situation of the Spartans was now similar to that of their

ancestors when they made their last stand at Thermopylae. They were

attacked in front and rear, and hemmed in on both sides by the natural

difficulties of the place. In their weak and exhausted condition it

would have been an easy task to make an end of them. But the great

object of Cleon and Demosthenes was to take them alive. They therefore

suspended the attack, and sent a herald, and summoned them to lay down

their arms. When they heard the proclamation, most of them lowered

their shields, and waved their hands in the air, to show that they had

dropped their weapons. The Athenian generals then entered into a parley

with Styphon the third in command of the Spartans; for Epitadas, the

chief officer, was slain, and Hippagretus, the second, had been left

for dead on the field. Styphon requested permission to communicate with

the Spartan authorities on the mainland, and ask what he and his

comrades were to do; and the Athenian commanders sent one of their own

men to carry the message. Having heard his report, the Spartan

magistrates sent a herald to see how matters stood; and after more than

one messenger had passed to and fro between their camp and the island,

they sent their final instructions, conveyed in these words "The

Spartans bid you to decide for yourselves, but to do nothing

dishonourable."

Fifty years before, these wounded and weary men would have needed no

instructions to tell them their duty. According to the ancient

tradition of Sparta they had but one course open to them--to die at

their posts. But the lapse of time had softened the stern fibre of the

Spartan character; and the broken remnant now brought to bay in

Sphacteria interpreted the ambiguous mandate in their own favour, and

surrendered themselves and their arms.

The number of the prisoners was two hundred and ninety-two, of whom

about a hundred and twenty were Spartans of pure descent, several of

them belonging to the highest families in Sparta. They were distributed

among the captains of the fleet for transportation to Athens. Dating

from the first sea-fight, the siege had lasted altogether seventy-two

days; and during seven weeks of this period they had subsisted on the

casual supplies smuggled over by the blockade-runners from the

mainland. Great was the joy at Athens when that costly freight was

brought safely into the harbour of Peiraeus; and Cleon, whose bustling

energy had really helped to precipitate a crisis, was the hero of the

hour. He had promised to settle the business, one way or the other,

within twenty days, and this promise, which had been laughed at as a

piece of crazy vanity, was fulfilled to the letter. The whole merit of

the performance, however, belonged to Demosthenes, who had planned the

attack on Sphacteria with admirable sagacity, and led the operations

from first to last.

The surrender of a picked troop of Spartan warriors caused a revolution

of feeling throughout Greece. Hitherto it had been assumed as a matter

of course that no Spartan soldier, in any circumstances, would yield to

an enemy; but now more than a hundred Spartans had preferred life to

honour. It was generally believed that the survivors were inferior in

valour to those who had fallen; and some time afterwards one of the

captives was asked this insulting question by one of the Athenian

allies: "Your \_brave\_ comrades were buried on the field, I suppose?"

The Spartan's answer was couched in a riddle: "It would be a mighty

clever spindle, [Footnote: Arrow.] which singled out the brave." His

meaning was that the stones and arrows had dealt out death among his

comrades without distinction.

CAMPAIGNS OF BRASIDAS IN THRACE

I

One advantage which accrued to the Athenians from the possession of the

Spartan captives was the immunity from invasion. For if the Spartans

prepared to make any movement against Attica, they could bring out

their prisoners, and threaten to put them to death. And in other

directions the future looked brighter than it had done for many years.

They held Pylos, which was garrisoned by Messenian troops, and served

as an open door, through which they could carry havoc over the whole

western district of Laconia; and the occupation of Cythera, which was

effected in the following year, gave them increased facility for

harassing the commerce of Sparta, and making descents on her eastern

coast.

Elated by these successes, the Athenians determined on a bolder flight,

and forgetting the lessons of Pericles, thought of recovering the

possessions which they had held on the mainland thirty years before.

With this intention they planned an attack, which was to be carried out

from three different points at once, on Boeotia. But the whole scheme

proved a failure, and led to a severe defeat at Delium; and about the

same time news arrived from Thrace which showed that the tide was

turning, and should have warned them, if they were wise, to set bounds

to their restless ambition.

Brasidas had long since recovered from the wounds received at Pylos.

The deep humiliation of Sparta, now reduced to become a suppliant for

peace, filled him with shame and sorrow, and in the eighth year of the

war he formed the bold design of organizing a campaign against the

coast-towns of Thrace, which were among the most important of the

Athenian tributaries. Having obtained the necessary commission from

Sparta, he collected a force of seventeen hundred heavy-armed infantry,

and in the summer following the disaster at Sphacteria, turned his

steps northward, and arrived without mishap at the borders of Thessaly.

The Thessalians generally were then on friendly terms with Athens, and,

apart from this, the passage of so large a force through their

territory caused suspicion and alarm among the inhabitants. But

Brasidas was a man of rare gifts: endowed with more than a full share

of the typical Spartan virtues, he combined with these a graciousness

of manner, and a winning eloquence, which made him an equal of the most

accomplished Athenian. He had, moreover, friends among the powerful

nobles of Thessaly, who undertook to guide him in safety to the

Macedonian frontier. On reaching the river Enipeus, he found his

passage barred by a Thessalian force, who seemed resolved to dispute

his progress. His courteous demeanour, and fair words, disarmed their

hostility, and he was allowed to pass. Fearing, however, a general

rising of the natives against him, and urged to despatch by his guides,

he pushed on by forced marches, and entering the passes of Olympus,

descended into the southern plain of Macedonia, whose king Perdiccas, a

shifty and treacherous barbarian, though nominally in alliance with

Athens, favoured the enterprise of Brasidas.

Perdiccas had undertaken to provide pay for half the Spartan force, in

return for help to be rendered against a rebel chieftain with whom he

was at war. But Brasidas, whose main object was to raise a revolt among

the Athenian allies, insisted on entering into negotiations with the

rebel, and having patched up a truce, conducted his troops to the

neighbourhood of Acanthus, a town on the eastern side of the Chalcidian

peninsula, where there was a party discontented with the Athenian rule.

In all the cities subject to Athens the general mass of the people were

found loyal towards her, or, at the worst, disinclined for any change;

and Acanthus was no exception. When Brasidas with his little army

appeared before the walls the people at first refused him admission.

But it was just before the vintage, and their grapes were hanging in

ripe clusters, exposed to the hand of the spoiler; and so, to save

their vineyards from ravage, they were at last induced to give him a

hearing.

It was very important for Brasidas to secure the voluntary adherence of

the Acanthians, whose action would have a powerful effect in

determining the attitude of the other Chalcidians towards them.

Accordingly he exerted all his skill as an orator, which was

considerable, to allay their suspicions, and rouse their enthusiasm for

the cause which he represented. That cause, he said, was the liberation

of Greece from the tyranny of Athens. Let none of them suppose that he

had come in the interests of a faction, to enslave the many to the few,

or the few to the many. He had bound the authorities of Sparta by the

most solemn oaths to respect the constitution of any state which

enlisted under their banner. Freedom for Greeks!--that was the

watchword which should find a response in every patriotic heart. After

this fine burst of sentiment, Brasidas descended to a much lower level,

and plainly intimated that if the Acanthians would not join him from

these high motives, he would employ coercion, and proceed to ravage

their estates, This last argument was decisive, and in order to save

their valuable harvest from destruction, they agreed to admit Brasidas

and his army into the town. Shortly afterwards their example was

followed by Stagirus, one day to become famous as the birthplace of

Aristotle.

It is melancholy to find a man of really pure and generous character

like Brasidas lending himself to be the mouthpiece of Spartan

hypocrisy. To him the sounding phrases and lofty professions which he

uttered may have meant something: but in their essence they were mere

hollow cant, intended to divert attention from the true issue, and drag

a peaceful and prosperous community into the private quarrels of

Sparta. So degraded was now the tone of politics in Greece, even among

her best and ablest men.

II

On the banks of the Strymon, just where the river sweeps round in a

sharp curve, west and east, the Athenians had founded, six years before

the outbreak of the war, the colony of Amphipolis. It was a site which

had long been coveted by the leaders of Greek colonial enterprise,

being the key to the richest district in Thrace, with unrivalled

facilities for commerce, and close to the gold-mines of Mount Pangeus.

A previous attempt which was made by the Athenians to occupy the

position had ended in ruinous disaster; but nearly thirty years later a

second body of emigrants, led by Hagnon from Athens, met with much

better success; Amphipolis now grew and prospered, and at the time

which we have reached was the most important city in the Athenian

empire.

The Amphipolitans had a bitter and jealous enemy in the neighbouring

town of Argilus, situated a few miles to the west, on the road to

Amphipolis; and ever since the appearance of Brasidas in Thrace the

Argilians had been plotting against the tranquillity of their hated

rival. Accordingly, when Brasidas, who had planned a surprise on

Amphipolis, appeared before their gates, they welcomed him eagerly, and

conducted him and his army to the bridge over the Strymon, which

crossed the river just outside the southern end of the city wall. The

defenders of the bridge, few in number, and taken unawares, were

instantly cut to pieces; for Brasidas came upon them before daybreak,

and the weather, which was wintry and inclement, favoured his design.

The farms and country-houses of the Amphipolitans, which occupied an

extensive district on the eastern side of the city, now lay at the

mercy of Brasidas, and after choosing a position for his camp, he began

to overrun the country. For those who were responsible for the safety

of Amphipolis had taken no precautions, though they knew that this

daring and active enemy had been carrying on a campaign for many weeks

in the adjacent parts of Thrace. Consequently, a good number of the

citizens, who were attending to the business of their estates, fell

into his hands, and it is not improbable that, if he had made a sudden

assault on the city, he would have captured it on the same day.

There was a disaffected party in Amphipolis, who had planned the

betrayal of the place, acting in concert with Argilus, through the

agency of certain Argilian citizens residing in the town. The traitors

now proposed that Brasidas and his army should be admitted, but they

were overruled by the general voice of the people, and it was agreed

that the Athenian Eucles, governor of Amphipolis, should send a message

for help to another Athenian officer, who was commissioned to watch the

interests of Athens in Thrace. That officer was Thucydides, the

historian, from whose work the materials for the present narrative are

taken. Thucydides was descended on his mother's side from the royal

family of Thrace, [Footnote: Such, at least, is the highly probable

conjecture of Classen.] and through this connexion he was the owner of

valuable working rights in the gold-mines of Mount Pangaeus, and a man

of great power and, influence in these districts. When the message

arrived from Amphipolis, he was engaged in some business at Thasos, and

postponing all other concerns he collected a small squadron of seven

ships and hastened to the rescue with all speed. But Brasidas, who had

received intelligence of his movements, was too quick for him. He had

valuable hostages in the persons of those Amphipolitans who had been

taken outside the walls. The population of Amphipolis consisted almost

entirely of men of mixed or foreign descent, who were anxious about

their properties, and in fear for their friends, while the few Athenian

residents were alarmed for their own safety, having little hope of

prompt succour. Taking advantage of this state of public feeling, the

politic Spartan issued a proclamation, pledging him to respect the

rights and property of all who chose to remain; while those who

preferred to withdraw were allowed five days to take away their goods.

This tempting offer produced the desired effect. It was in vain that

the Athenian governor interposed his authority, and strove to uphold

the imperial claims of Athens. The people threatened to rise in mutiny

against him, and when the partisans of Brasidas, now grown bold, openly

moved a resolution to accept his conditions, the proposal was carried,

and the Spartan general marched unopposed into the town.

Late on the same day Thucydides sailed into the harbour of Eion, the

port of Amphipolis, and learning that Brasidas was already in

possession of the inland city, took all necessary precautions to

provide against an immediate attack. He was only just in time; for on

the very next day Brasidas carried his troops down the river on a

flotilla of boats, and tried to establish himself in a strong position,

commanding the mouth of the river, and at the same time sent a storming

party to make an assault on the land side. But the attempt was

frustrated, and Eion at least was saved to Athens.

The fall of Amphipolis, which occurred shortly after the crushing

defeat at Delium, caused great consternation among the Athenians. Apart

from the wound to their pride, they were deprived by this loss of a

large portion of their revenue, and cut off from the principal source

of their timber supply. And there were still further grounds for alarm.

For Amphipolis was now an open door, through which the Spartans could

send troops into eastern Thrace, and carry the war to the entrance of

the Euxine. For a moment it seemed as if all their fears would be

realized. The gentle manners of Brasidas--his fairness, modesty, and

strict regard for the rights of all men--had won the hearts of the

Athenian allies in Thrace, and secret agents were constantly arriving

at his head-quarters on the Strymon, inviting him to come and help them

to recover their liberty. He had skilfully appealed to the most

deeply-rooted instinct of the Greek, the desire for unfettered action

in his own city, free from all interference from outside. This

instinct, long held in abeyance, first by the necessity for protection

from Persia, and when that danger was removed, by the habits acquired

under the mild rule of Athens, was now awakened into new life by the

influence of the great warrior and accomplished statesman, whose

watchword was "Liberty for Greeks!" The recent reverses of Athens had

excited a feeling of contempt among her subjects, and led them greatly

to under-estimate her real power; and Brasidas himself, by a not

over-scrupulous perversion of facts, had been careful to encourage this

belief. All these causes produced a burst of enthusiasm throughout

Thrace, and if the Spartans had supported Brasidas with vigour, a

general insurrection would have followed among the Athenian allies. But

the authorities of Sparta were jealous of their brilliant officer, and

their chief anxiety was to recover the prisoners taken at Sphacteria.

In the same winter the indefatigable Spartan effected the capture of

Torone, a town situated on the second of the three headlands which

project, like the prongs of a fork, from the peninsula of Chalcidice.

As in the case of Amphipolis, Torone fell into his hands by treachery;

but he had now made good his title as the champion of Greek

independence, and early in the following spring the citizens of Scione,

on the first or westernmost headland, invited him to come over and take

command of their town. On receiving this welcome summons Brasidas lost

no time, and crossed over by night in a skiff, which was convoyed by a

trireme, so that if any hostile vessel appeared in sight, it might be

engaged by the trireme, and leave him free to escape. He reached Scione

in safety, and having convened a general assembly of the citizens,

addressed them in flattering terms, praising their high courage and

patriotic spirit. "You," he said, "have set a noble example to your

oppressed brethren: isolated as you are, and cut off from all succour

from the mainland, you have defied all perils, and thrown in your lot,

for better or for worse, with the friends of liberty. Your gallantry

and self-devotion has given you a just claim to the gratitude of Sparta

and of all Greece." The revolt of Scione was indeed a daring defiance

of the Athenian power, for since the capitulation of Potidaea, which

occurred seven years before, the inhabitants had been in the position

of islanders, exposed to the whole maritime power of Athens. For the

moment, however, the people were carried away by a transport of

enthusiasm, and little dreaming of the terrible vengeance which was to

overtake them two years later, they greeted Brasidas as a deliverer,

and vied with one another who should honour him most. He was publicly

presented with a crown of gold, as the liberator of Greece; and in

private houses he was wreathed with garlands, and surrounded with

worship, like a victorious athlete.

But a few days before the defection of Scione all the ambitious schemes

of Brasidas had been checkmated by the action of his own countrymen at

home. For some time past negotiations had been in progress between

Athens and Sparta; and since the battle of Delium, and the rapid

successes of their great enemy in Thrace, the Athenians had been more

disposed to come to terms. In this altered mood they agreed to make a

truce for one year with Sparta, which would give time to arrange the

conditions of a lasting peace, and leave them at leisure to repair the

shattered fabric of their empire. Two commissioners, an Athenian and a

Spartan, were at once despatched to announce the conclusion of the

truce to Brasidas. They found him at Torone, preparing to set out a

second time for the western peninsula, and continue his intrigues

against the subjects of Athens. In the interview which followed a

dispute arose between Brasidas and the commissioners, as to whether

Scione should be admitted into the truce. Brasidas asserted that the

city had joined the Spartan alliance before the truce was signed; but

the Athenian commissioner loudly protested that the revolt occurred

after the conclusion of the truce,--and such, indeed, was the fact.

Brasidas, however, was bound in honour to defend the hapless community

which had been drawn by his fatal influence into so fearful a peril;

and in the existing confusion of the Greek calendar it was not easy to

establish a date with perfect exactitude. Accordingly Brasidas refused

to surrender Scione to the vengeance of Athens, and placed the town in

a state of defence. Not content with this, he extended the same

measures of protection to Mende, which revolted after the arrival of

the commissioners. This was an open violation of the truce, and the

Athenians, in great fury, immediately prepared to send a fleet against

these audacious rebels, and passed a savage decree, condemning the

whole adult male population of Scione to death.

III

During the following summer Mende was recovered by Nicias for the

Athenians, Scione was closely invested, and Perdiccas, who had

quarrelled with Brasidas, once more became an ally of Athens, and gave

proof of his sincerity by preventing the passage of Spartan

reinforcements to Thrace. The Athenians were thus left free to turn

their attention to Amphipolis, and at the beginning of the tenth year

of the war, the truce having now expired, Cleon was sent with a fleet

of thirty ships to conduct the siege of this important place. That so

weighty a charge should have been entrusted to hands so incompetent

argues a degree of infatuation in the Athenians which is very hard to

understand. On his voyage Cleon succeeded in retaking Torone by a

sudden assault, and then proceeding northwards dropped anchor at Eion,

where he remained inactive, after despatching messengers to Perdiccas,

and to a friendly Thracian prince, to ask for reinforcements.

Meanwhile Brasidas, who some time before had returned to Amphipolis,

was waiting to strike a blow at his unwarlike enemy. His own troops,

though about equal in numbers to the force under Cleon, were far

inferior in equipment and discipline; but he counted on some incautious

movement on the part of the Athenian general, which would throw the

picked infantry of Athens into disorder, and place them at a

disadvantage. So he left Clearidas, a young Spartan, whom he had

appointed governor of Amphipolis, in charge of the garrison, and taking

with him fifteen hundred men occupied a position on the right bank of

the river, where the ground rises abruptly to a considerable height,

affording a wide view over the city to the country beyond, as far as

Eion. From this point, which is called Cerdylium, he could watch the

proceedings of the enemy, and still have ample time to rejoin Clearidas

in Amphipolis, if, as he expected, Cleon should leave his defences and

advance upon the town.

He had not long to wait. The Athenian soldiers stationed at Eion were

chafing at their inaction, and mutinous speeches were heard on all

sides. What a man was this Cleon, this cowardly braggart, under whom

they were to take the field against the most daring and skilful leader

in Greece! They had known what to expect from such a general, since the

day when they sailed for Thrace. These murmurs reached the ears of

Cleon, and he saw that something must be attempted, or his men would be

totally demoralized. So he gave the order to march, and led his troops

up the ridge of hills which slope down towards Amphipolis on the

eastern side, where the town was defended by a single line of wall,

reaching from the northern to the southern bend of the river. He was

far from supposing that anyone would come out to attack him; he only

wanted, he said, to take a good view of the place, and when his

reinforcements arrived, he would surround the city on all sides, and

carry it by assault. For his wonderful good fortune at Pylos had given

him unbounded confidence in his powers as a strategist, and he thought

that Amphipolis would prove a second Pylos, forgetting that here he had

a Brasidas to deal with, and no Demosthenes to do the work for him.

