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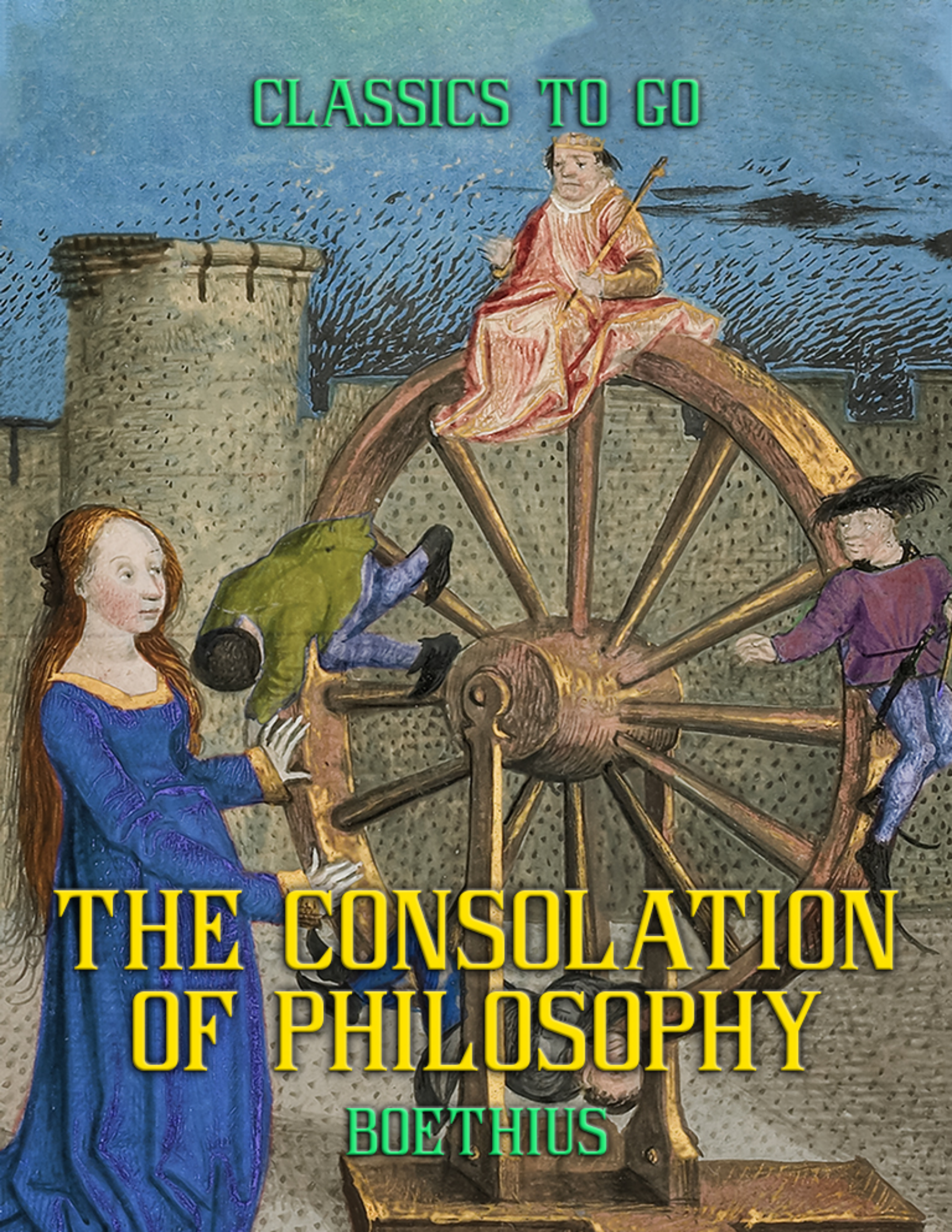

THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

BOETHIUS

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PREFACE.

The book called 'The Consolation of Philosophy' was throughout the Middle Ages, and down to the beginnings of the modern epoch in the sixteenth century, the scholar's familiar companion. Few books have exercised a wider influence in their time. It has been translated into every European tongue, and into English nearly a dozen times, from King Alfred's paraphrase to the translations of Lord Preston, Causton, Ridpath, and Duncan, in the eighteenth century. The belief that what once pleased so widely must still have some charm is my excuse for attempting the present translation. The great work of Boethius, with its alternate prose and verse, skilfully fitted together like dialogue and chorus in a Greek play, is unique in literature, and has a pathetic interest from the time and circumstances of its composition. It ought not to be forgotten. Those who can go to the original will find their reward. There may be room also for a new translation in English after an interval of close on a hundred years.

