

The Students' Scrap Book.

KLEON.

In pronouncing judgment upon an historical character allowance must be made for the prejudices of contemporary writers whose works are our only source of information. Even those writers who may in general be regarded as trustworthy are disposed to bestow blame or praise upon particular persons or measures connected with their private interests. Grote's opinion that Thucydides, whose object is to record the truth, should on this account be accepted as authority is open to this objection, that the historian and the demagogue are so far separated both socially and politically that neither could possibly render a just opinion of the other. Contrast, for instance, the proposed massacre of the Mitylenæans with the actual massacre of the Melians a few years after. In the former case the Mitylenæans had every reason for maintaining the alliance. Lesbos was one of the three islands that had been allowed to remain autonomous. Tribute was so light as to cause no complaint. Under these circumstances revolt was an offense of the gravest kind. The populace, too, had followed the lead of the oligarchs; that they when no aid came from Sparta and their affairs were in a hopeless condition, should return to their allegiance is but a slight excuse. Even by the confession of Didotos, Kleon's opponent, they deserved to die. This event gives Thucydides his first opportunity to attack the character of Kleon. He is represented as taking advantage of popular feeling to accuse the demos of ill-fated pity, lenity and fickleness, and to hound it on to bloodshed. On the other hand, the Medians were not allies, and their only crime could have been that of reaping the benefits of the Delian Confederacy without contributing to its support. They deserved to be treated, at least, as prisoners of war; yet the city which had become the center of intelligence, "the school of Greece," was in this instance guilty of the most shocking brutality. The mover of the resolution to massacre the innocent men, women, and children must have been an aristocrat, for Thucydides does not even mention his name!

Kleon's decree is acknowledged to have been just. It may also have been expedient. In a more humane age Cromwell justifies his severity toward the Irish rebels by putting forth the hope that the massacre at Drogheda may prevent the effusion of blood in future. If any state could revolt with impunity, nothing less than the dismemberment of the empire would result; but the punishment by Athens of the first great offender would intimidate the disaffected in other quarters.

Thucydides discriminates carefully in his treatment of the different public men. The stupidity of Nikias is lost amid his private virtues; the licentiousness, the profanity and the selfishness of Alkibiades are obscured by his splendid genius; but the smaller faults of Kleon are greatly exaggerated. The reasons for the historian's partiality are evident: Nikias, Alkibiades and Thucydides are of oligarchic families. They are destined by their noble birth to hold office in the state and army. Kleon is a *novus homo*, who by personal energy, talent, and audacity has gained a reputation as an "opposition" leader. He is a dangerous enemy to aristocratic office-holders. His accusations are violent, acrid—set forth in eloquent

language. Even his enemies regarded him as the most persuasive speaker of the age, and as possessed of a rare faculty for the management of public business. A still more potent reason for distrusting the historian's narrative is that he was made to feel in his own person the effect of this virulent eloquence in a banishment for twenty years for mismanagement as general. He had removed his forces to Thasos that he might attend to his mining projects there, while Brasidas unopposed was entering Amphipolis, the key to the Thracian settlements. That Thucydides should regard with approval the dullness of Nikias, especially after this display of weakness and self-interest on his own part, is not at all wonderful; but that he did not show the same indulgence to Kleon can be explained only on personal grounds.

A second opportunity for the misrepresentation of Kleon's character was presented after the investment of Sphacteria; but the impartial reader will find much more to admire in the prompt discernment and heroic conduct of the so-called demagogue than in the trickery of Nikias the oligarch. Kleon may have treated the ambassadors too harshly; the insolence of the Spartans met with a kindred insolence. Perhaps he demanded too much. To be sure the towns of the Peloponnesos would no longer be profitable to Athens; but the possession of the Megarian ports was essential to her supremacy. Athens had been obliged to surrender these places as a condition of the Thirty Years Truce (445 B.C.), now they should be given back as a prerequisite to further negotiations. No Athenian patriot, having observed the results, could regret the conduct of Kleon on this occasion. That the empire was not maintained at the height to which Kleon restored it was the fault of his successor's policy, not of his own.

In regard to Kleon's appointment to the command in Chalkidike Thucydides is less explicit; but the probabilities are that this case was similar to that in regard to Pylos. Kleon must have called attention to the necessity of action in that region, no one else would serve, and he himself was thus obliged to undertake the command. His subsequent conduct, though incomparably superior to that of Nikias at Syracuse, shows neither warlike skill nor, in the end, courage. To the former he made no pretense; the latter deserted him only in the last fatal hour when his troops were flying before the enthusiastic forces of Brasidas. Had the Athenian troops placed as much confidence in their leader as he deserved, the unskillful movement would not have been made, a junction with Perdikkas would probably have been formed and the enemy thus held in check. Yet even this defeat counted as a victory to the Athenians; for the death of Brasidas amply repaid them for the destruction of their own army.

It is needless to say that the *real* Kleon is not to be found in Aristophanes. The comic poet, besides sharing in the opinions and prejudices of Thucydides, has not a single inducement to speak the truth. Unlimited license for slander and caricature is permitted to his art. His portraiture of other characters may show the hand of a master, but they are equally unreal. That of Socrates in the *Clouds* is not even a caricature, but suggests an entirely different person. But we may find even in Aristophanes a grain of truth. The *Knights* bears witness to his violent invective, his power in the assembly, the courts and the council. The Kleon of the *Knights* is coarse and low, smelling of the tanyard, stealing his master's possessions, maintaining his influence by the gross