The Student's Scrap-book.

MEMORIES OF THE GREEKS.

Graduating address of H. W. Olmsted, Class of 1882.

The ancient national character of the Greeks may be studied in the two long Homeric poems, which, though almost the whole Greek history, were held in much the same esteem and veneration as the Bible is among us. They did not, I imagine, obtain this pre-eminent position because of the so-called abstract law of the survival of the fittist, as some have supposed, but because in them were represented both the Greek character and an ideal standard of attainment for Grecian conduct. They had come down to those Greeks whom we know in history from an unknown author and an unrecorded age, yet stamped with this, which may be said to be the only insignia of genius, that they gave voice to thoughts and sentiments, correlated or finding an echo in the individual experience and character of the entire people. In them the representations of the conduct and achievements of the heroes at the siege of Troy, of the skill and eloquence of the wandering Odysseus, of the famous warrior Achilles, were but poetically colored yet complete representations of the early national character. And far darting Phœbus Apollo, who, if I may instance one of the Homeric pictures, went like night, and sitting afar from Agamemon's army, sent his shafts among them, taking vengeance according to the prayer of his priest whom the chief had wronged, until funeral pyres were heaped continually; and again, Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, afterwards tutelary divinity at Athens, who, in the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, when the mighty warrior, enraged, had laid his hand on the hilt of his sword, hesitating whether to slay his chief, descended from the Olympic heaven and restrained him; and Zeus, chief and ruler among the gods, now presiding at the celestial banquets, now hurling his thunderbolts from the lofty hights of Olympia—these, and many others, represented at once the Greek ideal and the Greek religion.

The Greeks, with their solemn festivals and games their theaters for public contests of music and of the drama, with their temples and the matchless statues of their gods, with their free social marches, their joyous natures, have stood out the originators of culture and the authors of civilization; which civilization, after being obliterated for centuries and revived again in the Renaissance or new awakening only through the records of the old, should forever render all thanks for its existence to its immortal authors.

Many eulogies have been written to the bravery of those, who, at Marathon and at Platæa, at the sea fight at Salanius, and at Thermopylæ, preserved Greece from the Persians. And to eulogies gratitude should forever be added that Greek character and culture was not brought under the dominion and thus swallowed up in the barbarism and vice of the oriental nations.

The largest army the world has ever produced, according to the accounts of the historians, two millions of men being sent by the Persian monarch to overrun Greece, were disputed at the narrow pass of Thermopylæ by the Spartan general Leonidas. On that and the other battles hung the fate of all culture and civilization and progress. And if the monument erected in honor of those three hundred, who did not think it agreeable to their laws to retreat, and who persisted, after cutting their way to the center of the Persian host, were still standing, the traveler might well pause to read, not without many reflections, the simple inscription: "Go, stranger, tell at Lacedæmon that we died here in obedience to her laws."

After the Persian wars a custom was introduced among the Athenians of the public burial of those who had fallen in behalf of the State. The bodies were burned on the field of battle, the sacred ashes collected and brought to Athens where, lying in state, floral tributes and costly ornaments were placed about the coffins. And not only the known ashes were honored, and not only they who had been victorious in the fight, but all alike who had perished, having shown with whatsoever ability, good-will to the State, and an empty bier in honor of the unrecognized, was stretched out and conveyed in the procession.

It may with truth be said that the funeral robes of those public mourners rustled solemnly in the procession, and the perennially beautiful suburb, where the sacred dust was placed to rest, having in itself almost audible, still silent, voices, from the surrounding statues of the masters, the low-bending branches of the shady trees, and from the solemnity itself of the occasion, uttered them, not for Athens' liberty merely, but through Athenian liberty, for the freedom and progress of the whole world through all following periods of time.

The government of the Greeks was directed by the people. At Athens public measures were discussed and decided upon in an assembly of the body of the citizens, where every one was at liberty to mount the bema and set forth his views with reference to the common advantage, and where, in the language of one of her statesmen, that citizen who kept aloof from state affairs was regarded not as harmless but as useless. With such an emulative system of government Athens pursued through the lapse of centuries a policy of honor and glory among the surrounding host of barbarians; and finally, whenever the Greek vigor and character was degenerating toward decay, and the Macedonian power was intrigueing and pressing, a citizen stood forth in this democracy, as it were, a man bequeathed from the former illustrious age, to arrouse his countrymen in what was to be a final struggle. And when the Macedonian was victorious at Chaeronea, and Greek liberty was forever at an end, and when, given up to the enemy, a refugee in an inviolable temple of Nepthene, the great Athenian saying to his pursuers that they might cease acting the part of Creon in the tragedy and cast out his body unburned, but as for him he called gracious Neptune to witness that he quit his temple while breath was still within him, but his enemies would have defiled it with murder, then, unable to reach the entrance, sank from self-given poison by the altar. Greek freedom and character, their last representative perishing in him, lingered longest in that part of the national life which was called Greek democracy.

But the great Athenians, as well as the entire ancient Greek race, have long since ceased to be. Yet remembrance of them remains. The mountains and the hills of Greece in solemn silence speak of them. By the stillness of the vale, by the echoes from the rocks, by all the voices of nature in that land of story, memory of the Greeks is uttered. On the shore where stood the first