When he reached the top of the ascent, he called a halt, and took a

leisurely survey of the wide sweep of country spread below him,--to the

north, the broad, marshy waters of Lake Cercynitis, from which the

river issues just above the town,--eastwards, the towering summit of

Mount Pangaeus,--and on the other side, just beneath his feet, the

devoted city, which now seemed cowering, silent and deserted, as if

conscious of Cleon's eagle glance. The gates were closed, and not a man

was to be seen on the battlements. "What a pity," remarked Cleon, "that

we brought no siege-engines with us! We might have battered down the

wall, and marched in at once,--there is none to oppose us."

So readily did this holiday general fall into the trap which Brasidas,

with a just estimate of his capacity, had set for him. As soon as he

saw that Cleon had started from Eion, the Spartan general left his post

in Cerdylium, and led his men back into Amphipolis. Here he made such a

disposition of his forces as to give the place that peaceful and

innocent appearance which deceived Cleon's unpractised eye. Then he

took up his station with a picked troop of a hundred and fifty hoplites

at the southern gate of Amphipolis, leaving Clearidas in charge of the

main body, and awaited a favourable moment to attack.

But these preparations could not be made without exciting some

attention among the more experienced of the Athenian officers. They had

seen Brasidas entering the city, and observed him offering sacrifice,

as for battle, before the temple of Athene; and Cleon, who was

standing, lost in his contemplations, some distance in advance of his

forces, suddenly received the alarming intelligence that the enemy were

on the point of making a sally. "The whole garrison is in motion," said

the messenger, "and we have caught sight of the feet of many horses and

men under the gates: evidently they mean to attack us." Thus rudely

startled from his meditations, Cleon went to look for himself, and

seeing that the messenger had spoken the truth he gave the order for a

retreat in the direction of Eion. This movement should have begun from

the left wing, but there was some delay in executing the order, and

Cleon, who was in a great hurry to reach a place of safety, led the way

with his own division, which, being on the right, ought to have closed

the retreat. The consequence was that the whole Athenian army was

thrown into confusion, and Brasidas, who was watching from his station

at the gate, saw by the irregular motion of their spears and helmets

that all discipline was at an end. "Now is our time," he cried to his

men: "Open the gates! The day is ours." With these words he rushed out

with his troops, and fell upon the Athenian centre; and at the same

moment the main body under Clearidas poured out from the northern gate,

and attacked them in the rear.

The effect of this sudden assault was to cut the Athenian army in half:

the left wing, which was nearest to Eion, fled without striking a blow,

but the right made a vigorous resistance, though abandoned by their

cowardly general, who was cut down by a Thracian spearman as he tried

to make good his escape. A far nobler name was also added to the

death-roll of that fatal day: Brasidas, fighting at the head of his

troop, received a mortal wound, and was carried, unobserved by the

Athenians, into the city. He lived long enough to hear that his men had

gained a decisive victory, and then passed away, the purest and the

most heroic spirit among all those who played their part in this

unhappy war. After his death he received divine honours at Amphipolis,

and was worshipped as the second founder of the city.

THE HOLLOW PEACE

I

The negotiations for peace, begun in the previous year; had been

interrupted by the brilliant successes of Brasidas, and the factious

opposition of Cleon, and after their death the main obstacle to a

pacific understanding was removed. The high hopes conceived by the

Athenians after the capture of the Spartans at Pylos had been damped by

their disastrous defeat at Delium, and by the revolt of their allies in

Thrace; and, above all, they were anxious to recover Amphipolis. Still

more depressed was the temper of the Spartans. They had entered on the

war in a spirit of sanguine confidence, expecting to make an end of the

conflict by a single invasion of Attica; and now, after ten years of

fighting, their great rival remained almost untouched in the chief

sources of her power. Their coasts were exposed to continual ravage by

the Athenian fleets, and Pylos was still occupied by their bitter

enemies, the Messenians, attracting all the discontented elements in

Sparta, and keeping the Helots in a continual ferment. And finally a

hundred and twenty of their noblest citizens were immured in the

dungeons of Athens, and they were ready to make great sacrifices to

procure their release.

Accordingly, in the winter after the battle of Amphipolis, negotiations

were resumed, and early in the following spring a treaty of peace was

concluded between Athens and Sparta, on the understanding that all

places taken by force of arms should be restored, and all prisoners set

at liberty. Such was the Peace of Nicias, named after its chief

promoter, the former rival of Cleon, and now the leading politician at

Athens. It was really a private agreement between Athens and Sparta,

for the most important of the Spartan allies, who thought that their

interests were neglected, refused to sign the treaty. Alarmed by this,

the Spartans immediately concluded a second treaty with Athens, binding

both sides to mutual aid and defence, in case their territories were

attacked. The prisoners taken at Sphacteria were now restored, but

owing to the bungling of Nicias, the Athenians failed to regain

Amphipolis.

II

Six years elapsed after the conclusion of the Peace of Nicias, before

war was again openly declared; but it was a peace only in name, and was

broken by many acts of hostility on both sides. During this period the

principal states of Greece were involved in a network of political

intrigue, treaty following treaty, and alliance succeeding to alliance,

for the most part with no result. To this statement, there is, however,

one important exception. A year after the signing of the second treaty

between Athens and Sparta, a coalition was formed, including Athens,

Elis, and Mantinea, under the leadership of Argos; and in mentioning

this event we have to usher on to the stage one of the most

extraordinary characters in history. This was Alcibiades, a young

Athenian noble, endowed with every advantage of mind, person, and

fortune, whose fatal gifts, and lawless ambition, made him the evil

genius of his country. His high birth, his wealth, his wit, and his

wonderful beauty, attracted to him a host of flatterers, who fed his

vanity with soft adulation, and led him to believe that nothing was too

great for such powers as his. Like most of the brilliant young men of

his day, he attached himself for a time to the philosopher Socrates,

for whom he seems to have felt a warm admiration. But his connexion

with that great teacher and thinker, though it served to sharpen his

understanding, could not eradicate the effects of evil habit and

example. His wilful, selfish, and despotic temper soon broke loose from

that salutary restraint, and henceforth we find him pursuing a course

of action which brought ruin on his people, and on himself a traitor's

death and a dishonoured name.

Much irritation had been caused among the Athenians by the shifting and

treacherous conduct of the Spartans, who had failed to redeem their

sworn pledges, and had excited great suspicion at Athens by repeated

intrigues with Argos, and with their own offended allies of the

Peloponnesian League. Alcibiades had a private grudge against the

Spartans, to whom he had made overtures of friendship and service at

the time when the treaty was under discussion, only to be set aside as

a profligate and frivolous youth, unfit to meddle with serious matters

of state. He now placed himself at the head of the party hostile to

Sparta, and it was not long before he had an opportunity of revenging

the insult to his pride. He used all his influence to promote an

alliance with Argos, the ancient enemy and rival of Sparta in

Peloponnesus; and when envoys arrived from Sparta to remonstrate

against this proceeding, and reassure the Athenians as to their

intentions, he contrived by a masterpiece of low cunning to cover them

with shame and contempt. When the envoys were introduced to the senate

they declared that they had come with full powers to settle all

differences, and Alcibiades feared that if they made the same statement

to the general assembly of the citizens, they might induce the

Athenians to renounce their alliance with Argos. So, after the senate

had risen, he took the envoys aside, and with an air of great candour

and friendliness warned them that they must conceal the extent of their

powers when they appeared before the popular assembly. "You do not

understand," he said, "how to deal with the mob of Athens; if you show

your hand, they will force you into extravagant concessions. Leave the

matter to me, and everything will turn out as you wish."

The simple Spartans fell into the snare. They were not at all startled

by the proposal that they should eat their own words, for in dishonesty

they were not behind Alcibiades himself, though they were no match for

him in cunning. Being brought before the people, and asked whether they

had come with full powers, they answered bluntly "No!" Great was the

amazement at this flat contradiction of the avowal which they had made

before the senate, and Alcibiades, giving voice to the general

indignation, overwhelmed the astonished envoys with a torrent of

invective and abuse. The Spartans were dumb-foundered by his perfidy,

and looked helplessly at Nicias, the staunch friend and supporter of

Sparta, whom they had forsaken for this shameless young reprobate.

Nicias, who of course knew nothing of the trick, was utterly confounded

by the double-dealing of the envoys, and could do nothing to relieve

their embarrassment. The result was that the envoys were abruptly

dismissed, and after a fruitless mission of Nicias to Sparta, which

only served to lower his own reputation, the Athenians entered heart

and soul into the Argive alliance.

III

We have seen how much the credit of Sparta had been injured in the eyes

of Greece by the capture of her chosen warriors at Pylos, and by her

subsequent behaviour during the negotiations which led to the peace of

Nicias. Spartan valour was seen to be not above reproach, and the

Peloponnesian allies had still better reason to complain of the

hollowness of Spartan faith. The high reverence which had long been

attached to the name of Sparta had given place to something like

contempt, and the Eleans, who had an old grudge against her, took

advantage of this feeling to exclude her citizens from taking public

part in the Olympic festival, which was celebrated with great pomp and

splendour in the second year of the peace. And the degradation of the

proud Dorian city seemed to be complete, when a Spartan named Lichas,

who had entered for the chariot-race under another name, was driven

with blows from the racecourse. So deep was the abasement to which the

great name of Sparta had now sunk.

The Spartans saw that a vigorous effort must be made, if they would

recover their lost ascendancy; and two years later the opportunity

occurred for which they were waiting. On the northern side of the

Argolic peninsula lies the ancient city of Epidaurus, famous for its

rich vineyards, and its great temple of Asclepius, [Footnote:

Aesculapius.] the god of healing. For some time past, the Epidaurians,

who were in alliance with Sparta, had been involved in a dispute,

arising out of some obscure question of ritual, with Argos; and they

were now in sore straits, being hard pressed by the whole weight of the

Argive power, backed by the new confederacy. This was the pretext

needed by the Spartans, and mustering their whole forces they marched,

under the command of their king Agis, against Argos.

The Argives had received notice of the advance of Agis, and they

immediately marched out to meet him, wishing to engage the Spartans

before they had united with their allies from Corinth, Boeotia, and

elsewhere, who were assembling in great force at Phlius. The two armies

confronted each other for a moment at Methydrium, in Arcadia; but Agis

succeeded in avoiding an engagement, and breaking up his camp under

cover of darkness pushed on to Phlius. Thereupon the Argives, who were

accompanied by their allies from Mantinea and Elis, returned in haste

to Argos, and then, marching northwards, took up their position at

Nemea, which commanded the ordinary route from Phlius to the Argive

territory. But they were again outmanoeuvred by the skilful

dispositions of Agis. Avoiding the road by Nemea, which led through a

narrow and dangerous pass, he led his Spartans over the mountains and

descended into the plain which surrounds the city of Argos. One

contingent of his allies had orders to proceed in the same direction by

another mountain-path, while the Boeotians, who numbered no less than

ten thousand infantry, and five hundred cavalry, were directed to take

the high road by Nemea; for Agis expected that by threatening the

cultivated lands around Argos he would draw the Argives from their

position, and bring them down in haste to the defence of their estates.

The plan was completely successful. As soon as the Argives learnt that

Agis was ravaging their fields they set out with all speed towards

Argos, and finding Agis engaged in the work of pillage, they drew up

their forces, and offered battle. Their situation was in the highest

degree perilous. In front of them, cutting them off from the city of

Argos, was the flower of the Spartan army, reinforced by the troops of

Tegea and Arcadia; on their right flank the mountain slopes swarmed

with the infantry of Corinth and Phlius; and in the rear their retreat

was cut off by the thronging masses of Boeotians, who were now pouring

along the road from Nemea. They were fairly cut off, and seemed

delivered over to destruction; nevertheless, such was the presumptuous

confidence which possessed them, that they awaited eagerly the signal

for battle, crying out that they had caught the Spartans in a trap.

Fortunately for them there were two men among their leaders who took a

wiser view of the position; one of these was Alciphron, an official who

represented the interests of Sparta at Argos, [Footnote: The Greek word

is \_Proxenos\_,--a sort of consul.] and the other was Thrasyllus, one of

the five generals. These two men entered into a parley with Agis, and

by promising to satisfy the demands of Sparta induced him to grant a

truce. Agis then drew off his forces, and returned by way of Nemea to

Sparta; and the allies, much against their will, were compelled to

follow his example. Loud were the murmurs among the confederates, and

even among the Spartan soldiers, against Agis, who had thrown away this

golden opportunity of humbling the pride of Argos, and brought

dishonour on one of the finest armies that had ever been led into the

field by a Grecian general. Strange to say, the Argives were not less

indignant against the two men who had saved them from overwhelming

disaster; and Thrasyllus, the general, narrowly escaped being stoned to

death.

IV

The Argives thought themselves bound to abide by the conditions of the

truce, though made without their consent; but shortly after the retreat

of Agis, an Athenian force of a thousand hoplites and three hundred

cavalry arrived at Argos, and Alcibiades, who was present in the

character of ambassador, strongly urged the renewal of the campaign.

His proposal was warmly supported by the Mantineans and Eleans, and

they and the Athenians marched forthwith against Orchomenus in Arcadia,

which was in alliance with Sparta; and the Argives, who had wavered at

first, soon afterwards joined them. Orchomenus was gained over with

little trouble, and then the Eleans were eager to proceed against

Lepreum, a town in their alliance which had gone over to Sparta. But

the Argives, Athenians, and Mantineans, insisted on attacking Tegea,

where there was a party opposed to Sparta, by whose means they hoped to

bring this powerful city, the ancient rival of Mantinea, to their side.

Thereupon the Eleans abandoned the expedition, and went home in a rage,

but the rest of the allies took up their quarters at Mantinea, and

prepared to make an attack on Tegea.

The Spartans were in high anger against Agis for his unsoldier-like

conduct in the recent campaign, and when they heard of the capitulation

of Orchomenus their resentment rose to such a pitch that it was

proposed to inflict on him a heavy fine, and raze his house to the

ground. At his earnest entreaty they consented to reserve the sentence,

and give him an opportunity of wiping out the stain on his honour; but

as a mark of diminished confidence they appointed ten commissioners,

without whose consent he was not allowed to lead an army out of the

city.

They had just come to this decision when an urgent message arrived from

Tegea, bidding them to bring help with all speed, or the town would be

lost. The imminent peril startled the Spartans from their wonted

apathy, and they set out at once in full force to the relief of Tegea.

On reaching the borders of Arcadia they sent back the elder and younger

men, amounting to a sixth part of the army, to serve as a garrison in

Sparta; and at the same time couriers were despatched to summon their

allies in Arcadia and central Greece. The Arcadians arrived in time to

take part in the battle, but the Boeotians, Corinthians, and others,

though they hastened to obey the order, were delayed by a long and

difficult march, through the hostile territory of Argos.

Passing by Tegea, Agis entered the district of Mantinea, and having

pitched his camp began to lay waste the country. Informed of his

approach, the Argives and their allies marched out to meet him, and

choosing a position on the slope of a hill, defended in front by rugged

and broken ground, they drew up in order of battle. The Spartans,

incited, doubtless, by the example of their king, who was eager to

redeem his reputation, rushed impetuously to the assault; and they were

already within a stone's-throw of the enemy when a Spartan veteran

cried out to Agis: "Heal not ill with ill!" His meaning was that in

Argos Agis had been too cold, and now he was too hot. Agis heard the

warning voice, and his own good sense must have shown him how rashly he

was acting; accordingly, at the very moment of encounter, he gave the

word to retreat, and fell back to the neighbourhood of Tegea. At this

place there was a copious head of water, which, when properly

regulated, served to irrigate the fields of Tegea and Mantinea. The

disposal of the water-supply was a constant source of dispute between

the two rival cities; and Agis now prepared to turn the whole volume of

the fountain towards Mantinea, expecting that the Mantineans, when they

saw their fields threatened with inundation, would come down into the

plain to hinder the mischief.

The Argives and their allies were dumb-foundered by the sudden

disappearance of the Spartans; and when they had recovered from their

astonishment, they waited impatiently for the order to pursue the

runaways. As no such order was given, cries of "Treason!" arose in the

ranks, and the generals were openly accused of having sold themselves

to the enemy. The Spartans, it was asserted, had been allowed to

escape, when they were fairly caught under the walls of Argos; and now

the confederates had been betrayed a second time by their officers.

Amid the general clamour the Argive commanders stood for a moment

confounded and amazed; then recovering themselves they gave the word to

advance, and led their forces down into the plain. Here they passed the

night in the open field, and early next morning they stood to their

arms, and prepared for an immediate attack.

Agis was not aware that the Argive generals had taken up a new

position, and thinking that the confederates were still stationed on

the hill, he gave up his scheme of diverting the water, and directed

his march towards the place where he had first encamped. As they

proceeded thus in marching order, and quite unprepared for any hostile

movement, the Spartans suddenly found themselves face to face with the

whole Argive army, drawn up in order of battle. For one instant it

seemed as if a panic were about to spread through the Spartan ranks;

then their wonderful discipline prevailed, and with all promptitude,

but without flurry or confusion, the necessary orders were passed from

the King to the commanders of divisions, from these again to the

colonels, from the colonels to the captains, and from the captains down

to the sergeants, [Footnote: I have thought it best to give the English

titles, which of course have only a general correspondence with the

Greek Polemarch, Lochagus, etc.] who in their turn had to see that the

required movement was executed by the men under their command: for such

was the regular gradation of authority and responsibility in the

Spartan army. Thanks to this perfect organization, in a very few

minutes every man was in his place and ready for battle.

On the left wing of the Spartan army were posted the Sciritae, hardy

mountaineers from southern Arcadia; next to them stood the enfranchised

Helots, who had served under Brasidas in Thrace, and others of the same

race who had received the Spartan citizenship in reward for public

service; then came the main body of the Spartans themselves, and after

them the rest of the Arcadian allies; while the right wing was assigned

by immemorial privilege to the Tegeans, with whom were a few picked

Spartans. The cavalry, never a very strong part of the Spartan army,

were posted on either flank.

On the other side the Mantineans held the place of honour on the right

wing, because the engagement was fought in their territory; next in

order were the Arcadian allies of Argos, and after them, more towards

the centre, stood a picked troop of a thousand Argives, trained and

equipped at the public expense; then followed the main body of the

Argive troops, with the rest of their allies, the Athenians occupying

the extreme left. As to the numbers engaged, nothing certain is known.

Some time was lost by the Argive army in delivering the customary

harangues addressed by the generals of the several contingents to their

men, and this enabled the Spartans to steady their ranks before the

fighting began. They, on their side, men of war from their youth, had

no need of set speeches to remind them of their duty; but pithy words

of exhortation passed from man to man, and high and clear rose their

national war-songs, thrilling them with the memories of their heroic

past. Then the signal was given on both sides to charge, and the

Argives and their allies rushed impetuously to the onset, while the

Spartans advanced to meet them with even and deliberate pace, timed to

the music of numerous pipers, who were stationed at regular intervals

in their ranks.

