ANTIGONE AND LIR

By THOMAS MACDONAGH

I CAME away an hour ago from a performance of the _Antigone_ of Sophocles, such a performance as might move a Racine to write another _Esther_ or another _Athalie_—_a_ very Saint-Cyr performance indeed, by the Loreto Hall lady students of University College, Dublin. The grave dignity of the tragic theme, the deep intensity of the splendid eloquence, the passion, the pathos, the pity, with the ineluctable fate over all, the doom of the gods: these, swept up by the mighty music of Mendelssohn out of the sphere of our daily emotions, moved us,—not quite as they moved the Greeks with their different culture, their different ways of thought, their different way of religion, their different music, but as nothing in other drama, nothing in Shakespeare, can move us,—to a terror and a pity beyond the sorrow of earthly vicissitudes, touched and impressed by religious awe, raised from despair by the near presence of providence, albeit the ways of that providence are inscrutable.

The presentation this afternoon, beautiful in all its details, moved its audience profoundly,—raised us to a mood of tragedy, to the exultation of tragedy. It seems an impertinence at the moment to wish for more,—for a repetition of this or for similar presentations of other Greek tragedies,—to hope to see next year an _Iphigenia_ as beautiful as this _Antigone_. It seems and is an impossibility to criticise such a performance as if it were a theatre performance of a theatre play. If one would recollect the emotion, the best thing to do is to hear or read some different poem in the same mood, of different religion, of different custom, of different race,—in fine, not another such overwhelming Greek tragedy, but a tragedy or sorrow of story-telling with something of that terror and pity. I have chosen Doctor George Sigerson’s poem, _The Saga of King Lir_.

The story of the Fate of the Children of Lir differs very much from the other two Sorrows of Story-Telling. It belongs, I suppose, like the story of the Children of Tuireann, to the mythological cycle, not like the Deirdre saga to the cycle of Cuchulain and the Red Branch. Yet it differs widely from its fellow-tale, to call it so. It begins in the remote pagan times; it ends with Patrick and the tidings of Christianity. I write not at all as a scholar, attributing

**"The Saga of King Lir,"** by George Sigerson. Dublin: Maunsel and Co. Paper boards, 1s. net. Full parchment gilt, 3s. 6d. net.
changes and joinings to late redactions and the like. I take the tale as I find it in full in a common edition, and as Doctor Sigerson tells a part of it in his noble poem.

The Saga of King Lir is not the fate of the Children of Lir. It does not contain the tale of the age-long sufferings of the children after their transformation into swans. It is the story of Lir from the election of Bove as High King to the treachery of Aifa (Nos. I to V) and then suddenly to the end (No. VI), the return of the children to their old home to find only desolation and the grave of their father. I do not profess clearly to understand the whole import of the tale. I dread choosing explanations for things in it. I dread falling into some modern error,—into the "higher criticism." An explanation of such a thing as the transformation of the children into swans would narrow its significance to one interpretation, one meaning. As it is in the story, it is told as a downright fact, and it has thereby the wonderful suggestion of a symbol that will not suffer interpretation,—that must have in one the two words of the seen and the unseen.

Doctor Sigerson falls into no error in his telling of the ancient story. If some things in his telling are additions of his own, they are so certainly of the same timber that they match the original in grain. Such seems to me the greater part of No. V of the poem. Lir keeps ward on the rampart against the Unseen Things, while

"Around him wheeled
The murky menace of Eyes Invisible
And Night's still Deadness, pressing down always
The thing that lives."

He sees the destiny of his people:

"With sudden shudder Earth
Quailed, and he thought the waiting silence heard
The Lia Fail—the Earth-Voice of the Race!
It was the Wailing of the Woods of Erinn,
It was the Sorrow of her sobbing Streams,
It was the fierce reverberating Roar
Of the Three Waves that guard the Threatened Isle,
It was the Destiny declaring doom!

Awed he beheld upon the pictured Night
The threat of traitor Time. For straightway there
Appeared vague mist-like Shapes, half luminous,
That grew in form as though his eyes
Gave power through gazing on them. He saw
ANTIGONE AND LIR

The Unborn Kings of Peoples yet to be
And Times Unknown. Stately they came, and still
In grave procession—the High Kings of the Land:
Each bearing on his brow a shimmering Crown,—
Like misty stars that shine and disappear.
In awful beauty silently they passed
Advancing on their Fate, steadfast, erect,
From darkness into darkness.”

He sees “the end precipitate of that Great Race,” and alone has
power for an instant to veil with tears his watching eyes.

“In that instant—
What time the gray Dawn lifts the eaves of Night—
The fierce foe-demons pierced his ward, and passed
In mocking menace, at his false Queen’s call.”

Lir falls into a deep dejection. Later he knows his great loss, and
inflicts terrible punishment on the queen. He lives on alone, not
in despair:

“He still, through all the withered years, beheld
Star-like o’er courts of Kings—star-like above
The crash of wars where foremost flamed his sword—
The Vision Beautiful. Still glowed the Light,
Still sang soft Voices to the faithful heart
That hopeless hoped and with despair desired.”

Sophocles, whose tragedy I saw this afternoon, is the most
impersonal of poets. Coming from his work, one is tempted to ask
for that quality of aloofness in heroic poems; yet I have been stirred
again by what sounds to me a personal note all through the Saga
of King Lir. If it may be said without impertinence, one feels that
in passages,—in that splendid trust of the poet who sees the Vision
Beautiful, in the father to whom the morning voices of the children
were sweet,—we have something of intimate revelation. And indeed
it is explicit once. I know few things more touching in poetry than
the three lines at the end of No. III, following the description of
Aed, the sunbright boy:

“And he who tells it knew of one as fair
For earth too fair, for whom the skies bent down
Which left one glad in woe.”

31
This noble poem has given a new significance to the old saga. The passages I have quoted have not been chosen specially to display virtues of the poem. In one sense,—taken as they all are from a single number,—they fail to represent the poem, its epic strength, its vivid description, its lyric beauty. Let one short passage give the hint of these:

"When Dawn came singing on the peaks of Night,
With fifty chariots, through the great oak trees,
Tall pines and ancient yews, he sped his way.
Clanging through dusky woods with neigh of horses,
Whirring of wheels, glad horns and glint of arms—
They roused the rude boar, made the lank wolf flee,
But turned, in red-eyed rage, the Giant Stag
With menacing might of antlers lowered."

But the poem must be read as a whole to be duly appreciated. Doctor Sigerson has laboured all his day for this country. He has written only of Ireland, for Ireland. This poem is a portion of his reward. The old spirit of the Irish saga has breathed on him. He has worthily received the inspiration. His utterance has the dignity of high literature. His poem is a classic henceforth of our Irish literature in the English tongue.