Some of the editions contain a reproduction of a bust purporting to represent Boethius. Lord Preston's translation, for example, has such a portrait, which it refers to an original in marble at Rome. This I have been unable to trace, and suspect that it is apocryphal. The Hope Collection at Oxford contains a completely different portrait in a print, which gives no authority. I have ventured to use as a frontispiece a reproduction from a plaster-cast in the Ashmolean Museum, taken from an ivory diptych preserved in the Bibliotheca Quiriniana at Brescia, which represents Narius Manlius Boethius, the father of the philosopher. Portraiture of this period is so rare that it seemed that,

failing a likeness of the author himself, this authentic representation of his father might have interest, as giving the consular dress and insignia of the time, and also as illustrating the decadence of contemporary art. The consul wears a richly-embroidered cloak; his right hand holds a staff surmounted by the Roman eagle, his left the *mappa circensis,* or napkin used for starting the races in the circus; at his feet are palms and bags of money—prizes for the victors in the games. For permission to use this cast my thanks are due to the authorities of the Ashmolean Museum, as also to Mr. T.W. Jackson, Curator of the Hope Collection, who first called my attention to its existence.

I have to thank my brother, Mr. L. James, of Radley College, for much valuable help and for correcting the proof-sheets of the translation. The text used is that of Peiper, Leipsic, 1874.

PROEM.

Anicus Manlius Severinus Boethius lived in the last quarter of the fifth century A.D., and the first quarter of the sixth. He was growing to manhood, when Theodoric, the famous Ostrogoth, crossed the Alps and made himself master of Italy. Boethius belonged to an ancient family, which boasted a connection with the legendary glories of the Republic, and was still among the foremost in wealth and dignity in the days of Rome's abasement. His parents dying early, he was brought up by Symmachus, whom the age agreed to regard as of almost saintly character, and afterwards became his son-in-law. His varied gifts, aided by an excellent education, won for him the reputation of the most accomplished man of his time. He was orator, poet, musician, philosopher. It is his peculiar distinction to have handed on to the Middle Ages the tradition of Greek philosophy by his Latin translations of the works of Aristotle. Called early to a public career, the highest honours of the State came to him unsought. He was sole Consul in 510 A.D., and was ultimately raised by Theodoric to the dignity of Magister Officiorum, or head of the whole civil administration. He was no less happy in his domestic life, in the virtues of his wife, Rusticiana, and the fair promise of his two sons, Symmachus and Boethius; happy also in the society of a refined circle of friends. Noble, wealthy, accomplished, universally esteemed for his virtues, high in the favour of the Gothic King, he appeared to all men a signal example of the union of merit and good fortune. His felicity seemed to culminate in the year 522 A.D., when, by special and extraordinary favour, his two sons, young as they were for so exalted an honour, were created joint Consuls and rode to the senate-house attended by a throng of senators, and the acclamations of the multitude. Boethius

himself, amid the general applause, delivered the public speech in the King's honour usual on such occasions. Within a year he was a solitary prisoner at Pavia, stripped of honours, wealth, and friends, with death hanging over him, and a terror worse than death, in the fear lest those dearest to him should be involved in the worst results of his downfall. It is in this situation that the opening of the 'Consolation of Philosophy' brings Boethius before us. He represents himself as seated in his prison distraught with grief, indignant at the injustice of his misfortunes, and seeking relief for his melancholy in writing verses descriptive of his condition. Suddenly there appears to him the Divine figure of Philosophy, in the guise of a woman of superhuman dignity and beauty, who by a succession of discourses convinces him of the vanity of regret for the lost gifts of fortune, raises his mind once more to the contemplation of the true good, and makes clear to him the mystery of the world's moral government.

BOOK I.
THE SORROWS OF BOETHIUS.

SUMMARY.