The regular equipment of the Greek infantry soldier consisted, besides

his helmet and body-armour, of shield and lance, and in advancing to

battle he had always a tendency to diverge towards the right, from a

natural wish to keep his shielded side towards the enemy. This

divergence from the forward direction was begun by the man posted on

the extreme right; his comrade on the left followed his example, and

the deflection was continued along the whole line. The consequence was

that when two armies came into action, the left wing on either side was

greatly outflanked by the opponents' right; and the battle of Mantinea

affords no exception to this rule, for not even Spartan discipline was

able to counteract the overpowering instinct of self-preservation.

Seeing that his left wing was on the point of being outflanked by the

Mantineans, Agis signalled to the Sciritae and Brasideans to draw off

in a lateral direction towards the left, in order to present an equal

line to the right wing of the enemy. The order was executed, and to

fill up the gap thus produced on the left of his own centre, Agis

ordered the Spartan officers commanding on his right wing to bring up

their men and occupy the vacant space. They, however, flatly refused to

obey the order, and consequently the Sciritae and Brasideans were

assailed in front and on both flanks by overwhelming numbers, and

driven back with great loss to their camp.

So completely were the Spartans out-manoeuvred and worsted in tactics,

through the blunders of their general, and the cowardice of his

subordinates. But in this terrible crisis they showed what native

valour, aided by life-long discipline, can do. Leaving a victorious

enemy in their rear, they advanced without flinching against the

opposing centre, where the main body of the Argives were posted, with

the troops of Orneae and Cleonaea supporting them on the left. Then it

was seen that neither the courage of the Spartans, nor the terror of

their name, had diminished with the lapse of time; for when the

confederate troops found themselves face to face with the renowned

warrior of the Eurotas, they turned and fled, almost without striking a

blow, and trampling their comrades under foot, in their haste to avoid

the thrust of the Spartan lances. The Athenians on the left wing were

now in great danger; for the charge of the troops of Agis had cut them

off from the centre, and they were attacked on the other flank by the

Tegeans and Spartans. They were saved from immediate destruction by the

exertions of their own cavalry, and presently found themselves at

liberty to retire from the field; for Agis, having completed the rout

of the main body, called off his men, and went to the relief of his own

left. The Mantineans and the Argive Thousand made no effort to retrieve

the fortunes of the day, but gave way before the first onset of the

Spartans, and joined the flight of their comrades. The Mantineans

suffered severely in their retreat, but of the Argives only a few were

slain.

Such was the battle of Mantinea, which completely restored the military

fame of the Spartans, and blotted out the reproach of cowardice and

sloth which for some years past had rested on their name.

VI

One incident remains to be recorded, before we proceed to the crowning

catastrophe of our great historical drama. The Athenians, it should be

observed, were still nominally at peace with Sparta, and if they had

been wise they would have taken the opportunity of this respite from

hostilities to recover Amphipolis, and consolidate their empire in

Thrace. Instead of this, they looked around for fresh conquests, and

fixed their eyes on the little island of Melos, belonging to the Cyclad

group, which had been colonized in very early times from Sparta.

The Melians had not joined the Confederacy of Delos, and they might

therefore be reproached for sharing the protection of Athens without

making any return. Beyond this the Athenians had no ground of complaint

against them, for they had taken no part in the Peloponnesian War, but

had remained quietly at home, occupied with their own affairs. But

Athens claimed the haughty title of mistress of the sea, and pretended

to regard the neutrality of one insignificant island as an open

defiance of her power. Ten years before an Athenian fleet had been sent

under Nicias to reduce the refractory Melians to subjection; but the

attempt was unsuccessful, and Nicias withdrew, after having ravaged the

outlying districts. Being now more at leisure, the Athenians resolved,

in the mere wantonness of power, that Melos should only be suffered to

exist as a dependency of Athens, and thirty triremes sailed from the

harbour of Peiraeus to carry out the arbitrary decree.

On their arrival at Melos the Athenian admirals sent envoys into the

town, to summon the inhabitants to surrender. The envoys were invited

to a private conference with the chief men of the island; and between

the representatives of Athens and the Melian nobles there ensued an

extraordinary dialogue, which is given at great length by the

historian, and is commonly known as the Melian Debate. We cannot

suppose that the arguments here placed by Thucydides in the mouth of

the Athenian speaker were really uttered as set down by that writer.

Such a paradox of iniquity, such a shameless insult to the general

conscience of humanity, might have been employed by Plato, in exposing

the vicious teaching of the Sophists, or by Aristophanes in the full

riot of his satire: but the total abnegation of principle here implied

could never have been openly avowed by a responsible agent, speaking

for the most polished community in Greece. Even the worst criminals

seek to give some specious colour to their villainy; and the condemned

felon, who will face death without a tremor, shudders at the cry of

execration which greets his appearance at the scaffold. So hard it is,

even for the most depraved, to stifle the last embers of the moral

sense. We cannot suppose, then, that an educated Athenian of the fifth

century would publicly have claimed for his state the right of rapine

and murder. For this is the line of argument pursued by the

representative of Athens in the Melian Debate. The substance of what he

says may briefly be stated as follows "You are weak--we are strong;

Melos is a paltry island, Athens is queen of the Aegaean, and the

existence of an independent city in these waters is an insult to her

empire. Let us waste no time in discussions about abstract law and

right. For the mighty there is but one law--to get what they can, and

to keep it; and the weak have no rights, except by the sufferance of

the strong. This rule of conduct we know to be universal among men, and

we believe that the gods themselves are governed by it. [1] To sum up

the whole case in one word: you must yield or perish."

[1]

Desire of power, on earth a vicious weed,

Yet sprung from high, is of celestial seed;

In God 'tis glory; and when men aspire,

'Tis but a spark too much of heavenly fire.--DRYDEN.

It was in vain that the unhappy Melians tried to argue the question

from a higher standpoint; in vain they warned the Athenians that they

themselves might one day stand before the bar of justice, and plead for

their existence. They were brought back relentlessly to the grim

alternative-submission, or extermination. At length this strange

controversy came to an end, and after one final hint, of fearful

significance, the Athenian envoys withdrew, leaving the Melians to

consider their answer. The brave islanders were not long in coming to

their decision: they would not, they said, consent to enslave a city

which had maintained its liberty for seven hundred years; they put

their trust in divine justice, and in their kinsmen the Spartans, and

were resolved to resist to the last.

On receiving this answer the Athenian commanders at once laid siege to

Melos, and the doomed city was soon closely blockaded by sea and land.

The Melians made a gallant defence, and twice succeeded in breaking

through the lines of the besiegers, and conveying supplies into the

town. But presently reinforcements arrived from Athens, and the Melians

were confined within their walls. All hope of succour from Sparta had

vanished, food began to fail, and treason was at work among the

garrison. Thus driven to extremity, the Melians surrendered at

discretion. Then the Athenians showed that their threats had not been

idly uttered. All the men of military age in Melos were put to death,

the women and children were sold into slavery, and the land was

distributed among Athenian settlers.

In the fifth year of the war, after the capitulation of Mytilene, a

thousand of the inhabitants had been butchered in cold blood; and this

sentence, which seems so cruel to us, was regarded by the Athenians as

an act of mercy. Six years later, the decree which had originally been

passed against Mytilene, was actually executed on Scione, which had

revolted at the instigation of Brasidas. In this act of savage

retribution, Athens still remained within the limits of Greek

international law, which placed the inhabitants of a revolted city at

the mercy of their conquerors. But the case of Melos was different, for

that island had never been included in the Athenian alliance, and the

Melians had done nothing to provoke an attack. Thus the three names,

Mytilene, Scione, and Melos, mark an ascending scale of barbarity,

culminating in a massacre which, even in the eyes of Greeks, was an

atrocious crime. Athens had now offended beyond forgiveness, giving

colour to the accusations of her worst enemies, and heaping up

vengeance for the days to come.

THE ATHENIANS IN SICILY

I

The Peloponnesian War may be conveniently divided into four chief

periods. The first of these periods lasted for ten years, down to the

peace of Nicias. The second extends from the peace of Nicias to the

massacre of Melos. In the third, the scene of war was shifted from

Greece to Sicily, and it was there that the Athenian power really

received its death-blow. The fourth and final period begins after the

overthrow of the Athenians at Syracuse, and ends, nine years

afterwards, with their final defeat at Aegospotami, and the downfall of

the Athenian empire.

It is the third of these periods which will occupy our attention for

the remainder of the present volume, and as the momentous events which

we have to relate occurred entirely in Sicily, it is necessary to say

something of the previous history of that great island. The connexion

of the Greeks with Sicily begins in the latter half of the eighth

century before Christ, when settlers from Chalcis in Euboea founded the

city of Naxos on the north-eastern coast, under the shadow of Aetna.

Naxos in its turn sent out colonists, who built the cities of Leontini

and Catana, the former on an inland site, commanding the great plain

which extends southwards from Aetna, the latter on the coast, in a line

with the centre of the same plain. These were Ionic colonies, and we

may close the list with the name of Messene [Footnote: Originally

called Zancle.] founded twenty years later on the Sicilian side of the

strait which bears its name.

We have now to enumerate the principal Dorian cities. First among these

in time, and by far the first in importance, was Syracuse, founded from

Corinth a year after the settlement of Naxos. Between Syracuse and the

mother-city there was a close and intimate tie of friendship, which

remained unbroken throughout the course of Greek history. The original

city was built on the island of Ortygia, but a new town afterwards

arose on the low-lying coast of the mainland, and spread northwards

till it covered the eastern part of the neighbouring heights. Ortygia

was then converted into a peninsula by the construction of a causeway,

connecting the new city with the old. Under the despotism of Gelo, who

made himself master of the city in the early part of the fifth century,

[Footnote: 485 B.C.] Syracuse rose to great power and splendour, and

her territory extended over a great part of eastern Sicily. Gelo gained

immortal renown by defeating a mighty host of Carthaginians, who

invaded Sicily at the time when the confederate cities of old Greece

were fighting for their existence against Xerxes and his great armada.

After his death the power passed to his brother Hiero, whose victories

in the Olympian and Pythian Games are commemorated in the Odes of

Pindar. Hiero reigned for twelve years, and was succeeded by his

brother Thrasybulus; but a year later the despotism was overthrown, and

the government returned to a democracy.

A bare mention must suffice for Gela, founded from Rhodes and Crete

nearly half a century after Syracuse, and the more famous Agrigentum, a

colony from Gela, and next to Syracuse the greatest city in Sicily.

These played no part in the struggle with Athens; but Selinus and

Camarina, the two remaining Dorian cities of southern Sicily, will

occupy an important place in the following narrative.

Thus the whole coast districts on southern and eastern Sicily were held

by opulent and flourishing Greek cities. On the north was Himera, an

Ionic colony, and the scene of Gelo's great victory over Carthage;

while the western and north-western district was divided between the

Phoenicians and the Elymi, a people of unknown origin, whose chief

seats were at Eryx and Egesta. The inland parts were held, in the west,

by the Sicans, who are believed to have come from Spain, and in the

east by the Sicels, a people of Latin race, who gave their name to the

island.

II

Since the fourth year of the Peloponnesian War, Athens had been

meddling in the affairs of Sicily, under pretence of aiding the Ionian

cities, who dreaded the encroaching ambition of Syracuse. That these

fears were not unfounded was proved when, a few years afterwards, the

Syracusans expelled the commons of Leontini, and took possession of

their territory. The Leontine exiles sought refuge at Athens, but their

appeal for help remained for a time unanswered, as the Athenians were

then fully occupied in Greece. But six years after the conclusion of

the Peace of Nicias, an appeal came to Athens from a remote corner of

Sicily, which stimulated the Leontine exiles to fresh efforts, and led

to most important results.

Between the Greeks of Selinus and the Elymians of Egesta there was a

long-standing quarrel, and in a war which had recently broken out the

Egestaeans were reduced to severe straits by the combined forces of

Selinus and Syracuse. In their distress they turned to Athens for help,

and envoys were sent to plead their cause before the Athenian assembly.

In aiding Egesta, argued the envoys, Athens would be serving her own

interests; for if the Syracusans were not speedily checked in their

aggressions, they would soon make themselves masters of the whole of

Sicily, and in that case they could bring such an accession of strength

to the enemies of Athens in Greece as to make them irresistible. They

had good reason, therefore, to take sides against the enemies of

Egesta, and the more so as the Egestaeans promised to defray all the

expenses of the war.

The Athenians generally were inclined to take up the quarrel of Egesta,

but as a measure of precaution it was decided to send agents of their

own to make an inspection on the spot, and see whether the Egestaeans

were as wealthy as they pretended. On their return to Athens these men

reported that Egesta was possessed of fabulous riches. At every house

where they had been entertained, the tables and the sideboards had been

one blaze of gold and silver plate. The fact was that the Egestaeans

had collected all the gold and silver vessels in the town, and others

borrowed from the neighbouring cities, and by passing them on from

house to house, wherever these important guests were invited, had

contrived to make a great display. As an earnest of all this wealth,

the Athenian commissioners brought back with them sixty talents of

silver.

The smallness of this sum ought to have been sufficient to arouse the

suspicions of the Athenians; but they were willing to be deceived, and

they gave ready credence to reports of their commissioners. Voting in

full assembly, they passed a decree that sixty ships should be sent to

Sicily, under the command of Nicias, Alcibiades, and Lamachus. The

fleet was first to be employed in helping Egesta, and when that contest

had been brought to a successful issue the Leontines were to be

restored to their homes; finally, the generals were empowered to act as

might seem best in the interests of Athens. The real purpose of the

enterprise is indicated in the last clause. Vague plans of conquest

were floating before the minds of the Athenians, and at a time when

their whole energies should have been employed to repair the breaches

in their empire, they dreamed of founding a new dominion in the west.

Five days later the assembly met again to vote supplies and discuss any

further details which remained to be settled. But Nicias determined to

take the opportunity of reopening the whole question, wishing, if

possible, to divert his countrymen from their purpose, and put an end

to the expedition altogether. It was folly, he argued, to take up the

cause of needy foreigners, and drain the resources of Athens for a

distant and hazardous enterprise, when their subjects in Thrace were

still in open revolt, and their enemies in Greece were on the watch to

take them at a disadvantage. If they trusted in the treaty with Sparta,

they would soon find how infirm was the ground of their confidence.

That treaty had been forced upon the Spartans by their misfortunes, and

they would be only too glad to repudiate it, which they could easily

do, as many of the conditions were still under dispute. Moreover, the

most powerful cities of the Peloponnesian League had refused to sign

the treaty, and were ready, at the first hint from Sparta, to renew the

war. Athens was beset with perils, which were enough to tax her

strength to the utmost: and yet they talked of sailing to Sicily, and

raising up a new host of enemies against her! Even if the expedition

succeeded, they could never keep their hold on that vast and populous

island, while, if it failed, they would be utterly ruined. As to the

supposed danger from the ambition of Syracuse, that was mere idle talk.

The schemes of conquest, with which the Egestaeans had tried to alarm

the Athenians, would keep the Syracusans busy at home, and prevent them

from meddling in the affairs of Greece. "Leave the Greeks of Sicily

alone," said Nicias with true prophetic insight; "and they will not

trouble you. Do not disturb the prestige which belongs to a distant and

unfamiliar power. If they once learn to know you, they may learn to

despise you."

Then fixing his eyes on Alcibiades, who was sitting surrounded by his

own partisans, young profligates like himself, Nicias concluded thus:

"There is another danger against which I would warn you, men of

Athens--the danger of being led astray by the wild eloquence of

unscrupulous politicians, who seek to dazzle you with visions of new

empire, that they may rise to high command, and restore their own

shattered fortunes. Yes, Athens is to pour out her blood and treasure,

to provide young spendthrifts with the means of filling their

racing-stables! Against the mad counsels of these desperate men I

invoke the mature prudence of the elder members of this assembly, and

call upon them to show by a unanimous vote that neither flattery nor

taunts can induce them to sacrifice the true interests of Athens."

It must have been a severe ordeal for the young Alcibiades to sit and

listen to this keen and bitter invective, which set in a glaring light

the worst features in his character--his selfish ambition, his

shameless life, his total want of principle, his vulgar ostentation.

The last quality, so alien from the best traditions of Athenian

character, had been conspicuously displayed only a few weeks before at

the Olympic festival, where he had entered seven four-horsed cars for

the chariot-race, and won the first, second, and fourth prizes. Every

word of Nicias went home, galling him in his sorest point--his

outrageous vanity; and hardly had the elder statesman concluded his

speech, when he sprang to his feet, and burst without preface into a

wild harangue, which is a remarkable piece of self-revelation,

disclosing with perfect candour the inner motives of the man on whom,

more than on any other, the future of Athens depended. He began by

defending his barbaric extravagance, recently displayed at Olympia,

which, as he pretended to believe, had covered his native city with

glory, and spread the fame of Athenian wealth and power from one end of

Greece to another. The lavish outlay, and haughty demeanour, which

would be justly blamed in a common man, were right and proper in him,

one of the elect spirits of the time, inspired with great aims, and

treading the summits of public life. He had already shown what he could

do in the highest regions of diplomacy, by raising a great coalition in

Peloponnesus, which had faced the whole might of Sparta in the field,

and struck terror into the enemies of Athens.

After this impudent defence of his own pernicious policy, which had led

to the crushing defeat at Mantinea, and thus enabled the Spartans to

restore their damaged reputation, Alcibiades proceeded to deal with the

question of the day, and exerted all his sophistry to confirm the

Athenians in their design of invading Sicily. That island, he asserted,

was inhabited by a mixed population with no settled homes, and no

common patriotic sentiment; and among these motley elements they would

find plenty of adherents. The Siceliots [Footnote: Greeks of Sicily.]

were poorly armed, ill-furnished with heavy infantry, and in constant

danger from the hostile Sicels. The risk of attack from the

Peloponnesians would not be increased by sending part of the Athenian

fleet to Sicily: for Attica was in any case always exposed to invasion,

and a sufficient force of ships would be left at home to keep command

of the sea.

"We have no excuse, then," said Alcibiades in conclusion, "for breaking

our word to the Egestaeans, and drawing back from this enterprise. Both

honour and policy are pointing the way to Sicily. An empire like ours

is an ever-expanding circle, which lives by growing, and cannot stand

still. It is only by getting more, and always more, that we can keep

what we have. And let not Nicias succeed in his attempt to set the old

against the young, neither let us believe, like him, that the stability

of a state consists in stagnation. It is only by a hearty co-operation

of all ages and classes that any state can prosper, and a community

which finds no outlet for its energies abroad is soon worn out by

discord and faction at home. Above all is this true of us Athenians, to

whom ceaseless toil and endeavour is the very element in which we live."

