

**THE DEATH OF
VIRGIL: A DRAMATIC
NARRATIVE**

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A DRAMATIC NARRATIVE

BY

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TO
THE DEAR MEMORY
OF
SIR RICHARD JEBB

[SCENE IV, VIRGIL'S SOLILOQUY, appeared in *The Monthly Review* for June, 1907, and is reprinted with Mr. Murray's kind consent.]

PREFATORY NOTE

THE occasion and manner of Virgil's death are briefly but graphically recorded by Suetonius and other ancient authorities. For some eleven years the poet had been engaged upon the composition of the *Aeneid*. Undertaken in this shape at the suggestion of Augustus, it was, strictly speaking, a revival of an earlier ambition, for in youth he had begun an Epic on the 'Story of Rome', but had put it aside, daunted, it is said, by the difficulty of the material, and the intractability of the proper names. He was now in his fifty-second year and felt the 'lust of finishing', and with that object determined to retire to Greece and Asia and there devote three continuous years to the one task of correcting and perfecting his poem, intending afterwards to keep the rest of his life free for his favourite study, Philosophy. He began his journey, but at Athens met Augustus returning from the East and, persuaded by him, gave way and decided to return with him. Before leaving Athens, however, he made an archaeological visit to the neighbouring town of Megara, and while exploring its antiquities under a very hot sun contracted a low fever. This he

aggravated by sailing straight home, and finally, reaching Brundisium in a critical state, died there a few days after his landing, namely upon the 21st of September, 19 B.C.

His ashes were carried to Naples, where he had passed many years of his life, and buried in a tomb on the way to Puteoli, just before the second milestone. For this tomb he had written the following couplet :

*Mantua me genuit ; Calabri rapuere ; tenet nunc
Parthenope ; cecini pascua, rura, duces.*

He left one moiety of his estate to his half-brother Proculus, one-fourth part to Augustus, and one-twelfth to Maecenas, appointing as his residuary legatees Lucius Varius and Plotius Tucca, the same two who after his death, by the Emperor's orders, edited the *Aeneid*. He had begged of Varius before leaving Italy that, if anything happened to him, Varius would burn the *Aeneid*, but Varius had always replied that he should do nothing of the kind. The poet therefore in his last sickness kept on calling for the casket which contained it, in order that he might commit it himself to the flames, but no one would give it him, and either, as some say, he left no express provision about it, or if, as others relate, he ordered in his will that it should be burnt, Augustus overruled this clause. He had bequeathed the rest of his papers to Varius and Tucca, as his literary executors, on condition that they should publish nothing

which he had not himself given to the world. Augustus therefore, not willing that so great a work should perish, ordered Varius and Tucca to publish it, putting it into shape with as little rehandling as possible, omitting if they liked anything that was superfluous, but not adding a syllable. This they did. They struck out here and there some lines which the poet himself might have finally decided to omit, but they inserted nothing, leaving the half-lines incomplete, as we read them to-day.

The *Scene* of the poem is laid at Brundisium, and it opens with Virgil's landing there. The *Action*, if action it can be called and not rather passion, occupies portions of the few days during which the poet lingered.

The *Persons* are, Virgil himself, and his secretary Eros (who, surviving him by many years, told in his old age more than one story of his great master, especially as regards his manner of composition); Augustus; and Maecenas. An Apothecary speaks once. 'Mute Masks' are, the people of the inn, attendants, sailors, soldiers, &c.

An old and charming story, preserved in some Latin lines formerly sung in the Mass of St. Paul at Mantua, relates that the Apostle of the Gentiles, in the course of his famous journey to Rome, when, as we know from the narrative in the Acts, he disembarked at Puteoli and was met by the brethren there, was conducted to

the neighbouring tomb of Virgil, and wept because he had come too late to convert this beautiful soul, by Christian tradition ever regarded as 'naturally Christian', to the new and true faith. The lines, the original of which will be found in Comparetti's *Virgilio nel Medio Evo*, chap. vii, may be thus rendered :

To Maro's mound the way they led :
The Apostle raining o'er the dead
The true and tender tear ;
Alive, he cried, hadst thou been found,
How high a saint I here had crowned,
Thou poet without peer !