Boethius' complaint (Song I.).—CH. I. Philosophy appears to Boethius, drives away the Muses of Poetry, and herself laments (Song II.) the disordered condition of his mind.—CH. II. Boethius is speechless with amazement. Philosophy wipes away the tears that have clouded his eyesight.—CH. III. Boethius recognises his mistress Philosophy. To his wondering inquiries she explains her presence, and recalls to his mind the persecutions to which Philosophy has oftentimes from of old been subjected by an ignorant world. CH. IV. Philosophy bids Boethius declare his griefs. He relates the story of his unjust accusation and ruin. He concludes with a prayer (Song V.) that the moral disorder in human affairs may be set right.—CH. V. Philosophy admits the justice of Boethius' self-vindication, but grieves rather for the unhappy change in his mind. She will first tranquillize his spirit by soothing remedies.—CH. VI. Philosophy tests Boethius' mental state by certain questions, and discovers three chief causes of his soul's sickness: (1) He has forgotten his own true nature; (2) he knows not the end towards which the whole universe tends; (3) he knows not the means by which the world is governed.

BOOK I.

SONG I.

Boethius' Complaint.

Who wrought my studious numbers
Smoothly once in happier days,
Now perforce in tears and sadness
Learn a mournful strain to raise.
Lo, the Muses, grief-dishevelled,
Guide my pen and voice my woe;
Down their cheeks unfeigned the tear drops
To my sad complainings flow!
These alone in danger's hour
Faithful found, have dared attend
On the footsteps of the exile
To his lonely journey's end.
These that were the pride and pleasure
Of my youth and high estate
Still remain the only solace
Of the old man's mournful fate.
Old? Ah yes; swift, ere I knew it,
By these sorrows on me pressed
Age hath come; lo, Grief hath bid me
Wear the garb that fits her best.
O'er my head untimely sprinkled
These white hairs my woes proclaim,
And the skin hangs loose and shrivelled
On this sorrow-shrunken frame.
Blest is death that intervenes not
In the sweet, sweet years of peace,
But unto the broken-hearted,
When they call him, brings release!
Yet Death passes by the wretched,

Shuts his ear and slumbers deep;
Will not heed the cry of anguish,
Will not close the eyes that weep.
For, while yet inconstant Fortune
Poured her gifts and all was bright,
Death's dark hour had all but whelmed me
In the gloom of endless night.
Now, because misfortune's shadow
Hath o'erclouded that false face,
Cruel Life still halts and lingers,
Though I loathe his weary race.
Friends, why did ye once so lightly
Vaunt me happy among men?
Surely he who so hath fallen
Was not firmly founded then.

I.

While I was thus mutely pondering within myself, and recording my sorrowful complainings with my pen, it seemed to me that there appeared above my head a woman of a countenance exceeding venerable. Her eyes were bright as fire, and of a more than human keenness; her complexion was lively, her vigour showed no trace of enfeeblement; and yet her years were right full, and she plainly seemed not of our age and time. Her stature was difficult to judge. At one moment it exceeded not the common height, at another her forehead seemed to strike the sky; and whenever she raised her head higher, she began to pierce within the very heavens, and to baffle the eyes of them that looked upon her. Her garments were of an imperishable fabric, wrought with the finest threads and of the most delicate workmanship; and these, as her own lips afterwards assured me, she had herself woven with her own hands. The beauty of this vesture had been somewhat tarnished by age and neglect, and wore that dingy look

which marble contracts from exposure. On the lower-most edge was inwoven the Greek letter Π [Greek: P], on the topmost the letter θ [Greek: Th],[A] and between the two were to be seen steps, like a staircase, from the lower to the upper letter. This robe, moreover, had been torn by the hands of violent persons, who had each snatched away what he could clutch.[B] Her right hand held a note-book; in her left she bore a staff. And when she saw the Muses of Poesie standing by my bedside, dictating the words of my lamentations, she was moved awhile to wrath, and her eyes flashed sternly. 'Who,' said she, 'has allowed yon play-acting wantons to approach this sick man—these who, so far from giving medicine to heal his malady, even feed it with sweet poison? These it is who kill the rich crop of reason with the barren thorns of passion, who accustom men's minds to disease, instead of setting them free. Now, were it some common man whom your allurements were seducing, as is usually your way, I should be less indignant. On such a one I should not have spent my pains for naught. But this is one nurtured in the Eleatic and Academic philosophies. Nay, get ye gone, ye sirens, whose sweetness lasteth not; leave him for my muses to tend and heal!' At these words of upbraiding, the whole band, in deepened sadness, with downcast eyes, and blushes that confessed their shame, dolefully left the chamber.