The advice of Alcibiades, thus tendered in the garb of political

wisdom, was of fatal and ruinous tendency, and in direct opposition to

the oft-repeated warnings of Pericles. But his speech was exactly

suited to the temper of his audience, and most of those who followed

him spoke to the same effect, and when the Egestaeans and Leontines

renewed their entreaties it became evident that the original motion

would be confirmed by a large majority. Nicias, however, resolved to

make one more effort, and he came forward to speak again, hoping by a

new device to check the torrent of popular enthusiasm. Affecting to

regard the matter as settled, he entered into an estimate of the force

required for the proposed expedition, prefaced by an alarming picture

of the wealth and power of the Sicilian Greeks. To act with effect

against such an enemy, they must send, not only an overwhelming naval

force, but a numerous body of troops, both cavalry and infantry, and a

fleet laden with supplies for many months. They must proceed, in fact,

as if they were founding a great city on a hostile soil. On no other

condition, added Nicias, would he undertake the command. Nicias had

intended, by exaggerating the difficulties of the undertaking, to damp

the ardour of the Athenians; but to his utter dismay, these timid

counsels were greeted with a great shout of applause. It was supposed

that he had changed his opinion, and even the elder men began to think

that so prudent a leader, backed by such an armament, could not fail of

success. A great wave of excitement swept over the assembly, and the

few who still doubted were cowed into silence. When the tumult had

subsided, a certain Demostratus, [Footnote: The name is given by

Plutarch.] who had spoken strongly in favour of the expedition,

addressing Nicias in the name of the assembly, asked him to state

plainly what force he required. Thus driven into a corner, Nicias

answered, with great reluctance, that the number of triremes must be

not less than one hundred, with five thousand heavy-armed infantry, and

slingers and bow-men in proportion. This enormous estimate was carried

without demur, and by the same vote full powers were conferred on the

generals to fix the scale of the armament as they might think best for

the interests of Athens.

Thus, by a strange freak of fortune, the Athenians, at the most

momentous crisis of their history, were urged along the road to ruin by

the most opposite qualities in their leaders, the cold caution of

Nicias, and the wild energy of Alcibiades.

III

During the whole of the following spring [Footnote: B.C. 415.]

preparations for the invasion of Sicily were actively pushed on, and

the whole city was in a bustle and stir of excitement. Athens had

recently recovered from the ravages of the plague, and six years of

peace had recruited her resources, both in men and money. Since the

first outbreak of the war a new generation had grown up, and these

young and untried spirits joined, with all the fire of youth, in an

enterprise which promised them a boundless field of adventure. Others

were attracted by the baser motive of gain, or by mere curiosity, and

the love of travel. No thought of danger or hardship, no hint of

possible failure, clouded the brilliant prospect; it was a gay holiday

excursion, and at the same time a grand scheme of conquest, offering

fame to the ambitious, wealth to the needy, and pleasant recreation to

all. Thousands flocked eagerly to enter their names for the service,

and the only trouble of the recruiting officers was in choosing the

stoutest and the best.

The great armament was on the eve of departure, and all hearts were

full of joyful anticipation, when an event occurred which suddenly

chilled this happy mood, and cast a shadow of evil augury on the whole

undertaking. The Athenians of that age, like their descendants nearly

five centuries later, [Footnote: See Acts xvii. 22.] were "more

god-fearing than other men." They worshipped a multitude of divinities,

and their city was thronged with the temples and statues of heroes and

gods. Conspicuous among the objects of popular adoration was the god

Hermes, who is exhibited by ancient poets and artists as a gracious and

lovely youth, the special patron of eloquence and wit, the guardian

spirit of travellers and merchants, and the giver of good luck. A

familiar feature in the streets and public places of Athens was the

bust of Hermes, surmounting a quadrangular stone pillar. Many hundreds

of these pillars, which were called Hermae, were scattered about over

the whole city, standing before the doors of houses and temples, at

cross-ways and places of public resort. Wherever he went, whatever he

did, the Athenian felt himself to be in the presence of this genial and

friendly power, who attended him, with more than human sympathy, in all

his ways.

If such were the feelings of the Athenians towards their favourite

deity, what must have been their horror when they awoke one morning to

find that all the busts of Hermes, with one or two exceptions, were

shattered and mutilated beyond all recognition. The whole population

was thunderstruck, and wild rumours ran from mouth to mouth concerning

the perpetrators and the motive of this shocking outrage. It was

evident that many hands must have been employed on the work of

destruction, and those who had so foully insulted the most hallowed

affections of their fellow-citizens were believed to be capable of any

enormity. It was loudly asserted that a black conspiracy was hatching

against the liberties of the people, and that the worst days of the

tyranny were about to be revived. For in those days religion and

politics were associated with a closeness of intimacy unknown in modern

Europe, and sacrilege might well be regarded as a prelude to treason.

Active measures were at once taken to bring the offenders to justice,

and great rewards were offered to anyone, whether citizen, slave, or

resident foreigner, who gave information concerning this or any similar

crime. At first nothing was disclosed as to the mutilation of the

Hermae, but other recent acts of profanation were brought to light, and

among these was mentioned a derisive parody of the great Eleusinian

Mysteries, alleged to have been performed in the house of Alcibiades,

and elsewhere. The enemies of Alcibiades, who were both numerous and

powerful, eagerly seized this handle against him; but when the matter

was debated in the public assembly, it became evident that, if he were

brought to trial at once, his present popularity, as chief promoter of

the Sicilian expedition, would ensure his acquittal. Seeing, therefore,

that their attack had been premature, those who had led the outcry

against him now drew back, reserving themselves for a more favourable

occasion. Being known as the bitter opponents of Alcibiades, they could

not, without exciting grave suspicions, propose the adjournment of his

trial; but other speakers, prompted by them, urged on grounds of public

expediency that the charges against him should be held in suspense, so

as not to delay the departure of the fleet. Alcibiades saw plainly that

this manoeuvre was contrived to get him out of the way, to remove his

adherents from Athens, and leave his enemies free to pursue their

machinations during his absence. But it was in vain that he exposed the

malicious motives of the last speakers, and pleaded earnestly for an

immediate trial. The Athenians were still possessed by their daring

scheme of conquest, and they decreed that Alcibiades should keep his

command, and sail at once to Sicily.

IV

At last the great day arrived, and in the first light of a mid-summer

dawn, a vast multitude was seen pouring along the broad highway which

led, between the Long Walls, from Athens to Peiraeus. The Upper City

was almost deserted by its inhabitants, for there was hardly one

Athenian who had not some cherished comrade, or some near relation,

enrolled for service in Sicily, and the crowd was swelled by thousands

of strangers, who came as spectators of that memorable scene. Little

now appeared of that sanguine and joyous temper which had prevailed

among the Athenians when they first voted for the expedition. Their

feelings had lately been fearfully harrowed by the mutilation of the

Hermae, and now that the moment of parting was at hand, all the perils

and uncertainties of their grand enterprise rose up vividly before

them. They were restored, however, to some degree of cheerfulness, when

they reached the harbour of Peiraeus, and saw the magnificent fleet

riding at anchor. Nearly all the vessels lying in the bay were

Athenian; for the main body of the allies, and the commissariat ships,

had been ordered to muster at Corcyra. The triremes furnished by Athens

numbered a hundred, of which sixty were fully equipped as war-galleys,

while forty were employed as transports. These numbers had been

equalled more than once before during the war; but in efficiency, in

splendour of appearance, and in the quality of the crews, this was by

far the finest fleet that ever sailed from Peiraeus. Only the bare

hulls of the ships were provided by the state, and each vessel was

assigned to some wealthy citizen, who defrayed all the expense of

fitting her for active service. Sometimes the cost of equipping a ship

was divided between two or more citizens, and at ordinary times this

form of taxation must have been felt by the rich as a heavy burden. But

such was the popularity of the Sicilian expedition that the wealthy

Athenians who were charged with this duty went far beyond what was

required of them, each striving to surpass the others by the superior

beauty and speed of his own ship. The crews were all composed of picked

men, attracted by the double rate of pay which was furnished from the

state exchequer; and in addition to this, the trierarchs [Footnote:

Citizens charged with the duty of equipping a trireme.] paid special

premiums to the petty officers and to the highest class of rowers. The

same spirit of emulation extended to the whole body of Athenians

enrolled in the army and fleet; every man felt that whatever he spent

on his own personal equipment was spent for the honour and glory of

Athens. And the effect produced on the public mind in Greece was, in

fact, prodigious: after all the ravages of the plague, and ten years of

exhausting warfare, Athens, it seemed, was stronger than ever, and in

the mere exuberance of energy was making this imposing display of

wealth and power. As to the ostensible object of the expedition--the

conquest of Sicily--few doubted that it must follow as a matter of

course.

The last farewell had been spoken, the troops were all embarked, and

the rowers sat ready at their oars. The trumpet sounded, commanding

silence, and the voice of the herald was heard, repeating a solemn

prayer, which was taken up by the whole multitude on sea and on shore,

while the captains and soldiers poured libations of wine from goblets

of silver and gold. When this act of worship was ended, the crews

raised the paean, and at a given signal the whole fleet was set in

motion, and passed, in single file, out of the harbour. On reaching the

open water, they quitted this order, and engaged in a friendly contest

of speed as far as Aegina. Then the crews settled down to their work,

and the great armament swept on, high in heart and hope, to join the

allied contingents, and commissariat fleet, now assembled at Corcyra.

As yet only general rumours of the intended invasion had reached

Syracuse, and few of the citizens were aware of the imminent peril in

which they stood. Among those who were better informed was Hermocrates,

a Syracusan of high rank, who for many years had been the guiding

spirit in Sicilian politics. Speaking at a public assembly, about the

time when the Athenian fleet sailed from Peiraeus, he urged the

necessity of taking prompt measures for placing the city in a thorough

state of defence. He had no fear, he said, of the ultimate triumph of

Syracuse in the approaching struggle: only let them be on their guard,

and not underrate the power of the enemy whom they would have to face.

The words of Hermocrates, who enjoyed a high reputation for valour,

patriotism, and sagacity, were not without their effect, and it was

resolved that the generals should at once set about organizing the

military resources of Syracuse, and providing all things necessary for

the public safety. Some steps in this direction they had already taken;

and tidings soon arrived at Syracuse which caused them to redouble

their exertions.

For in the meantime the Athenians had reached Corcyra, where they held

a final review of all their forces. The total number of the triremes

was a hundred and thirty-four, and with these sailed a vast fleet of

merchant ships, and smaller craft, laden with stores of all kinds, and

carrying a whole army of bakers, masons, and carpenters, with the tools

of their crafts, and all the engines required for a siege. Besides

these, there was a great number of other vessels, small and great,

fitted out by private speculators for purposes of trade. The military

force was on a corresponding scale, comprising five thousand, one

hundred hoplites, of whom fifteen hundred were full Athenian citizens,

four hundred and eighty archers, seven hundred slingers from Rhodes,

and a hundred and twenty exiles from Megara, equipped as light-armed

troops. The force of cavalry was but small, being conveyed in a single

transport.

The whole armament now weighed anchor from Corcyra and sailed in three

divisions, each commanded by one of the generals, to the opposite coast

of Italy. On arriving at Rhegium, an Ionic city on the Italian side of

the strait, they received permission to beach their ships, and form a

camp outside the walls; and here they waited for the return of three

fast-sailing triremes, which had been sent forward from Corcyrato carry

the news of their approach to Egesta, and claim the promised subsidy,

and at the same time to sound the temper of the Greek cities in Sicily.

Before long the ships came back with their report, and the Athenians

now learned to their great chagrin that all the fabled wealth of Egesta

had dwindled to the paltry sum of thirty talents.

The three generals now held a council of war, to decide on a plan of

campaign. It was evident that no help was to be obtained from Egesta,

and the attitude of the Rhegini, who declined to enter their alliance,

boded ill for the success of the expedition. As their prospects were so

discouraging, Nicias proposed to confine their operations within the

narrowest limits, to patch up a peace between Selinus and Egesta, to

aid the Leontines, if it could be done without risk or expense, and

after making a display of the Athenian power, to sail home to Athens.

Alcibiades protested strongly against such a course, as disgraceful to

Athens, and unworthy of the splendid armament entrusted to their

command. Let them try first what could be effected by negotiation with

the Greek cities and native tribes of Sicily, and after gaining as many

allies as possible in the island, let them proceed to the attack of

Selinus and Syracuse. Lamachus, on the other hand, a plain, downright

soldier, was for sailing straight to Syracuse, and striking immediately

at the heart of Sicily. The city, he argued, would be found unprepared,

and if they acted at once, in the first terror of their presence, they

were certain of victory; but if they waited, their men would lose

heart, the efficiency of the fleet would be impaired, and the

Syracusans would gather strength and courage from the delay.

How true was the forecast of Lamachus was proved by the event; but his

bold plan was distasteful alike to the timid temper of Nicias, and to

the tortuous, intriguing spirit of Alcibiades. Finding, therefore, that

he had no hope of convincing his colleagues, he voted for the middle

course, and accordingly the plan of Alcibiades, unquestionably the

worst of the three, was adopted.

In pursuance of this fatal policy Alcibiades crossed over to Messene,

and tried to win over that city to the side of Athens. Meeting with no

success, he returned to Rhegium, and immediately afterwards he and one

of his colleagues sailed with a force of sixty triremes to Naxos. Here

the Athenians found a hearty welcome, but at Catana, which was then

under the influence of Syracuse, their overtures were rejected, so they

continued their voyage southwards, and made their camp for the night at

the mouth of the river Terias. Starting early next day, they proceeded

along the coast, and, crossing the bay of Thapsus, came in sight, for

the first time, of their great enemy, Syracuse. The main body of the

fleet remained in the offing, but ten triremes were sent forward to

reconnoitre the Great Harbour, and get a nearer view of the

fortifications. When the little squadron came within hearing of the

walls, a herald proclaimed in a loud voice that any of the Leontines

now present in Syracuse should leave the city without fear, and come

over to their faithful kinsmen and allies, the Athenians. After this

futile demonstration, better calculated; to excite laughter than

terror, the reconnoitring triremes withdrew, and the whole fleet sailed

back in the direction of Rhegium. On their return voyage the Athenians

succeeded, by a lucky accident, in gaining the adherence of Catana,

which henceforth became the head-quarters of the whole armament. Soon

after they had effected this important change of station the Salaminian

state trireme arrived with momentous news from Athens. We have seen

what a panic of superstitious fear had been caused among the Athenians

by the mutilation of the Hermae. Arrested for the moment by the

all-absorbing interest of the Sicilian expedition, the excitement broke

out with renewed violence after the departure of the fleet. The enemies

of Alcibiades saw that the time was now ripe for bringing up against

him the charge of violating the mysteries, and pressing for a judgment.

A formal indictment was laid before the senate, and it was decided that

he should come home and stand his trial. But it was necessary to

proceed with caution, for Alcibiades was popular with the troops

serving in Sicily; and it was possible that, if any violence were

attempted against his person, they might break out into mutiny.

Accordingly the captain of the Salaminian trireme was instructed to

treat him with all respect, and allow him to return to Athens in his

own vessel. On receiving the summons Alcibiades affected to obey, and

set sail from Catana, with the state trireme in attendance. The two

ships remained in company as far as Thurii, a Greek town of southern

Italy, but there the great criminal disappeared, and after searching

for him in vain the officers of the Salaminia were obliged to return to

Athens without him. When the news of his flight was brought to Athens,

he was arraigned in his absence, and condemned to death. But if his

enemies supposed that they had heard the last of Alcibiades, they soon

learnt how deeply they were mistaken.

V

The conduct of the campaign in Sicily was thus left in the feeble hands

of Nicias; for though Lamachus nominally held an equal command, his

poverty and political insignificance prevented him from holding the

position to which his military talents entitled him. The few remaining

weeks of summer were frittered away in trivial operations on the

western coasts of the island, and then the Athenians withdrew into

winter quarters at Catana. The predictions of Lamachus now began to be

fulfilled: seeing that Nicias, with the vast force at his disposal,

attempted nothing against them, the Syracusans began to despise their

enemy, and thought of taking the offensive. Horsemen from Syracuse rode

repeatedly up to the Athenian outposts at Catana, and tauntingly

inquired if the Athenians had come to found a colony in Sicily. At last

even Nicias felt that some display of activity was necessary to save

himself from contempt. He had learnt from certain Syracusan exiles that

there was a convenient place for landing troops, on the low-lying shore

where the river Anapus flows into the Great Harbour. Here he determined

to make a sudden descent, and in order to avoid disembarking in the

face of an enemy, he contrived a stratagem to remove the whole

Syracusan force out of reach. A citizen of Catana, who was attached to

the Athenian interest, was sent with a message to the Syracusan

generals, which held out a tempting prospect of gaining an easy and

decisive advantage over the Athenian army. Professing to come from the

partisans of Syracuse still remaining in Catana, he promised on their

behalf that if the Syracusans made a sudden assault on the Athenian

camp, their friends in Catana would simultaneously fall upon the

Athenian troops, who were in the habit of deserting their quarters and

straggling about the town, and set fire to their ships.

This plausible story found ready credence with the Syracusan generals,

and they named a day on which they promised to appear in full force

before the walls of Catana. When the time appointed drew near, they

marched out with the whole Syracusan army, leaving the city to be

garrisoned by their allies, and took up a position within easy reach of

Catana. Thereupon Nicias, who was fully informed of their movements,

embarked his troops by night, sailed down the coast past Syracuse, and

entering the Great Harbour, came to land near the outlying suburb of

Polichne, where stood the great temple of the Olympian Zeus. Here he

planted a breastwork of palisades to defend his ships, and drew up his

army on ground which offered many obstacles to the advance of the

Syracusan cavalry. Then, having broken down the bridge over the Anapus,

he waited for the enemy to appear.

Meanwhile the Syracusan generals had marched upon Catana, and finding

that they had been duped, returned with all speed to the defence of

their own city. After a long and fatiguing march, they came in view of

the Athenian position, and drew up their forces for battle. But Nicias

declined the challenge, and the day being now far advanced, they fell

back and encamped for the night in the open field.

Next morning Nicias, acting with unusual vigour, drew up his army in

two equal divisions, and leaving one half to defend the camp, and act

as a reserve, with the other he advanced rapidly upon the enemy. The

Syracusans, who had perhaps reckoned too much on the known indolence of

Nicias, were taken by surprise. Their discipline was lax, and many of

them had left their posts, and gone off into the town. Nevertheless,

they met the attack with firmness: those who were on the spot hastened

to assume their weapons, which they had laid aside, while the

stragglers came running back, and took their stand wherever they saw a

gap in the ranks. After some preliminary skirmishing between the

light-armed troops, the heavy masses of the hoplites came to close

quarters, and a fierce hand to hand struggle ensued. While the issue

was still uncertain, a violent thunderstorm broke over the contending

armies, and struck terror into the Syracusans, who regarded it as an

omen of defeat. But the seasoned soldiers of Nicias saw nothing unusual

in an autumn tempest, and perceiving the enemy to waver, they pressed

their attack, and broke through the opposing lines. The whole Syracusan

army now fell back upon Syracuse, but they retired without haste or

disorder, and their retreat was covered by a numerous and efficient

body of cavalry, so that their total loss amounted only to two hundred

and sixty.

