

THE LIFE OF SOCRATES.¹

BY WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD.

I.

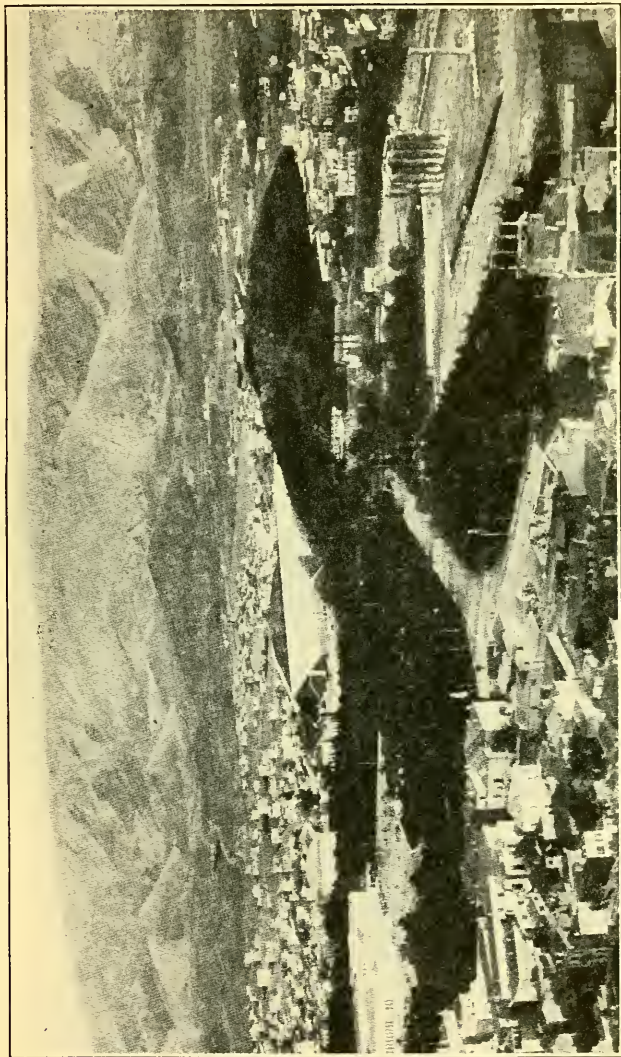
THE Athenian of whom I speak was born, according to tradition, a half-hour's walk from the walls of the city, in the deme, or precinct, Alopeke, birthplace too of Thucydides and of Aristides. Here amid olive- and fruit-trees, vegetable gardens and wayside plants, in view of Mount Hymettus, was the house of Sophroniscus, the artisan stone-cutter, and of his practical helpmeet Phaenarete, a midwife. Thus the parents were plain people, both earning their own bread at old racial occupations that combined cleverness of head and of hand; thus, also, it was the folk-stock, it was the common womb of humanity, out of which have issued so many of the powerful ones of the earth, that furnished the bone and brain of Socrates. The father seems to have lived only long enough to lead the child to the public sacrifices; the mother married again, and we hear of a half-brother in the household.

Great men tend to lose their human nature in the aftertimes. They become symbols of forces and ideals, being absorbed into a train of thought on historic cause and effect—as factors in our judgments rather than as faces for our imaginations. But we need the touch of the hand and the sound of the voice. The great man must walk by our side if we are to walk well. The affair can be managed; it is not a question of the dissevering years altogether—a contemporary is not a matter of time, except etymologically: it depends upon us. That Socrates was born at Athens in 469 may be a line of print, a point of departure for a lecture in philosophy, or a vision of life.

But after standing for one preeminent moment by the infant's

¹This partial sketch of the life of Socrates follows Dr. Leonard's introductory paragraphs published in the January issue. The illustrations which should have accompanied his description of the city of Athens were crowded out of that number and will be found here and in later instalments somewhat apart from their context.—ED.

cradle and getting our bearings with reference to its issues of immortality, we must wander for a number of years in the outer world of conjecture. Legend itself has left us little. Around the boyhood of Socrates have gathered none of the tales or myths that have



ATHENS.
Southeastern part taken from the east end of the Acropolis. Reproduced
from Weller's *Athens and Its Monuments*.

unconsciously symbolized the genius and unfoldment of so many of the illustrious.

We surmise he had the customary education in gymnastic and in music, which included besides singing and dancing, the mem-

orizing of much Homer and Hesiod. At eighteen he would become a citizen and take his turn in the militia on the Attic frontier, a service we can conceive him as performing in a more rollicking vein than Coleridge or any other philosopher ever condemned to the barracks. The tradition that he made a beginning at his father's profession is presumably reliable; but his reputed statue of the three Graces on the Acropolis has yet to be unearthed. It is plausible, too, that by the time he had passed his majority, he met and learned from the philosophers, a number of whom are represented



ACROPOLIS FROM MUSEUM HILL.

either by ingenuous hearsay or dramatic propriety as having been formally or casually his teachers: Parmenides, the Eleatic; Zeno, the dialectician; Anaxagoras and Archelaus, the physicists; Protagoras, first of the sophists. These men were doubtless in Athens during the younger manhood of Socrates, and the air was full of talk on the physical sciences, just beginning to be differentiated, as well as on metaphysics, already split up into the two opposing world-views of the absolute and of the relative. It is to the sophists, however, with whom he is in point of view and activity closest allied; and with the sophists he presumably most frequently asso-



THE PATRON GODDESS OF ATHENS.