But I, because my sight was dimmed with much weeping, and I could not tell who was this woman of authority so commanding—I was dumfoundered, and, with my gaze fastened on the earth, continued silently to await what she might do next. Then she drew near me and sat on the edge of my couch, and, looking into my face all heavy with grief and fixed in sadness on the ground, she bewailed in these words the disorder of my mind:

FOOTNOTES:

[A] Π (P) stands for the Political life, the life of action; θ (Th) for the Theoretical life, the life of thought.

[B] The Stoic, Epicurean, and other philosophical sects, which Boethius regards as heterodox. See also below, ch. iii., p. 14.

SONG II.
His Despondency.

Alas! in what abyss his mind
    Is plunged, how wildly tossed!
Still, still towards the outer night
    She sinks, her true light lost,
As oft as, lashed tumultuously
By earth-born blasts, care's waves rise high.

Yet once he ranged the open heavens,
    The sun's bright pathway tracked;
Watched how the cold moon waxed and waned;
    Nor rested, till there lacked
To his wide ken no star that steers
Amid the maze of circling spheres.

The causes why the blusterous winds
    Vex ocean's tranquil face,
Whose hand doth turn the stable globe,
    Or why his even race
From out the ruddy east the sun
Unto the western waves doth run:

What is it tempers cunningly
    The placid hours of spring,
So that it blossoms with the rose
    For earth's engarlanding:
Who loads the year's maturer prime
With clustered grapes in autumn time:

All this he knew—thus ever strove

Deep Nature's lore to guess.
Now, reft of reason's light, he lies,
And bonds his neck oppress;
While by the heavy load constrained,
His eyes to this dull earth are chained.

II.

'But the time,' said she, 'calls rather for healing than for lamentation.' Then, with her eyes bent full upon me, 'Art thou that man,' she cries, 'who, erstwhile fed with the milk and reared upon the nourishment which is mine to give, had grown up to the full vigour of a manly spirit? And yet I had bestowed such armour on thee as would have proved an invincible defence, hadst thou not first cast it away. Dost thou know me? Why art thou silent? Is it shame or amazement that hath struck thee dumb? Would it were shame; but, as I see, a stupor hath seized upon thee.' Then, when she saw me not only answering nothing, but mute and utterly incapable of speech, she gently touched my breast with her hand, and said: 'There is no danger; these are the symptoms of lethargy, the usual sickness of deluded minds. For awhile he has forgotten himself; he will easily recover his memory, if only he first recognises me. And that he may do so, let me now wipe his eyes that are clouded with a mist of mortal things.' Thereat, with a fold of her robe, she dried my eyes all swimming with tears.

SONG III.

The Mists dispelled.

Then the gloom of night was scattered,
Sight returned unto mine eyes.
So, when haply rainy Caurus
Rolls the storm-clouds through the skies,

Hidden is the sun; all heaven
Is obscured in starless night.
But if, in wild onset sweeping,
Boreas frees day's prisoned light,
All suddenly the radiant god outstreams,
And strikes our dazzled eyesight with his beams.

III.

Even so the clouds of my melancholy were broken up. I saw the clear sky, and regained the power to recognise the face of my physician. Accordingly, when I had lifted my eyes and fixed my gaze upon her, I beheld my nurse, Philosophy, whose halls I had frequented from my youth up.

'Ah! why,' I cried, 'mistress of all excellence, hast thou come down from on high, and entered the solitude of this my exile? Is it that thou, too, even as I, mayst be persecuted with false accusations?'

'Could I desert thee, child,' said she, 'and not lighten the burden which thou hast taken upon thee through the hatred of my name, by sharing this trouble? Even forgetting that it were not lawful for Philosophy to leave companionless the way of the innocent, should I, thinkest thou, fear to incur reproach, or shrink from it, as though some strange new thing had befallen? Thinkest thou that now, for the first time in an evil age, Wisdom hath been assailed by peril? Did I not often in days of old, before my servant Plato lived, wage stern warfare with the rashness of folly? In his lifetime, too, Socrates, his master, won with my aid the victory of an unjust death. And when, one after the other, the Epicurean herd, the Stoic, and the rest, each of them as far as in them lay, went about to seize the heritage he left, and were dragging me off protesting and resisting, as their booty,