The victory thus remained with the Athenians; but the moral advantage

was entirely on the side of the Syracusans. With an army composed of

raw recruits, they had met the flower of the Athenian forces, trained

by years of warfare, and led by experienced generals, in fair fight,

and though attacked at a disadvantage, they had fought with spirit, and

retreated with coolness and deliberation. They had good reason to be

satisfied with the result of their first encounter with the invader,

and they might well share the high and confident hopes expressed by

their most eminent citizen, Hermocrates. Speaking at a general

assembly, immediately after the battle, the great patriot congratulated

his countrymen on the courage which they had displayed, and at the same

time pointed out the necessity of improving their discipline and

military organization. One important reform should be made at once; the

number of the generals, which had hitherto been fifteen, should be

greatly reduced, and those appointed to the supreme command should be

given absolute power, so that they might act with secrecy and despatch.

Further, let the whole adult male population be placed under arms, and

kept in constant drill all through the winter. If these measures were

vigorously carried out, they might successfully defy the Athenians to

do their worst.

Acting on this advice, the Syracusans deposed the existing generals,

and chose Hermocrates, with three others, to fill their place. The

reform of the army was at once taken in hand, and ambassadors were sent

to Corinth and Sparta to ask for aid. Corinth, as the mother-city of

Syracuse, might well respond to the call, and it was hoped that the

Spartans would be induced to declare open war on Athens, so as to

compel the Athenians to withdraw their forces from Sicily, or at least

prevent them from sending reinforcements.

Various defensive works were undertaken by the Syracusans during the

winter. The most important of these was a new wall, extending from the

northern sea to the Great Harbour, and taking in a wide space of

ground, outside the old line of wall, to the west of the city. By thus

increasing the area of Syracuse, they made it much more difficult for

Nicias to draw his line of blockade, when the siege began in the

following spring. They also constructed a fort, with a permanent

garrison, to guard the temple of Zeus in the suburb of Polichne, and

drove piles into the sea at all the landing-places of the Great Harbour.

Soon after the battle Nicias shifted his winter quarters to Naxos, and

learning this the Syracusans marched in full force to Catana, laid

waste the territory, and burnt the deserted huts of the Athenians. The

insult was tamely endured, and shortly afterwards the ever-active

Hermocrates had an opportunity of thwarting the Athenian intrigues

among the Greek cities of Sicily. The scene of this diplomatic

encounter was Camarina, a Dorian city which had hitherto wavered

between its hatred of Syracuse and its fear of Athens. Early in the

winter Athenian envoys appeared at Camarina with overtures of alliance,

and Hermocrates was sent to represent the interests of Syracuse.

Speaking first in the debate, Hermocrates set himself to unmask the

designs of the Athenians, who, under the thin pretence of helping the

Ionic cities of Sicily, had come (he said) to make a conquest of the

whole island. The Ionians of Greece had long groaned under their yoke,

and the same fate was in store for the Ionians of Sicily, if they

allowed themselves to be beguiled by specious lies. The plea of

friendship and goodwill might pass with the degenerate Greeks of Asia

and the Aegaean, born to be cajoled and enslaved; but the Camariaeans

were of the stout Dorian race, the hereditary foes of tyranny, too wise

and too brave to lend themselves as tools to a bare-faced scheme of

aggression. If not, let them beware: Syracuse was fighting in a

righteous cause, and must prevail in the end; help was coming from

Peloponnesus, and if the Camariaeans stood aloof, the day would come

when they would regret their disloyalty.

There can be no doubt that Hermocrates was right in his view of the

motive which brought the Athenians to Sicily, and the arguments of

Euphemus, the advocate for Athens, who strove to confute him, will not

bear examination. But the people of Camarina were in a difficult

position; their city had suffered many things in the past at the hands

of Syracuse, and they had reason to fear that her oppressions might be

renewed, if she emerged triumphant from the present struggle. On the

other hand, if the Athenians were victorious, they might forfeit their

independence altogether. In this dilemma they determined to play a

waiting game, and when the time came for action, to throw their weight

on the winning side. For the present they answered that they chose to

remain neutral.

The debate at Camarina, though interesting and instructive from the

light which it throws on the passions and motives of the combatants,

had little influence on the final issue of the war. But about the same

time a scene was being enacted in another part of the Greek world,

which led to most momentous consequences. Early in the winter the

Syracusan envoys arrived at Corinth, and made an earnest appeal for

help. The Corinthians were warmly attached to their famous colony,

which had never wavered in its allegiance to the mother-city, and

moreover they were the implacable enemies of Athens. They therefore

took up the cause of Syracuse with enthusiasm, and they sent the envoys

on to Sparta, accompanied by delegates of their own, to urge the

immediate resumption of hostilities against Athens, and the sending of

prompt aid to Sicily.

At Sparta they found an able and unscrupulous ally, the very last whom

they had expected to meet there. This was the outlaw Alcibiades, who,

after eluding the vigilance of the Athenian officers at Thurii, had

crossed over in a merchant ship to Cyllene, the port of Elis. While

staying there, he received an invitation from the Lacedaemonians to

proceed to Sparta, and made his way thither, having first stipulated

for a safe-conduct; for he dreaded the vengeance of the Spartans, to

whom he had done much mischief by raising the coalition which led to

the battle of Mantinea. So there he was, the guest of his old enemies,

burning with all an exile's hatred, and ready to strike some deadly

blow against the city which had cast him out.

At first the Spartans gave but a cool and qualified response to the

application of the envoys from Corinth. They were prepared to lend

moral support to the Syracusans, by sending an embassy to encourage

them in their resistance, but of more substantial aid they said little

or nothing. Now was the time for Alcibiades to play his part. He knew,

far better than any of his hearers, all the vulnerable points of

Athens, and had no scruple in using his knowledge for her ruin. Having

obtained permission from the magistrates, he rose to address the

Spartan assembly; and his speech is given at full length by the

historian, who was himself an exile at the time, and may possibly have

been present [Footnote: The suggestion is made by Grote.] on this

important occasion.

The Spartans might smile when they heard this accomplished traitor

professing friendship towards themselves, and zeal for their service;

they might be disgusted at the flippant sophistries by which he strove

to defend his unexampled villainy. But far different feelings must have

been awakened, when he went on to unfold the gigantic scheme of

conquest, to which, as he pretended, the invasion of Sicily was no more

than a prelude. According to this statement, the Athenians intended,

after subjugating the Greeks of Sicily, to turn their arms against the

Italian Greeks, and finally to attack Carthage. If all these designs

were successful, they would build a great number of new ships, taking

their materials from the forests of Italy, raise a vast military force,

both of Greeks and barbarians, and then return, backed by the whole

power of the West, and draw a ring of war round Peloponnesus. With such

resources they would be irresistible, and all Greece must inevitably

fall under their sway.

"Such," continued Alcibiades, "is the secret history of the Sicilian

expedition, which you have heard from the mouth of him who knows it

best. Remember, then, that the issue before you concerns not Syracuse

only, but Sparta also: for if Syracuse falls--and fall she must, if

left without support--all Sicily will be under the heel of Athens; then

will come the turn of Italy, and after that you will soon have the

enemy at your own doors. Now learn what you must do, if you would avert

all the evils which I have foretold. You must send a fleet to Sicily at

once, with hoplites who can row the ships themselves, and serve in the

army as soon as they land, and with them a Spartan commander, to

organize the fighting men of Sicily, and compel those who are hanging

back to do their duty. Such a man will be a host in himself, and will

infuse new life and energy into the defence. Further, you must

establish a fortified camp at Decelea, a position which commands the

whole territory of Attica; for by so doing you will reduce Athens to a

state of siege, and compel the whole male population to serve on

garrison duty; you will deprive the Athenians of their revenues from

the silver-mines at Laurium, and you will put new heart into the cities

subject to Athens, and encourage them to withhold their tribute. Let

these measures be carried out with promptitude and vigour, and you will

soon reap your reward, in the humiliation of Athens, and the honour and

gratitude of all Greece."

At these words of Alcibiades the sluggish Spartans took fire, and

recognizing the importance of his advice they determined to follow the

course which he had indicated. Gylippus, a Spartan of high rank,

received orders to proceed at once to Syracuse, and assume the control

of the war, and the Corinthians were directed to provide ships for the

conveyance of troops. But after this brief display of energy the

Spartans relapsed into their wonted torpor. Many months elapsed before

Gylippus was able to embark for Sicily, and meanwhile important events

had been occurring at the seat of war. We return, therefore, to the

head-quarters of Nicias, which had once more been removed from Naxos to

Catana.

VI

For the next year and a half [Footnote: Spring 414--autumn 413 B.C.]

the scene of our narrative lies almost entirely in the immediate

neighbourhood of Syracuse, so that it now becomes necessary to describe

in some detail the site of that city, and the character of the adjacent

country. Mention has already been made of the island of Ortygia, the

site of the original colony, connected with the mainland of Sicily by a

bridge or causeway. At the southern extremity of Ortygia there is a

narrow strip of land, pointing like a finger towards the rocky

peninsula of Plemmyrium; and between these two points lies the entrance

to a spacious bay, already alluded to under the name of the Great

Harbour. At the western end of the bay there is a long stretch of low,

marshy ground, intersected by the little rivers Cyana and Anapus, and

infested with fever during the heats of summer. On a rising ground,

south of the Anapus, stood the suburb of Polichne, with its great

temple, sacred to the Olympian Zeus. A little to the north of Ortygia

the coast rises abruptly in a bold line of cliffs, facing eastwards,

and forming the base of a triangular plateau, which slopes upwards from

the sea, and gradually grows narrower until it ends in a point, called

the hill of Euryelus. This plateau, which bore the name of Epipolae, is

guarded on all its three sides by rocky precipices, only to be ascended

at two or three places. Its eastern end, called Acheadina, from the

wild pear-trees which once flourished there, was occupied by a new

city, now included with Ortygia in the same wall of defence. Here were

situated the famous stone-quarries, which afterwards acquired so tragic

an interest from the sufferings of the captive Athenians; and

southwards from this district the ground shelves gently to the shores

of the Little Harbour, a sheltered inlet at the northern end of Ortygia.

At the opening of spring the operations against Syracuse began in good

earnest. The first object of Nicias was to obtain possession of the

heights of Epipolae, for since the construction of the new Syracusan

wall it had become impossible for him to draw his line of blockade from

the side of the Great Harbour. His preparations were already far

advanced, when the Syracusan generals resolved to anticipate him, by

occupying all the approaches to Epipolae. With this intention they

issued an order for a full muster of troops in a meadow by the Anapus,

and after a general review and inspection of arms they appointed a

picked body of six hundred hoplites to guard the heights of Epipolae,

and hold themselves ready for any other pressing service. But the

precaution was taken too late. On the night before the review Nicias

set sail with his whole army from Catana, and landed at a place called

Leon, not more than six or seven furlongs from the northern side of

Epipolae. The fleet then took up its station in the sheltered water

behind the peninsula of Thapsus, while the land forces, advancing at a

run, crossed the level ground, and then, breasting the ascent, gained

the summit of Euryelus.

News of their approach presently reached the Syracusans, who were still

mustered by the Anapus, and breaking off the review, they marched in

haste towards Epipolae, hoping still to dislodge the Athenians from

their position. But in their rapid advance over a distance of nearly

three miles their ranks became disordered, and their attack was so

straggling and ineffectual that they were easily repulsed, and driven

back with considerable loss into the town. On the following day Nicias

led his troops down the slope, and offered battle before the walls of

Syracuse; but the challenge was declined, and the Syracusans remained

within their defences, leaving the Athenians in undisputed possession

of Epipolae.

After this important success the Athenian generals prepared at once to

form the siege of Syracuse. They first constructed a fort at a place

called Labdalum, on the northern verge of Epipolae, and near its

western extremity, to serve as a safe depositary for their baggage and

money. Then, taking up a position near the centre of Epipolae, they

built a circular wall, covering a considerable space of ground, and

defended on the side towards the city by an outer breastwork, a

thousand feet long. This enclosure, which was called the Circle, was

intended as a shelter for the men employed on construction of the

blockading wall, which started from either side of the Circle, and was

to be carried north and south until it reached the sea. The work made

rapid progress, and greatly alarmed the Syracusans, who saw themselves

in danger of being cut off from all hope of succour on the land side.

Dismayed by this prospect, they resolved to make one more effort to

drive the Athenians from their position, and marching out in full

force, offered battle. Advancing in haste and disorder, they would

certainly have suffered a crushing defeat, but for the prudent caution

of their generals, who were so much impressed by the superior

discipline of the Athenians, that they gave the order to retire, and

led their troops back into the city, leaving only a detachment of horse

to skirmish with the besiegers. But the Athenians had now an efficient

force of cavalry, which had been raised by successive reinforcements to

the number of six hundred and fifty men; and these, backed by a small

force of infantry, soon drove the horsemen of Syracuse from the field.

The Athenians then completed the building of their Circle, and began to

lay the materials for the northern line of wall. By the advice of

Hermocrates the Syracusans made no further attempt to attack them in

full force, but began to build a counterwall, running out from the city

in a direction south of the Athenian Circle, so as to cross the line to

be followed by the wall of blockade, and prevent it from reaching the

Great Harbour. The work proceeded without interruption, for the

Athenians were engaged in their building operations north of the

Circle, and did not choose to divide their forces. When it was

completed, this counterwork consisted of a solid stone wall, crowned

with wooden towers, and defended in front by a palisade. The blockade

of Syracuse was thus rendered impossible, as long as the defenders

could keep possession of their counterwall. But unfortunately the

guards left in charge of the new wail soon began to neglect their duty,

and erected tents in the shade, where they passed the hot hours of the

afternoon, while some even left their posts, and went off to refresh

themselves in the city. The Athenian generals did not fail to take

advantage of this negligence. Watching their opportunity, when most of

the Syracusan guards were reposing under the shelter of the tents, they

sent a chosen troop of some three hundred men to make a sudden assault

on the counterwall. Then, having divided the main body of the Athenian

army between them, they disposed their forces so as to prevent any

rescue from the town. One division was drawn up before the principal

gate in the new Syracusan wall, while the other proceeded to a

postern-gate, at the point where the counterwall started from the city.

The combined movement was completely successful; the three hundred

carried the stockade and cross-wall by storm, and compelled the

defenders to take refuge within the ramparts of Syracuse. The whole

Athenian army then marched up to the counterwall and stockade, which

they speedily demolished, carrying off the materials for their own use.

Wishing to prevent any second attempt on the part of the Syracusans to

cut them off from the southern slope of Epipolae, the Athenian generals

now fortified that part of the cliff which looks towards the Great

Harbour. By occupying this point they obtained a new centre, commanding

the space between the Circle and the southern edge of the cliff, and

placing them in communication with the level valley of the Anapus,

across which they had to carry their line of blockade. For the present

building operations were suspended on the northern side of the Circle,

as they wished first of all to complete the investment of Syracuse

towards the south.

Perceiving their intention, the Syracusans began a second counterwork,

consisting of a stockade and ditch, which started at the point of

junction between the old city-wall and the new, and ran across the low

swampy ground as far as the Anapus. Thus the Athenians were confronted

by a new obstacle, which had to be removed, before they could make any

further progress. Acting with energy and decision, they sent orders to

the fleet, which was still lying at Thapsus, to sail round into the

Great Harbour; and without waiting for its arrival, before daybreak

Lamachus led his troops down the cliff, and advanced against the

stockade. His men carried hurdles and planks, to secure their footing

in the most treacherous parts of the swamp, and, proceeding thus, in

the first light of dawn they came up to the stockade. They found the

Syracusans assembled in force to resist them, and an engagement ensued,

which speedily ended in favour of the Athenians. The right wing of the

Syracusan army fled back into the city, while the left wing retreated

towards the suburb of Polichne, hotly pursued by the picked troop

[Footnote: P. 203.] of Athenian hoplites, who wished to cut them off

before they reached the river. By this rash movement the Athenians came

near to forfeiting the advantage which they had gained, and brought

upon themselves an irreparable loss. For the Syracusan cavalry turned

on their pursuers, and drove them back in disorder upon the Athenian

right. The sudden reverse created something like a panic in that part

of the line, and Lamachus, who was in command of the left wing,

hastened to their relief, and threw himself, with a handful of men,

between the Syracusan cavalry and the fugitives. This gallant action

turned the tide of battle once more, and gave the Athenians on the

right wing time to rally; but Lamachus and his followers, pushing

forward too hotly, were attacked by the enemy in a place where their

retreat was cut off by a ditch, and slain to a man.

Meanwhile the Syracusans who had fled into the city, observing the

temporary defeat of the Athenians, had taken courage again, and they

returned to the field, having first sent a detachment to attack the

Athenian Circle, where Nicias, who was disabled by sickness, had been

left in charge with a small garrison. Thinking to make an easy capture,

the party sent on this service ran up the slope of Epipolae, and

reached the breastwork of the Circle, which they took and demolished.

With the scanty force at his disposal, Nicias had little hope of

repelling the attack, so he had recourse to a desperate expedient. He

ordered the camp-servants to set fire to a great pile of timber, which

was lying, together with a number of siege engines, in front of the

wall. They did as he directed, and a great flame arose, which drove

back the assailants, and gave warning of his danger to the Athenians in

the plain below, where the whole Syracusan army was now in full

retreat. Almost at the same moment the Athenian fleet was seen sailing

into the Great Harbour, and a strong contingent from the victorious

army came swarming up the hill to the rescue. Thereupon the storming

party from Syracuse turned and fled back to the city, where they found

the streets thronged by their beaten and dispirited comrades.

The result of this battle was to leave the Athenian in undisputed

possession of the whole country round Syracuse. Lamachus, indeed, had

fallen, and the loss of that daring and active spirit soon made itself

severely felt. But for the present the fortunes of Athens were in the

ascendant, and everything seemed to promise a speedy triumph. The

Syracusans were thoroughly cowed by their defeat, and looked passively

on, while a double wall of blockade crept steadily forwards from the

southern edge of Epipolae towards the Great Harbour, where the Athenian

fleet had now taken up its permanent station. The native Sicels, who

had hitherto held back through fear of Syracuse, now joined the

Athenians in great numbers. Even the distant Etruscans, the ancient

enemies of Syracuse, sent three war-galleys to take part in the sack of

the great Dorian city.

Day by day the spirits of the Syracusans sank lower and lower. They now

began to feel the actual pressure of a siege. Months had passed since

their envoys had sailed for Greece, and there was still no sign of help

from Corinth or Sparta. They had lost all hope of saving themselves by

their own unaided efforts, and no course seemed left to them but to

make the best terms they could with Nicias. Negotiations were

accordingly opened with the Athenian general, but after much discussion

no definite result was attained. In this hour of weakness and distress,

the Syracusans became divided against themselves, and every man

suspected his neighbour of treason. Then they turned upon their

generals, who, after holding out such high promises, had brought them

to this pass, either by mismanagement, or by deliberate treachery.

Hermocrates and his colleagues were deposed from their command, and

three other generals succeeded to their place.

In the eyes of all those who were watching the struggle, the fate of

Syracuse was sealed; she was destined to fall a prey to the devouring

ambition of Athens. But at this very moment a little cloud was

approaching from the east, which was fraught with disaster and ruin to

the besieging army.

VII

Just at the time when the Syracusans were brought to the brink of

despair, Gylippus, after so many months' delay, was on his voyage to

Sicily. While lying at Leucas, a Corinthian settlement in the Ionian

sea, he received the alarming intelligence that Syracuse was already

completely blockaded, and the report was confirmed by every vessel that

came in from the west. Deceived by these false rumours, he gave up all

hope of saving Sicily, but hoping still to forestall the Athenians in

Italy, he put out from Leucas with four ships, and steered a straight

course for Tarentum. From this city, which was friendly to Sparta and

Syracuse, he started on his mission among the Italian Greeks, and

putting in at Locri he heard for the first time that the Athenian wall

was still unfinished on the northern side of Epipolae, leaving a wide

gap, through which a relieving force might enter the town.

Two courses now lay open to Gylippus. He might sail southwards, and

make an attempt to run the blockade of Syracuse--or he might land on

the northern coast of Sicily, march across the island, and fight his

way into the city through the unwalled interval. In either case, the

enterprise seemed desperate enough. By a very moderate exertion on the

part of Nicias, employing only a fraction of the immense force at his

disposal, Gylippus might have been destroyed, before he had time to

become dangerous. But Nicias was lulled into a fatal confidence. He had

heard of the mission of Gylippus, but made no attempt to oppose his

voyage to Italy, regarding him as a mere free-booter, unworthy of

serious notice. At last, learning that Gylippus was at Locri, he was

induced to send out four triremes against him. They were instructed to

take station at Rhegium, and cut off the daring intruder as he passed

through the strait. But when they reached Rhegium, the wary Spartan was

already beyond their reach. He had decided to approach Syracuse by

land, and was now far advanced on his voyage to Himera, the only Greek

settlement on the north coast of Sicily. Himera, though an Ionic

colony, was attached to the Dorian interest, and her citizens gave a

hearty welcome to the Spartan deliverer. Before long, a little army of

about three thousand men was assembled at Himera, and ready to follow

the fortunes of Gylippus. Seven hundred of these were the sailors and

marines from his own vessels, armed as hoplites, and the Himeraeans

furnished a thousand infantry, light and heavy-armed, and a hundred

cavalry. Owing to the recent death of a powerful chieftain, who had

been a strong partisan of Athens, the northern Sicels had now changed

sides, and they sent a thousand men to serve under the Spartan leader.

Small contingents also arrived, in answer to the call of Gylippus, from

Gela and Selinus. With this little force, composed of such motley

elements, Gylippus started from Himera, and entered on his march for

the relief of Syracuse. The fate of Syracuse was already wavering in

the balance. As yet no news of approaching succour had reached the

beleaguered city, and the Syracusans had abandoned all hope. To save

themselves from a worse calamity, they resolved to surrender, and an

assembly was summoned to settle the terms of capitulation. But at this

very moment a message came to them by sea, which kindled their courage

afresh, and banished these counsels of despair. When Gylippus left

Leucas, a Corinthian fleet of some fifteen vessels was preparing to

sail from that port for Syracuse. One of the ships, commanded by a

certain Gongylus, was delayed in the harbour, and started after the

rest. But Gongylus, instead of steering the ordinary course, which

would have taken him first to Italy, made a bold dash, straight across

the sea, and just when the momentous decision was pending, his ship

came to anchor in the Little Harbour. Forthwith the joyful tidings

spread like wildfire through the city: Gylippus was coming, armed with

full authority from Sparta--Corinth had taken up their cause--Syracuse

was saved! All thought of surrender was instantly flung away, and news

arriving shortly afterwards that Gylippus was near at hand, the whole

Syracusan force marched out to meet him, and escorted him triumphantly

into the town.

Thus, without a blow being struck, an immense access of strength had

been brought to the besieged, and the grand condition of successful

resistance, on which Alcibiades had laid such weight, was fulfilled. A

Spartan officer of consummate ability was now in Syracuse, and he had

made his way into the city, not alone, not by stealth, but at the head

of an army, and before the very eyes of the enemy. Weeks must have

elapsed between the departure of Gylippus from Leucas, and his arrival

at Syracuse; and during all this time, with one trifling exception,

Nicias made no effort to oppose his progress. Prudent men might well

have regarded the enterprise of Gylippus as a wild and desperate

adventure; and such it must have proved, but for the astounding

blindness and apathy of Nicias.

At the time when Gylippus reached Syracuse the Athenian lines of

circumvallation were all but completed on the side of the Great

Harbour; but a wide interval was still left between the Circle and the

northern sea, and it was here that Gylippus had effected an entrance.

To keep this space open was a matter of supreme importance, and the

scene of action is now shifted again to the northern slope of Epipolae.

On the day after his arrival Gylippus succeeded in capturing the

Athenian fort at Labdalum, and the command of this position gave

increased facilities for the construction of a third counterwall, which

was forthwith taken in hand, and carried in the direction of Labdalum,

until it crossed the blockading line at its northern end.

If the Syracusans succeeded in completing and holding this counterwork,

the blockade of Syracuse would be rendered impossible. Yet for some

time Nicias made no attempt to interrupt its progress. As if already

convinced of his inferiority in the field, he took steps to keep his

communications open by sea, and with this object he employed a part of

his forces in fortifying the headland of Plemmyrium, which commanded

the entrance to the Great Harbour. Here he built three forts which

served as an arsenal for the Athenian stores; and henceforth Plemmyrium

became the chief station for his fleet. This removal had a disastrous

effect on the Athenian crews; for the place being almost a desert, and

the springs distant and scanty, they were compelled to go far from

their quarters in search of forage and water, and while thus engaged

they were cut off in great numbers by the Syracusan horse, who had been

posted at Polichne for this purpose. A rapid demoralization of the

crews was the consequence, and desertions became more frequent every

day.

Meanwhile the counterwall was advancing steadily up the hill, and every

day Gylippus drew up his army, to cover the operations of the workmen.

At last he determined to force on an engagement, and in the first

encounter the Syracusans, fighting in a confined space, which prevented

their cavalry from coming into action, suffered a defeat. In no wise

discouraged by this reverse, on the next day they took up a position in

the more open ground, and offered battle again. By this time the

Syracusan counterwork had almost passed the end of the Athenian wall,

and if it were carried a few yards further, the siege of Syracuse would

be brought to a standstill. Roused by the imminence of the crisis,

Nicias determined to make one more effort to regain his mastery in the

field, and led his troops to the attack. The main body of the hoplites

were soon hotly engaged on both sides, and in the midst of the action

Gylippus directed his cavalry and light-armed infantry to make a sudden

charge on the Athenian left. This movement was executed with so much

skill and resolution that the Athenians in that part of the line gave

way, and drew after them the rest of their comrades, who broke their

ranks, and fled for shelter behind the siege works.

The Syracusans lost no time in turning their victory to account. On the

very same night their wall was extended some distance beyond the

blockading line, and until this new barrier was overthrown, the

investment of Syracuse had now become impossible.

Whichever way he looked, Nicias saw himself menaced with failure and

defeat. He had sent twenty ships to intercept the Corinthian squadron

on its voyage from Leucas; but the little fleet of rescue succeeded in

avoiding the snare, and made its way into the port of Syracuse, thus

adding twelve fresh vessels to the defending force. Gylippus himself

was marching unhindered up and down the island, passing from city to

city, and raising reinforcements of ships and men; and a second embassy

had been despatched by the Syracusans, to carry the news of their

victory to Corinth and Sparta, and ask for further help. Another

ominous sign of coming events was the bustle and activity now visible

in the dockyards of Syracuse and the waters of the Little Harbour; for

the Syracusans had turned their attention seriously to their fleet, and

thought of nothing less than attacking the Athenians on their own

element.

These symptoms of renewed confidence and energy were observed by Nicias

with growing disquiet. And if he turned his eyes to his own camp, he

saw little to relieve his anxiety. For the predictions of Lamachus had

been fulfilled to the letter. By his fatal policy of procrastination

Nicias had frittered away the resources of the most splendid armament

that ever set sail from Peiraeus. His soldiers were infected by the

despondency of their leader, and many of them were stricken by the

marsh-fever which haunts the unwholesome district of the Anapus. Above

all the condition of the fleet showed the lamentable effect of long

inaction and delay. All the supplies of the Athenians came to them by

sea, and in order to keep their communications open, it was necessary

to keep the whole of the fleet on constant duty. In consequence of

this, the hulls of the triremes had become sodden with water, which

made them leaky, and difficult to row. Moreover the crews, which were

largely composed of foreign seamen, had grown restive and mutinous

under the severe strain of hardships and privation, so different from

the easy and lucrative service in the hope of which they had enlisted.

Some took the first opportunity of deserting to the enemy, while others

ran away to remote parts of Sicily; and there was no means of filling

the places thus left vacant.

Such was the burden of care and apprehension which lay heavy on the

feeble shoulders of the Athenian general. He was naturally a weak man,

haunted by superstitious terrors, irresolute, easily cast down; and

this infirmity of character was aggravated by a painful and incurable

disease. There was no longer any question of laying siege to Syracuse:

he himself was now besieged, and it was all he could do to maintain his

position within his defences, and keep the sea open for the conveyance

of supplies. In this desperate situation he determined to send a

written despatch to Athens. We are led to suppose that this was an

unusual proceeding, and that news from the seat of war was generally

sent by word of mouth. The document is given at full length, with all

its grievous confessions of incompetence and failure. After setting

forth the facts of the case as stated above, Nicias insists that one of

two things must be done: either the army now lying before Syracuse must

be recalled to Athens, or the Athenians must send out a second army,

equal in strength to the first, and a general to relieve him of his

command.

At the conclusion of his despatch Nicias peevishly complains of the

exacting temper of the Athenians, and their readiness to blame anyone

but themselves if anything untoward occurred. Whatever may be the truth

of the general charge, it was most ill-timed and ungrateful in his own

case. Towards him, at least, the conduct of his fellow-citizens was

marked by an excess of generosity, amounting to actual infatuation.

Nothing is more remarkable than the unshaken confidence of the

Athenians in their feeble general, after hearing this terrible

indictment, drawn up by his own hand. They refused to accept his

resignation, and passed a decree that large reinforcements should be

sent to Sicily, with Demosthenes and Eurymedon as generals; and in the

meantime they appointed Menander and Euthydemus, two officers already

serving before Syracuse, to share with Nicias the burden of command.

Before the winter was ended Eurymedon started with ten ships for

Sicily, to announce that effectual help was coming; while Demosthenes

was charged with the duty of enlisting troops and organizing a fleet.

Meanwhile new perils were gathering round the Athenians at home, which

should have warned them to abandon their wild plans of conquest, and

concentrate all their strength for their own defence. The Spartans had

long been restrained by a scruple of conscience from an open

declaration of war, wishing to avoid the guilt which is associated with

the first act of aggression. Eighteen years before they had refused all

offers of arbitration, and deliberately provoked an encounter with

Athens, in direct violation of the Thirty Years' Truce, which provided

for an amicable settlement of differences; and by so acting they had,

as they believed, incurred the anger of heaven, and brought on

themselves a long train of disasters. But now the position was

reversed: for in the previous year the Athenians had made descents on

the coasts of Laconia, and other districts of Peloponnesus; and they

had repeatedly turned a deaf ear to the friendly overtures of the

Spartans, who proposed to submit all disputed matters to a peaceful

tribunal.

Thus relieved of their scruples, the Spartans prepared to renew the war

in good earnest, and early in the following spring [Footnote: B.C.

413.] they summoned their allies to the Isthmus, and marched under Agis

their king into Attica. After ravaging the plain, they encamped at

Decelea, fourteen miles north of Athens, and here they established a

fortified post, which was garrisoned by contingents of the

Peloponnesian army, serving in regular order. Once more Alcibiades had

cause to exult in the success of his malignant counsels, which had sent

Gylippus to Syracuse, and had now planted this root of bitter mischief

on the very soil of Attica.

While the allies were thus engaged at Decelea, a considerable body of

troops had embarked at Taenarum and at Corinth, and sailed to take part

in the defence of Syracuse. In Greece, all the old enemies of Athens

were arming against her, and beyond the sea her prospects grew darker

and darker every day. Yet nothing, it seemed, could break the spell of

fatal delusion which rested on the doomed city. While Attica lay in the

grip of the enemy, a fleet of sixty-five triremes, carrying a great

military force, weighed anchor from Peiraeus, and steered its course,

under the command of Demosthenes, for Sicily.

VIII

We must now return to Syracuse, where fortune was preparing a new blow

for the ill-fated Athenian army. Gylippus came back from his mission at

the beginning of spring, bringing with him the reinforcements which he

had gathered from various parts of Sicily. At once resuming the

offensive, he planned an attack on the forts recently erected by Nicias

at Plemmyrium, and in order to divide the attention of the Athenians,

he determined to make a simultaneous movement against them by sea and

land. He himself took command of the army, and setting out at night,

made his way round to the rear of the Athenian position at Plemmyrium.

Meanwhile the Syracusan fleet lay ready in two divisions, one of which,

consisting of thirty-five vessels, was moored in the docks, within the

Great Harbour, while the other, to the number of forty-five, had its

station in the Lesser Harbour. At the hour appointed by Gylippus, just

as day was breaking, both squadrons got under weigh, and bore down upon

Plemmyrium, from the opposite sides of Ortygia. Though taken by

surprise, the Athenians put out in haste with sixty triremes, and a

sea-fight ensued, in which the Syracusans for some time had the

advantage. By this time Gylippus was at hand with his army, and by a

sudden assault on the Athenian forts he made an easy capture of all

three; for the greater part of the garrison had flocked down to the

sea, to watch the progress of the action in the Great Harbour.

Fortunately for these men, who had so grossly neglected their duty, the

Athenian fleet had now gained a decisive victory, and they were thus

enabled to make their escape by water, and cross over to the camp of

Nicias, on the other side of the bay.

By the capture of Plemmyrium a great treasure fell into the hands of

the Syracusans. The loss to the Athenians, in money, stores, and men,

was serious enough; but further consequences ensued, which were nothing

less than disastrous. The enemy now commanded both sides of the

entrance to the Great Harbour, and not a ship-load of provisions could

reach the Athenian camp without an encounter with the Syracusan

triremes. Well might despondency and dismay take possession of the

beleaguered army, cramped in their narrow quarters on the swampy flats

of the Anapus.

All Sicily, with one or two exceptions, had now declared for Syracuse,

and reinforcements came pouring in from every side. Gylippus was

resolved, if possible, to destroy the armament of Nicias, before the

fresh succours from Athens had time to arrive; and, as before, the

attack was to be made simultaneously by sea and land. Since the loss of

Plemmyrium, the Athenian fleet had been penned up in the confined space

at the head of the Great Harbour. Outside of these narrow limits, the

whole coast was in the hands of the enemy, and any Athenian trireme

which ventured out into open water ran the risk of being driven on a

hostile shore. Unless they chose to incur this great peril, the

Athenians would have to fight in close order, with the long, tapering

prows of their vessels exposed to collision.

The Syracusans skilfully availed themselves of the advantage thus

offered. The impact of prow with prow, which had hitherto been regarded

as a disgraceful evidence of bad seamanship, had now become the most

effective method of attack; and in order to execute this simple

manoeuvre without damage to their own ships, the Syracusans shortened

the prows of their triremes, and strengthened them with heavy beams of

timber, thus converting them into a broad and solid mass, which could

be driven with crushing force against the slender beaks of the Athenian

galleys.

When all was ready, Gylippus led out his troops, and assailed the

Athenian wall which faced towards Syracuse, and at the same time the

garrison stationed at Polichne left their quarters, and made another

attack on the opposite side. The assault had already commenced, when

the Syracusan fleet, which numbered eighty triremes, was seen advancing

towards the inner shore of the bay, where the ships of Nicias lay

moored; and the Athenian seamen, who had not expected to be called into

action, hastened in some confusion to man their ships, seventy-five of

which were presently engaged with the enemy. After a day passed in

irregular and desultory fighting, the battle ended slightly in favour

of the Syracusans. During the next day the Syracusans remained

inactive, and Nicias employed the interval in repairing the ships which

had suffered damage, and providing for the defence of his fleet. The

Athenian naval station was protected by a row of piles, rammed into the

bottom of the sea, forming a semi-circular breastwork, with an opening

about two hundred feet wide, where the ships passed in and out. On

either side of this entrance Nicias caused a merchant vessel to be

moored, and each vessel was provided with an engine called a dolphin, a

heavy mass of lead, suspended from the yard-arm, which could be dropped

on the deck of any hostile trireme attempting to pass.

Early on the following morning the Syracusans resumed hostilities both

by sea and land, and after several hours of desultory fighting, they

drew off their fleet, and sailed back to their station under the walls

of the city. The Athenians were well pleased by this sudden relief, and

concluding that their work was done for the day, they disembarked at

leisure, and began to prepare their midday meal. But before they had

time to snatch a mouthful, the whole Syracusan fleet was seen advancing

again from the opposite shore, and the hungry and weary Athenian crews

were summoned on board to repel a second attack. This crafty manoeuvre

was due to a suggestion of Ariston, the most skilful of the Corinthian

seamen, by whose advice provisions had been brought down to the beach,

so that the Syracusan crews were kept together, and ready to renew the

action, after a brief interval for repose and refreshment.

For a little while the two fleets faced each other, without venturing

to attack; then the Athenians, who were feverish with hunger and

fatigue, could restrain themselves no longer, but with one consent they

dashed their oars into the water, and with shouts of mutual

encouragement charged down upon the enemy. The Syracusans kept a firm

front, and opposing their massive prows to the rash assault, inflicted

great damage on the Athenian triremes, many of which were completely

wrecked by the shock of the collision. On every side the Athenians were

hard beset; the light-armed troops posted on the decks of the Syracusan

vessels, plied them with a shower of javelins, while the waters swarmed

with a multitude of boats, manned by daring adventurers, who rowed

boldly up to the sides of the Athenian triremes, broke the oars, and

hurled darts through the port-holes at the rowers. After fighting for

some time at a great disadvantage, with exhausted crews, and in a

narrow space, where they had no room to manoeuvre, the Athenians were

compelled to fall back, and sought refuge behind their palisade.