they tore in pieces the garment which I had woven with my own hands, and, clutching the torn pieces, went off, believing that the whole of me had passed into their possession. And some of them, because some traces of my vesture were seen upon them, were destroyed through the mistake of the lewd multitude, who falsely deemed them to be my disciples. It may be thou knowest not of the banishment of Anaxagoras, of the poison draught of Socrates, nor of Zeno's torturing, because these things happened in a distant country; yet mightest thou have learnt the fate of Arrius, of Seneca, of Soranus, whose stories are neither old nor unknown to fame. These men were brought to destruction for no other reason than that, settled as they were in my principles, their lives were a manifest contrast to the ways of the wicked. So there is nothing thou shouldst wonder at, if on the seas of this life we are tossed by storm-blasts, seeing that we have made it our chiefest aim to refuse compliance with evil-doers. And though, maybe, the host of the wicked is many in number, yet is it contemptible, since it is under no leadership, but is hurried hither and thither at the blind driving of mad error. And if at times and seasons they set in array against us, and fall on in overwhelming strength, our leader draws off her forces into the citadel while they are busy plundering the useless baggage. But we from our vantage ground, safe from all this wild work, laugh to see them making prize of the most valueless of things, protected by a bulwark which aggressive folly may not aspire to reach.'

SONG IV.

NOTHING CAN SUBDUE VIRTUE.

Whoso calm, serene, sedate,
Sets his foot on haughty fate;
Firm and steadfast, come what will,

Keeps his mien unconquered still;
Him the rage of furious seas,
Tossing high wild menaces,
Nor the flames from smoky forges
That Vesuvius disgorges,
Nor the bolt that from the sky
Smites the tower, can terrify.
Why, then, shouldst thou feel affright
At the tyrant's weakling might?
Dread him not, nor fear no harm,
And thou shall his rage disarm;
But who to hope or fear gives way—
Lost his bosom's rightful sway—
He hath cast away his shield,
Like a coward fled the field;
He hath forged all unaware
Fetters his own neck must bear!

IV.

'Dost thou understand?' she asks. Do my words sink into thy mind? Or art thou dull "as the ass to the sound of the lyre"? Why dost thou weep? Why do tears stream from thy eyes?

'"Speak out, hide it not in thy heart."

If thou lookest for the physician's help, thou must needs disclose thy wound.'

Then I, gathering together what strength I could, began: 'Is there still need of telling? Is not the cruelty of fortune against me plain enough? Doth not the very aspect of this place move thee? Is this the library, the room which thou hadst chosen as thy constant resort in my home, the place where we so often sat together and held discourse of all

things in heaven and earth? Was my garb and mien like this when I explored with thee nature's hid secrets, and thou didst trace for me with thy wand the courses of the stars, moulding the while my character and the whole conduct of my life after the pattern of the celestial order? Is this the recompense of my obedience? Yet thou hast enjoined by Plato's mouth the maxim, "that states would be happy, either if philosophers ruled them, or if it should so befall that their rulers would turn philosophers." By his mouth likewise thou didst point out this imperative reason why philosophers should enter public life, to wit, lest, if the reins of government be left to unprincipled and profligate citizens, trouble and destruction should come upon the good. Following these precepts, I have tried to apply in the business of public administration the principles which I learnt from thee in leisured seclusion. Thou art my witness and that divinity who hath implanted thee in the hearts of the wise, that I brought to my duties no aim but zeal for the public good. For this cause I have become involved in bitter and irreconcilable feuds, and, as happens inevitably, if a man holds fast to the independence of conscience, I have had to think nothing of giving offence to the powerful in the cause of justice. How often have I encountered and balked Conigastus in his assaults on the fortunes of the weak? How often have I thwarted Trigguilla, steward of the king's household, even when his villainous schemes were as good as accomplished? How often have I risked my position and influence to protect poor wretches from the false charges innumerable with which they were for ever being harassed by the greed and license of the barbarians? No one has ever drawn me aside from justice to oppression. When ruin was overtaking the fortunes of the provincials through the combined pressure of private rapine and public taxation, I grieved no less than the sufferers. When at a season of grievous scarcity a forced sale, disastrous as it was unjustifiable, was proclaimed, and threatened to overwhelm