This important success raised the spirits of the Syracusans higher than

ever. They had gained a decisive victory over the greatest naval power

in Greece, sunk seven triremes, disabled many more, and slain or taken

prisoners a large number of men. Flushed with pride and hope, they

immediately began to prepare for a final attack, which was to end in

the complete destruction of their enemies both by sea and land. But

these high expectations received a sudden check; for on the day after

the battle, [Footnote: Or possibly two days.] the watchers on the walls

of Syracuse descried a great fleet on the northern horizon. Presently

the regular beat of ten thousand oars could be distinctly heard; it

grew louder and louder, and as the vanguard came into full view, the

alarmed Syracusans recognized the truth. There was no mistaking the

peculiar build and familiar ensigns of the renowned Athenian galleys.

This could be no other than the fleet of Demosthenes, arrived just in

time to save the shattered armament of Nicias, and once more turn the

tide of war against Syracuse. A great multitude rushed to the

battlements, and gazed with keen pangs of anxiety as the long line of

triremes, seventy-three in number, swept past the walls of Ortygia,

rounded the southern point, and crossing the Great Harbour, dropped

anchor at the naval station of Nicias. If anyone not concerned in the

struggle had been present, he might have admired the grand exhibition

of military pomp and power, the perfect trim and condition of the

triremes, the precision of the rowing, and the glittering ranks of the

hoplites, javelin-men, archers, and slingers, who thronged the decks.

But no such feeling could find room in the minds of the Syracusans.

After their long trials and sufferings, on the very eve of their

crowning triumph, a new host of enemies had sprung up against them, and

all their toils were beginning anew.

IX

When Demosthenes arrived at Syracuse, the position of affairs was as

follows: the blockading wall of the Athenians still extended in an

unbroken line from the circular fort on Epipolae to the camp and naval

station of Nicias at the head of the Great Harbour; but the Athenians

were cut off from access to the northern slope of Epipolae by the

Syracusan counterwall, which had been carried up the whole length of

the plateau as far as the hill of Euryelus. Along the northern edge of

the cliff the Syracusans had established three fortified camps, where

the defenders of the counterwall had their quarters, and on the summit

of Euryelus a fort had been erected, which held the key to the whole

system of defence.

Demosthenes saw at once that, before any progress could be made with

the siege of Syracuse, it was necessary to gain possession of the

counterwall, and confine the Syracusans within the limits of their

city. The sooner he made the attempt, the greater was his chance of

success; for every day wasted would give new confidence to the enemy,

and the condition in which he found the troops of Nicias was a visible

warning against the fatal consequences of delay. An attack made on the

cross-wall from its southern side ended in total failure; his

siege-engines were burnt, and the storming-parties repulsed at every

point. The only course which remained was to march round to the

north-western extremity of the plateau, carry the fort of Euryelus, and

assail the Syracusans within their own lines. After consulting with his

colleagues, Demosthenes determined to try the hazardous method of a

night-attack, hoping thus to take the garrison on Euryelus by surprise.

He himself, with Eurymedon and Menander, took the command, and the

whole Athenian army was engaged in the adventure, except those who

remained behind with Nicias to guard the camp. On a moonlight night in

August, at the hour of the first watch, the march began. Moving

cautiously up the valley of the Anapus, they turned the northern end of

the hill, and reached the path by which Lamachus had ascended in the

spring of the previous year. At first all seemed to promise success to

the Athenians unobserved by the enemy, Demosthenes ascended the hill,

stormed the fort, and, drove the garrison back on the three fortified

camps which flanked the Syracusan counterwall on its northern side. The

fugitives raised the alarm, and the call was promptly answered by a

picked troop of six hundred hoplites, who were stationed nearest to the

point of danger. These men made a gallant stand, but they were

overpowered by superior numbers, and thrust back on the main body of

the Syracusans, who were now advancing under Gylippus to the rescue.

They in their turn were forced to give ground before the impetuous

charge of Demosthenes, and a general panic seemed about to spread

through the whole Syracusan army. Already the Athenians had begun to

throw down the battlements of the counterwall, and if they were allowed

to proceed, Syracuse would once more be exposed to imminent danger.

But now occurred one of those sudden turns of fortune which were so

common in Greek warfare. As the soldiers of the Athenian van rushed

forward too hotly, wishing to complete the rout of the enemy they fell

into disorder, and in this condition they were confronted by a stout

little troop of Boeotian hoplites, who had found their way to Syracuse

earlier in the summer. This unexpected resistance checked the furious

onset of the Athenians, and the Boeotians, pursuing their advantage,

charged in solid phalanx and put them to flight. Once more the tide of

battle had turned against Athens. Restored to confidence by the steady

valour of their allies, the Syracusans closed their ranks, and advanced

in dense masses up the hill. A scene of indescribable horror and

confusion ensued, so that no one was afterwards able to give a clear

account of what had happened. On the narrow neck of land which forms

the western end of Epipolae two great armies were rushing to the

encounter. On one side was the main body of the Athenians, still

ignorant of the defeat of their comrades, and hurrying forward to share

in the victory. On the other side was the whole host of Syracuse,

advancing with deafening shouts to meet them; and in the middle were

the men of Demosthenes, flying in headlong rout before the conquering

Boeotians. In the uncertain light, the fugitives were at first mistaken

for enemies, and many of them perished miserably by the spears of their

own countrymen. On came the Syracusans, bearing down all before them;

but the Athenians, as they strove to escape, were flung back upon the

enemy by fresh bodies of their own men, who were still thronging by

thousands up the northern path of Euryelus. All semblance of order was

now lost in the Athenian army, which was broken up into detached

parties, some flying, some advancing, and shouting their watchword to

all whom they met, so as to learn whether they had to do with friend or

foe. But the Syracusans soon learnt the watchword, which thus became a

means of betraying the Athenians to their own destruction. To add to

the confusion, the Dorian allies of Athens raised a paean, or war-song,

so similar to that of the Syracusans, that the Athenians fled at their

approach supposing them to be enemies. The grand army of Demosthenes,

which had set out with such high hopes, was now no better than a mob of

wild and desperate men, friend fighting against friend, and citizen

against citizen. At length the whole multitude turned and fled, each

man seeking to save himself as best he could. Some, hard pressed by the

enemy, flung themselves from the cliffs, and were dashed to pieces on

the rocks below; others succeeded in reaching the plain, and found

their way back to the camp of Nicias; while not a few lost their way,

and wandered about the country until the following day, when they were

hunted down and slain by the Syracusan horseman.

Demosthenes had done all that a man could to recover the ground lost by

Nicias, and resume the aggressive against Syracuse. His well-laid

scheme had ended disastrously, and only one course remained, consistent

with public duty and common sense. To waste the blood and treasure of

Athens in Sicily any longer would be suicidal folly. The Athenians at

home were in a state of siege, and needed every man and every ship for

the defence of their own territory, and the maintenance of their empire

in Greece. Sickness and despondency had already wrought dire havoc

among the troops encamped before Syracuse. To remain was utter ruin,

both to themselves and their fellow-citizens. The sea was still open,

and the new armament, with what remained of the old, would be strong

enough to secure their retreat. Let them embark without delay, turn

their backs on the fatal shores of Sicily, and hoist sail for home.

These arguments were urged by Demosthenes with unanswerable force at a

private meeting of the generals which was held immediately after the

defeat on Epipolae But unhappily for all those most nearly concerned in

the debate, the influence of Nicias was still supreme in the Athenian

camp; and to spur that gloomy trifler into decisive action was beyond

the power even of Demosthenes. Nicias knew that, if he gave the word to

retreat, in a few weeks he would have to stand before the bar of his

countrymen, and give an account of the great trust which he had

betrayed. It would be better, he thought, to perish under the walls of

Syracuse, than to brave that stern tribunal, and read his doom on those

angry, accusing faces. And apart from these selfish terrors, he was

still in communication with his partisans in Syracuse, who encouraged

him to wait for a favourable turn of affairs. Thus fettered to the spot

both by his hopes and his fears, he obstinately refused to move.

While Demosthenes argued, and Nicias demurred, Gylippus had not been

idle. A day or two after the battle, he once more left Syracuse, and

traversed the whole length of the island, collecting troops on his way.

At Selinus he was joined by the Peloponnesian and Boeotian soldiers who

had sailed from Taenarum early in the spring, and had just reached that

port, after a long and adventurous voyage. With this welcome addition

to his forces, and thousands more who had answered his call from all

parts of Sicily, he returned to Syracuse, and prepared to put out all

his strength in a general assault on the army and fleet of Athens.

The Athenians had not yet abandoned their lines on the southern side of

Epipolae, and from this position they watched the arrival of the new

army raised by Gylippus, as it defiled down the slope, and poured

through the gates of Syracuse to swell the ranks of their enemies. In

their own camp the state of things was growing worse every day, and

even Nicias now became convinced that to remain any longer would be

sheer madness. With the hearty concurrence of his colleagues, he gave

his vote for immediate departure, and the order was secretly passed

round the camp that every man should hold himself in readiness to go on

board, as soon as the signal was given. It was necessary to proceed

with caution, for if the enemy were informed of their purpose, they

would have to fight their way through the Syracusan fleet. The

preparations were accordingly made with as little noise as possible and

in a short time all was ready for the voyage. Night sank down on the

Athenian camp, but among all that vast multitude no one thought of

sleep, for the whole host was waiting in breathless eagerness for the

signal to embark. Over the eastern waters the full moon was shining,

making a long path of silver and pointing the way to home. But suddenly

a dark shadow touched the outer rim of that gleaming disk, and crept

stealthily on, until the whole face of the moon was veiled in darkness.

A whisper, a murmur, a shudder went round among those anxious watchers,

and before the shadow had passed away, ten thousand tongues were

eagerly discussing the meaning of that mysterious portent. Most were

agreed that it was a warning from heaven, forbidding their departure

until the angry powers had been appeased by sacrifice and prayer. In

the mind of Nicias, enslaved by the grossest superstition, there was no

room for doubt. He was surrounded by prophets, whose advice he sought

on every occasion, and guided by them he proclaimed that for thrice

nine days, the time required for a complete circuit of the moon, there

could be no talk of departing.

But the Athenians were soon engaged in a sterner task than the vain

rites of propitiation and penitential observance. The news of their

intended retreat, and its untoward interruption, so raised the spirits

of the Syracusans, that they resolved to risk another sea-fight, and

after some days spent in training their crews, they sailed out with

seventy-six ships, and offered battle, and Gylippus at the same time

attacked the Athenian lines by land. The Athenians succeeded in

repulsing the assault on their walls, but in the encounter between the

fleets, though they out-numbered the enemy by ten ships, they suffered

a decisive defeat. Eurymedon was slain, and eighteen vessels fell into

the hands of the Syracusans, who put all the crews to the sword.

The pride and ambition of the Syracusans now knew no bounds. Relieved

from all fear for the safety of their city they began to take a loftier

view of the struggle, and to grasp the full compass and grandeur of the

issues involved. It was no mere feud between two rival states, but a

great national conflict, which was to end in the downfall of a

wide-spread usurpation, and the deliverance of a hundred cities from

bondage. The whole naval and military forces of Athens lay crippled and

helpless within their grasp; they would shatter to pieces the

instrument of tyranny, and win an immortal name as the liberators of

all Greece. Their first care was to prevent the escape of the

Athenians, and for this purpose they began to close the mouth of the

Great Harbour by a line of triremes and vessels of burden, anchored

broadside across the channel.

X

The Athenians were thus caught in a trap, and their only hope of saving

themselves was to force the barrier of the Great Harbour, and escape by

sea, or, failing that, to make their way by land to some friendly city.

As a last sad confession of defeat, they withdrew the garrison from

their walls on Epipolae, and reduced the dimensions of their camp,

confining it to a narrow space of the coast, where the fleet lay

moored. Every vessel which could be kept afloat was prepared for

action, and when the whole force was mustered, out of two great

armaments only a hundred and ten were found fit for service. A small

body of troops was left to guard the camp, and all the rest, except

such as were totally disabled by sickness, were distributed as

fighting-men among the ships. For the countrymen of Phormio had now

reverted to the primitive conditions of naval warfare, in which the

trireme was a mere vehicle for carrying troops, and not, as in the days

of that great captain, the chief weapon of offence. Every foot of

standing-room on the decks was occupied by a crowd of hoplites,

javelin-men, archers, and slingers, and on their prowess the issue of

the battle depended. To lay their vessels aboard the enemy with as

little delay as possible, and leave the rest to the soldiers, was now

the chief object of the Athenian captains; and the better to effect.

this, men were stationed on the prows, armed with grappling-irons, to

hold the attacking trireme fast, and prevent her from backing away

after the first shock of collision.

With hearts full of sad foreboding, the great multitude mustered on the

beach, and waited for the word to embark. On a rising ground, fronting

the camp, the generals; stood grouped in earnest consultation; then

every voice was hushed, as Nicias came forward, and beckoned with his

hand, commanding silence. The form of the general was bowed with years,

and his face lined with pain and sickness, but in his eye there was an

unwonted fire, and his tones rang clear and full, as he reminded his

hearers of the great cause for which they were to fight, and the mighty

interests which hung in the balance that day. "Men of Athens," he said,

"and you, our faithful allies, your lives, your liberty, and the future

of all who are dear to you, are in your own hands. If you would ever

see home again, you must resolve to conquer fortune, even against her

will, like seasoned veterans, inured to the perils and vicissitudes of

war. Hitherto we have generally got the better of the enemy on land and

we are now going to fight a land battle on the sea. As soon as you come

within reach of a Syracusan vessel, fling your grappling-irons, and

hold her fast, until not a man is left alive to defend her deck. This

will be the task of the soldiers, whom I need not tell to do their

duty. And you, seamen of the Athenian fleet, be not dismayed because we

have forsaken our former tactics, but trust to the strong arms of the

fighting men. Remember, those of you who are not of Attic descent, how

long you have enjoyed the high privileges of Athenian citizens, and the

honour reflected on you by your connection with Athens.

"My last word shall be spoken to you, fellow-citizens, Athenians born

and bred. You know what you have to expect from the Syracusans, if this

last struggle should end in defeat. But consider further what will be

the fate of your friends at home. Their docks are empty, their walls

are stripped of defenders, and if you fail them, Syracuse will unite

with their old enemies, and bear them down. Here, where we stand, are

the army, the fleet, the city, and the great name of Athens; go, then,

and fight as you never fought before, for never yet had soldier such a

prize to win, and such a cause to defend."

When Nicias had concluded his stirring appeal, the embarkation of the

troops began. As the fatal moment drew nearer and nearer, the anxiety

and distress of the Athenian general became unbearable. Feeling that he

had not said enough, he hurried to and fro, addressing each captain

with an agony of supplication, and imploring him by every sacred

name,--his wife, his children, his country, and his country's gods,--to

play a man's part, forgetting all thoughts of self. Having exhausted

every topic of entreaty, and seen the last man on board, he turned

away, still unsatisfied, and addressed himself to the task of drawing

up the troops left under his command for the defence of the camp. These

were disposed along the shore in as long a line as possible, that they

might encourage those fighting on the sea by their presence, and lend

prompt help in case of need. Behind them, every point of outlook was

held by a throng of anxious spectators,--the sick, the maimed, and the

wounded,--every man who had strength to crawl from his bed, and watch

that last desperate struggle for liberty and home.

And now the Athenian admirals, Demosthenes, Menander, and Euthydemus,

raised the signal, and the great fight began. The foremost ships

succeeded in reaching the mouth of the Great Harbour, and began to

break through the barrier, when the whole Syracusan fleet closed in

upon them on all sides, and forced them back Then the battle became

general, and soon the two fleets were scattered over the whole surface

of the bay in little groups, and each group engaged in a wild and

furious melee. There was no attempt to manoeuvre, but ship encountered

ship; as accident brought them together, and advanced to the attack,

under a shower of javelins and arrows. Then followed the dull crash of

collision, and the fierce rush of the fighting-men, as they endeavoured

to board. Here and there could be seen knots of three or four triremes,

locked together with shattered hulls and broken oars, while the

soldiers on the decks strove for the mastery. Nearly two hundred

triremes, and some forty thousand men, were engaged in that tumultuous

fight; and the thunder of the oars, the crash of colliding triremes,

and the yells of the assailants, raised an uproar so tremendous that it

was impossible to hear the voice of command. All order and method was

lost, yet still they fought on, the Syracusans with a savage thirst for

vengeance, the Athenians with the fury of despair; and for a long time

the issue remained doubtful.

All this scene of havoc and carnage was witnessed by the whole

population of Syracuse, who thronged the walls, or stood in arms along

the shore, and followed every incident with breathless interest. But

above all among the Athenians left behind in the camp excitement was

strained to the point of anguish. Here the view was more restricted,

and each group of spectators had its attention fixed on some one of the

many encounters which were raging in different parts of the bay. Some

who saw their friends conquering, shouted with joy and triumph; some

shrieked in terror, as an Athenian ship went down; and others, when the

combat long wavered, rocked their bodies to and fro in an agony of

suspense. Thus at the same moment every shifting turn of battle,

victory and defeat, panic and rally, flight and pursuit, was mirrored

on those pale faces, and echoed in a thousand mingled cries.

But at length these discordant voices were united in one general note

of horror, as the whole Athenian fleet, or all that was left of it, was

seen making in headlong rout for the upper end of the bay, with the

victorious Syracusans pressing hard behind. Then most of those who were

watching from the shore were seized with uncontrollable terror, and

sought to hide themselves in holes and corners of the camp; while a

few, who were more stout-hearted, waded into the water, to save the

ships, or rushed to defend the walls on the land side. But for the

present the Syracusans were contented with their victory, and after

chasing the fugitive triremes as far as their defences, they wheeled

and rowed back across the Great Harbour, through floating corpses, and

the wrecks of more than seventy vessels. On their arrival at Syracuse

they were hailed with such a burst of enthusiasm as had rarely been

witnessed in any Greek city. The victory, indeed, had been dearly

bought, but it was well worth the cost, and the power of Athens had

sustained a blow from which it could never recover. But among all the

thronging hosts of Syracuse, who now gave themselves up to revel and

rejoicing, there was one man at least who knew that even now the danger

was not yet past. Forty thousand Athenian soldiers were still encamped

within sight of the walls, and if they were allowed to escape, they

might establish themselves in some friendly city, and begin the war

again. All this was strongly felt by Hermocrates, and he lost no time

in imparting his cares and anxieties to the responsible leaders. The

Athenians, he urged, would be almost certain to decamp during the

night: let a strong force be sent out at once from Syracuse, to occupy

all the roads, and cut off their retreat. The advice was good, but in

the present temper of the army it was felt to be impracticable. The

whole city had become a scene of riot and wassail, and if the order

were given to march, it was but too evident that not a man would obey.

Baffled in this direction, the keen-witted Syracusan hit upon another

plan, which he at once proceeded to carry into effect.

Hermocrates was not mistaken in his conjecture. The beaten and

dispirited Athenians had now but one thought,--to break up their camp

with all despatch, and make their escape by land. They had still sixty

triremes left, and Demosthenes proposed to make one more attempt to

force the entrance of the Great Harbour; but when his suggestion was

made known to the crews, they broke into open mutiny, and flatly

refused to go on board. The generals were therefore compelled to adopt

the only alternative, and it was resolved to set out on that very

night. But Fortune had not yet exhausted her malice against the hapless

Athenians. The order to strike camp had been issued, and the soldiers

were busy preparing for the march, when a party of horsemen rode up to

the Athenian outposts, and hailing the sentinels, said that they had a

message to Nicias from his friends in Syracuse. "Tell him," said the

spokesman of the party, "That he must not attempt to stir to-night, for

all the roads are held by strong detachments of the Syracusans. Let him

wait until he has organised his forces, for a hasty and disordered

flight is sure to end in disaster."

The message, of course, came from Hermocrates, who had contrived this

trick to delay the departure of the Athenians, until time had been

gained to occupy the passes on their route. That Nicias should have

fallen into the snare is not surprising, but it is less easy to explain

how Demosthenes and the other generals came to be deceived by so

transparent a fraud. Yet such was in fact the case; the insidious hint

was accepted as a piece of friendly advice, and the march was

postponed. For a whole day and night the Athenians still lingered on

the spot, and thus gave ample time for their enemies to draw the net

round them, and block every avenue to safety.

On the third day after the battle, the order was given to march. As the

great army formed into column, the full horror of their situation came

home to every heart. This, then, was the end of those grand dreams of

conquest with which they had sailed to Sicily two years before! On the

heights of Epipolae their walls and their fort was still standing, a

monument of failure and defeat. Each familiar landmark reminded them of

some fallen comrade, or some disastrous incident in the siege. If they

glanced towards the Great Harbour, they could see the victorious

Syracusans towing off the shattered hull of an Athenian trireme, the

last sad remnant of two great armaments. If they turned their thoughts

towards Athens and home, they found no comfort there; for their beloved

city was beset with enemies, and in themselves, beaten and broken as

they were, lay her chief hope of salvation. The past was all black with

calamity, and the future loomed terrible before them, threatening

captivity and death; and the present, in that last hour of parting, was

full of such sights and sounds of woe as might have stirred pity even

in the breasts of their enemies. Around them, the camp was strewn with

the unburied corpses of brothers, comrades and sons, and thousands more

were tossing on the waves, or flung up on the shores of the bay. And

while the neglect of that sacred duty pressed heavily on their

conscience, still more harrowing were the cries of the sick and

wounded, who clung round their knees, imploring to be taken with them,

and when the army began to move followed with tottering steps, until

they sank down exhausted, calling down the curse of heaven on the

retreating host. Such was the anguish of that moment, that it seemed as

if the whole population of some great city had been driven into exile,

and was seeking a new home in a distant soil.

In this dire extremity, when the strongest spirits were crushed with

misery, one voice was heard, which still spoke of hope. It was the

voice of Nicias, who, when all others faltered, rose to a pitch of

heroism which he had never shown before. Bowed as he was with care, and

wasted by disease, he braced himself with more than human energy, and

moved with light step from rank to rank, exhorting that stricken

multitude in words of power. "Comrades," he said, "even now there is no

need to despair. Others have been saved before now from calamities yet

deeper than ours. You see in what state I am, cast down from the summit

of human prosperity, and condemned, in my age and weakness, to share

the hardships of the humblest soldier among you,--I, who was ever

constant in the service of the gods, and punctual in the performance of

every social duty. Yet have I not lost faith in the righteousness of

heaven, nor should you give up all for lost, if by any act of yours you

have fallen under the scourge of divine vengeance. There is mercy, as

well as justice, among the gods, and we, in sinking thus low, have

become the proper objects of their compassion. Think too what firm

ground of confidence we have, in the shields and spears of so many

thousand warriors. There is no power in Sicily which can resist us,

either to prevent our coming or to shorten our stay. A few days march

will bring us to the country of the friendly Sicels, who have already

received notice of our approach. Once there, we can defy all attack,

and look forward to the time when we shall see our homes again, and

raise up the fallen power of Athens."

These and similar exhortations were repeated by Nicias again and again,

as the army moved slowly forwards up the valley of the Anapus, keeping

a westerly direction, towards the interior of the island. The troops

were formed in a hollow oblong, with the baggage animals and

camp-followers in the middle, and advanced in two divisions, Nicias

leading the van, and Demosthenes bringing up the rear. The vigilance

and activity of Nicias never relaxed for a moment. Careless of his many

infirmities and exalted rank, he passed incessantly up and down the

column, chiding the stragglers, and attending to the even trim of his

lines. On reaching the ford of the Anapus, they put to flight a

detachment of the enemy which was stationed there to oppose their

passage, and crossing the river, continued their march. But now the

real difficulties of the retreat began to appear. The Syracusans had no

intention of hazarding a pitched battle, but their horsemen and light

infantry hung upon the flanks of the Athenian army, making sudden

charges, and keeping up a constant discharge of javelins.

At nightfall the Athenians encamped under the shelter of a hill, some

five miles from their starting-point, and setting out at daybreak on

the following day, they pushed on with pain and difficulty, harassed at

every step by the galling attacks of the Syracusan troops. [Footnote:

Thucydides, with characteristic brevity, leaves this to be inferred

from the slowness of their progress.] A march of two miles and a half

brought them to a village, situated on a level plain, and here they

halted, wishing to supply themselves with food, and replenish their

water-vessels; for the country which they had now to traverse was a

desert, many miles in extent. Directly in their line of route there is

a narrow pass, when the road, on entering the hill country, drops sheer

down on either side into a deep ravine, and if they could once cross

this dangerous point they would be within reach of their allies, the

Sicels. But it was too late to proceed further that day, and while they

lay encamped in the village, the Syracusans hurried on in advance, and

blocked the pass by building a wall across the road. When the Athenians

resumed their march next morning, they were fiercely assailed by the

enemy's light horse and foot, who disputed every inch of ground, and at

last compelled them to fall back on the village where they had encamped

the night before. Provisions were now growing scanty, and every attempt

to leave their lines in search of plunder and forage was baffled by the

Syracusan horse.

On the fourth day they broke up their camp early, and by incessant

fighting succeeded in forcing their way as far as the pass. But all

further advance was prevented by the wall, and the dense masses of

infantry posted behind it. In vain the Athenians flung themselves again

and again upon the barrier. The troops stationed on the cliffs above

assailed them with a shower of missiles, and the solid phalanx of

hoplites repulsed every assault. Convinced at last that they were

wasting their strength to no purpose, they desisted, and retiring from

the wall halted at some distance for a brief interval of repose. During

this pause a storm of rain and thunder broke over their heads; and to

the weary and disheartened Athenians it seemed that the very elements

were in league with the enemy against them. But they had little time to

indulge in these melancholy reflections; for while they were resting,

Gylippus stole round to their rear, and prepared to cut off their

retreat by building a second wall across the pass. The news of this

imminent peril roused the Athenians from their stupor, and they marched

back with all speed along the road by which they had come. A picked

body of troops, sent on in advance, scattered the soldiers of Gylippus,

and the whole army then emerged from that death-trap, and encamped for

the night in the open plain.

The next day was spent in a last desperate effort to reach the hill

country. But being now on level ground, they were exposed on all sides

to the attacks of the Syracusan horse, who charged them incessantly,

and slew their men by hundreds, with hardly any loss to themselves. The

hopeless struggle continued until evening, and when the enemy drew off,

they left the Athenians not a mile from the place where they had passed

the previous night.

The original plan of the Athenian generals had been to penetrate the

highlands of Sicily to the west of Syracuse, and then strike across

country, until they reached the southern coast, in the direction of

Gela or Camarina. [Footnote: I have followed Holm, as cited in

Classen's Appendix (Third Edition, 1908).] But after two days' fighting

they had utterly failed to force an entrance into the mountains. Many

of their soldiers were wounded, the whole army was weakened by famine,

and a third attempt, made in such conditions, must inevitably end in

utter disaster. They resolved therefore to change their route, and

march southwards along the level coast country, until they could reach

the interior by following one of the numerous glens which pierce the

hills on this side of Sicily. Having come to this decision, they caused

a great number of fires to be lighted, and then gave the order for an

immediate start, hoping by this means to steal a march on the enemy.

This sudden flight through the darkness, in a hostile country, with

unknown terrors around them, caused something like a panic in the

Athenian army.

Nicias, however, who was still leading the van, contrived to keep his

men together, and made good progress; but the division under

Demosthenes fell into great disorder, and was left far behind. By

daybreak, both divisions [Footnote: See note, p. 242.] were within

sight of the sea, and entering the road which runs north and south

between Syracuse and Helorus, they continued their march towards the

river Cacyparis. Here they intended to turn off into the interior, with

the assistance of the Sicels, whom they expected to meet at the river.

But when they reached the ford of the Cacyparis, they found, instead of

the Sicels, a contingent of Syracusan troops, who were raising a wall

and palisade to block the passage. This obstruction was overcome

without much difficulty, and the whole Athenian army crossed the river

in safety. But the presence of the enemy on this side of Syracuse was

sufficient to deter them from taking the inland route by the valley of

the Cacyparis, and following the advice of their guides, they kept the

main road, and pressed on towards the south.

We must now return for a moment to the Syracusans under Gylippus, who

remained in their camp all night, not far from the pass which they had

so successfully defended. When they found in the morning that the

Athenians had departed, they were loud in their anger against Gylippus,

thinking that he had purposely suffered them to escape. The tracks of

so many thousands left no room for doubt as to the direction which the

fugitives had taken, and full of rage at the supposed treachery of

their leader, the Syracusans set out at once in hot pursuit. About

noon, on the sixth day of the retreat, they overtook the division of

Demosthenes, which had again lagged behind, and was marching slowly and

in disorder separated from the other half of the army by a distance of

six miles. Deprived of all hope of succour from his colleague, and

hemmed in on all sides by implacable enemies, Demosthenes called a

halt, and prepared to make his last stand. But his men, who from the

first had held the post of honour and danger, were fearfully reduced in

numbers, faint with famine, and exhausted by their long march. Driven

to and fro by the incessant charges of the Syracusan cavalry, they

could make no effective resistance, and at last they huddled pell-mell

into a walled enclosure, planted with olive-trees, and skirted on

either side by a road. They were now at the mercy of the Syracusans.

who surrounded the enclosure, and plied them with javelins, stones, and

arrows. After this butchery had continued for many hours, and the

survivors were brought to extremity by wounds, hunger, and thirst,

Gylippus sent a herald, who was the bearer of a remarkable message.

"Let those of you," he said, "who are natives of the islands subject to

Athens, come over to us, and you shall be free men." The offer was

addressed to the Greeks from the maritime cities of the Aegaean, who

might be supposed to be serving under compulsion, and it speaks volumes

for the loyalty and attachment of these men to Athens that most of them

refused to accept their freedom from the hands of her enemies. At

length, however, the whole army of Demosthenes, which had now dwindled

to six thousand men, was induced to surrender, on condition that none

of them should suffer death by violence, by bonds, or by starvation. At

the command of their captors they gave up the money which they had with

them, and the amount collected was so considerable that it filled the

hollows of four shields. When the capitulation was concluded,

Demosthenes, who had refused to make any terms for himself, drew his

sword, and attempted to take his own life; [Footnote: This interesting

fact is recorded by Plutarch and Pausanias, who copied it from the

contemporary Syracusan historian, Philistus.] but he was prevented from

effecting his purpose, and compelled to take his place in the mournful

procession which was now conducted by a strong guard along the road to

Syracuse.

Meanwhile the vanguard under Nicias, in total ignorance of the fate

which had befallen their comrades, marched steadily forwards, and

crossing the river Erineus, encamped for the night on a neighbouring

hill. Here they were found next morning by Gylippus and the Syracusans,

who informed them that Demosthenes and his men had surrendered, and

called upon them to do the same. Doubting their good faith, Nicias

obtained a truce, while he sent a horseman to ascertain the facts; and

even when he had learnt the truth from his messenger, he still tried to

parley, offering, in the name of the Athenian state, to defray the

whole cost of the war, and to give hostages for payment, at the rate of

an Athenian citizen for each talent, on condition that he and his men

were allowed to go. But the Syracusans were in no mood to listen to

such proposals, even if Nicias had spoken with full authority from

Athens. Bare life they would grant, but no more, and as the Athenians

refused to yield on these terms, they closed in upon them, and the

cruel, hopeless struggle began again, and continued until evening. The

wretched Athenians lay down supperless to snatch a few hours of rest,

intending, when all was quiet, to steal away under cover of darkness.

But when they rose at dead of night, and prepared to march, a shout

from the Syracusan camp warned them that the enemy were on the alert,

and they were compelled to return to their comfortless bivouac. Three

hundred, however, persisted in their intention, and forcing their way

through the Syracusan lines, gained for themselves a brief respite from

capture.

A whole week had now elapsed since the ill-fated army left its quarters

on the shores of the Great Harbour, and a few thousand starving and

weary men were all that remained of that great host. At dawn on the

eighth day Nicias gave the word to march, and they pressed on eagerly

towards the Assinarus, a stream of some size, with high and precipitous

banks, not more than two miles distant from their last halting-place.

They had still some faint hope of making good their escape, if they

could but cross the river. So they fought their way onwards, through

the swarming ranks of the Syracusans, who closed them in on all sides,

and thrust them together into one solid mass. There was life, there was

freedom a little way beyond,--or, if that hope proved futile, at any

rate there was water; and every fibre in their bodies ached and burned

with intolerable thirst. They reached the river; both banks were

already lined by the Syracusan horse, who had ridden on before, and

stood guarding the ford: but there was no stopping the wild rush of

that maddened, desperate multitude. Down the steep bank they plunged,

trampling on one another, and flung themselves open-mouthed upon the

stream, with one thought, one wish, overpowering every other

impulse,--to drink, and then to die. Some fell upon the spears of their

comrades, and perished, others slipped on the floating baggage, lost

their foothold, and were swept away by the flood. Yet still they poured

on, by hundreds and by thousands, drawn by the same longing, and thrust

downwards by the weight of those behind, until the whole riverbed was

filled with a huddled, surging mob of furious men, who drank, and still

drank, or fought with one another to reach the water. All this time an

iron storm of missiles rained down upon them from the thronging hosts

of their enemies on the banks above, while some, in the midst of their

draught, were pierced by the spears of the Peloponnesians, who followed

them into the river, and slew them at close quarters. The water grew

red with blood, and foul from the trampling of so many feet, but the

thirsty multitude still came crowding in, and drank with avidity of the

polluted stream.

For a long time the slaughter raged unchecked, and the river-bed was

choked with heaps of slain. A few, who escaped from the river, were

pursued and cut down by the Syracusan horse. Nicias had held out until

the last moment; but when he perceived that all was lost, his men being

powerless either to fight or fly, he made his way to Gylippus, and

implored him to stop the useless carnage. "I surrender myself," he

said, "to you and the Spartans. Do with me as you please, but put an

end to this butchery of defenceless men." Gylippus gave the necessary

order, and the word was passed round to kill no more, but take captive

those who survived. The order was obeyed, though slowly and with

reluctance, and the work of capture began. But few of those taken in

the river ever found their way into the public gaol, where Demosthenes

was now lying, with the six thousand who had surrendered on the day

before. For, as there had been no regular capitulation, large numbers

of the prisoners were secretly conveyed away by the Syracusans, who

afterwards sold them into slavery for their own profit. As for the

three hundred who had broken out of camp on the previous night, they

were presently brought in by a party of cavalry despatched in pursuit.

When the first transports of joy and triumph were over, an assembly was

called to decide on the fate of the two Athenian generals, and of those

state prisoners, some seven thousand in number, who were the sole

visible remnant of two great armies. Then arose a strange conflict of

motives. The first who put forward his claims was Gylippus, to whose

genius and energy the victorious issue of the struggle was mainly due.

As a reward for his services, he asked that Nicias and Demosthenes

should be left to his disposal, for he wished to have the honour of

carrying home with him these famous captains, one the greatest friend,

the other the greatest enemy of Sparta. But the general voice of the

assembly was strongly against him. Nothing but the blood of the two

principal offenders could satisfy the vengeance of the Syracusans, and

those who had intrigued with Nicias were anxious to put him out of the

way, in fear lest he should betray them. Moreover the Corinthian allies

of Syracuse, who for some reason had a special grudge against Nicias,

demanded his immediate execution. In vain Hermocrates pleaded the cause

of mercy, [Footnote: Plutarch, \_Nicias\_, c. 28.] and urged his

fellow-citizens to make a generous use of their victory. Sentence of

death was passed, and these two eminent Athenians, so different in

character and achievement, were united in their end.

Far worse was the doom pronounced on the six thousand men of

Demosthenes, and the thousand more who were brought to Syracuse after

the massacre at the Assinarus. They were condemned to confinement in

the stone quarries, deep pits surrounded by high walls of cliff, under

the south-eastern edge of Epipolae. Penned together in these roofless

dungeons, they were exposed to the fierce heat of the sun by day, and

to the bitter cold of the autumn nights, and having scarcely room to

move, they were unable to preserve common decency, or common

cleanliness. Many died of their wounds, or of the diseases engendered

by exposure, and their bodies were left unburied, a sight of horror and

a source of infection to the survivors. To these frightful miseries

were added a perpetual burning thirst, and the lingering torture of

slow starvation, for each man received as his daily allowance a poor

half pint of water, and a mere pittance of food, just enough to avoid

breaking the letter of the conditions which Demosthenes had made for

his troops. In this state they were left without relief for ten long

weeks; then all except the Athenians themselves, and their allies from

the Greek cities of Sicily and Italy, were taken out and sold as slaves.

EPILOGUE

Such was the end of the Sicilian Expedition, which ultimately decided

the issue of the Peloponnesian War. Forsaking the wise counsels of

their greatest statesman, and carried away by the mad sophistry of

Alcibiades, the Athenians had committed themselves, heart and soul, to

a wild game of hazard, in which they had little to win, and everything

to lose. By this act of desperate folly they brought on themselves an

overwhelming disaster, from which it was impossible for them wholly to

recover. With wonderful vitality they rallied from the blow, and

struggled on for nine years more, against the whole power of

Peloponnesus, and their own revolted allies, backed by the influence

and the gold of Persia. They gained great victories, and under prudent

leaders they might still have been saved from the worst consequences of

their defeat in Sicily. But at every favourable crisis they wantonly

flung away the advantage they had gained, and abandoned themselves to

blind guides, who led them further and further on the road to ruin.

The history of Thucydides ends abruptly in the twenty-first year of the

war, and for an account of the closing scenes we have to go to the

pages of Xenophon. It will be convenient, therefore, to bring our

narrative to a close at the point which we have reached, for any

attempt even to sketch the events of this confused and troubled period

would carry us far beyond the limits of the present volume. And so for

the present we take leave of the Athenians, in the hour of their

decline. Their light is burning dim, and yet darker days are awaiting

them in the future. But they are still great and illustrious, as the

chief guardians of those spiritual treasures which are our choicest

heritage from the past.

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