The identification of the statue as the Lemnian Athena is disputed. The replicas from which this restoration was made are two torsos in the Museum of Dresden and a head in the Museum of Bologna. Reproduced from Weller's *Athens and Its Monuments*.

ciated (as Jesus with the rabbis), before his years of maturest self-dependence.

II.

A chronological account of his career is impossible. We have a few dated events in the military and civil history of Athens, in which Socrates played a part; we have the performance of the *Clouds* in 423, and hints of his primary activity as teacher early and late, the most circumstantial, however, only when he was already an elderly man, surrounded by the Socratic circle.

He appears first in history at about the age of thirty-seven. But he is not at Athens; he is not teaching. Armed with the heavy shield and spear of a hoplite, a citizen-warrior in the early days of the Peloponnesian war, he is far northward in Chalcidice at the siege of Potidaea (432). The pictures given by Alcibiades in the *Symposium* of Plato are brilliant and well-known, moreover characteristic and significant in several ways. We see here for the first time the shabby mantle and the unsandalled feet. One scene is winter. The snow flakes gather in the folds of his single garment; the ice is under the bare heels. He goes his rounds; the other privates in the ranks bear it ill: "This fellow is airing his hardihood to shame us." Another scene is amid the confusion of battle. He is stalking toward us with a wounded soldier in his arms. It is Alcibiades, who a little time before in Athens seems to have attached himself to the philosopher, like Critias, to learn merely for selfish ambitions, not for truth. Had Socrates left him to die on the field, it would have been better for Athens. And thinking of how Alcibiades's subsequent conduct was to be urged against Socrates at the crisis, I was about to add—better for Socrates. But no; cowardice is never better—never better for the man himself, never for his usefulness to us after his death. It is worth knowing that Socrates was brave as well as wise. The third scene changes to the Chalcidicean summer. Socrates stands somewhat apart from the tents in morning meditation. Nobody pays much attention; he is doubtless already notorious for queer ways both on the streets of Athens and here in camp. But noon comes; he is still there. And twilight—still there. This is a new thing. Word is passed around. The soldiers take their bedding out and lie down to watch him. The stars rise and set—who is this that his thought should be more than food and drink and sleep? At last he salutes the golden sun and goes his way. This celebrated anecdote, making perhaps some allowance for exaggeration, we may well credit. It

is too public in its setting to have been invented out of whole cloth during the very lifetime of many veterans of the northern campaign; at least too unique in its portrayal of character to have been foisted upon any man whose nature would have rendered such extraordinary demeanor unlikely. We cannot but accept it as one of several illustrations of Plato's skill in utilizing for art the facts of life.

Socrates was twice again under arms, and at a time of life when not alone the philosophers prefer their own firesides: at Delium in 424, where his calm and resourceful conduct during retreat earned him the commendations of Alcibiades and the general Laches (in Plato); and at Amphipolis, in 422, where no one was present whose report has come down to us.

A number of years later, now an old man, we hear of him for the first time in civic affairs. Xenophon gives the facts in a paragraph of simple narration, and Plato in the Dialogues represents his Socrates as playfully referring to them by the way. Matters so public we readily separate from literary fiction. The most circumstantial account, however, is in Plato's *Apology* (20) where I am ready to believe we can hear in the homely grandeur of the utterance not only the dramatic tribute of the disciple, but some echoes of the great voice itself.

"The only office of state which I ever held, O men of Athens, was that of senator; the tribe Antiochis, which is my tribe, had the presidency [Socrates himself being president for the day] at the trial of the generals who had not taken up the bodies of the slain after the battle of Arginusæ [406, toward the close of the Peloponnesian war]; and you proposed to try them in a body, contrary to the law, as you all thought afterwards; but at the time I was the only one of the Prytanes who was opposed to the illegality, and I gave my vote against you. [Socrates refused to put the matter to vote]; and when the orators threatened to impeach and arrest me, and you called and shouted, I made up my mind that I would run the risk, having law and justice with me, rather than take part in your injustice because I feared imprisonment and death. This happened in the days of the democracy. But when the oligarchy of the Thirty was in power [404], they sent for me [Socrates being a well-known citizen] and four others into the rotunda, and bade us bring Leon the Salaminian from Salamis, as they wanted to put him to death. This was a specimen of the sort of commands which they were always giving with the view of implicating as many as possible in their crimes; and then I showed, not in word only but in deed, that,

if I may be allowed to use such an expression, I cared not a straw for death, and that my great and only care was lest I should do an unrighteous or unholy thing. For the strong arm of that oppressive power did not frighten me into doing wrong; and when we came out of the rotunda, the other four went to Salamis and fetched Leon, but I went quietly home. For which I might have lost my life, had not the power of the Thirty shortly afterwards come to an end. And many will witness to my words."

If there need be comment, let a Roman speak:

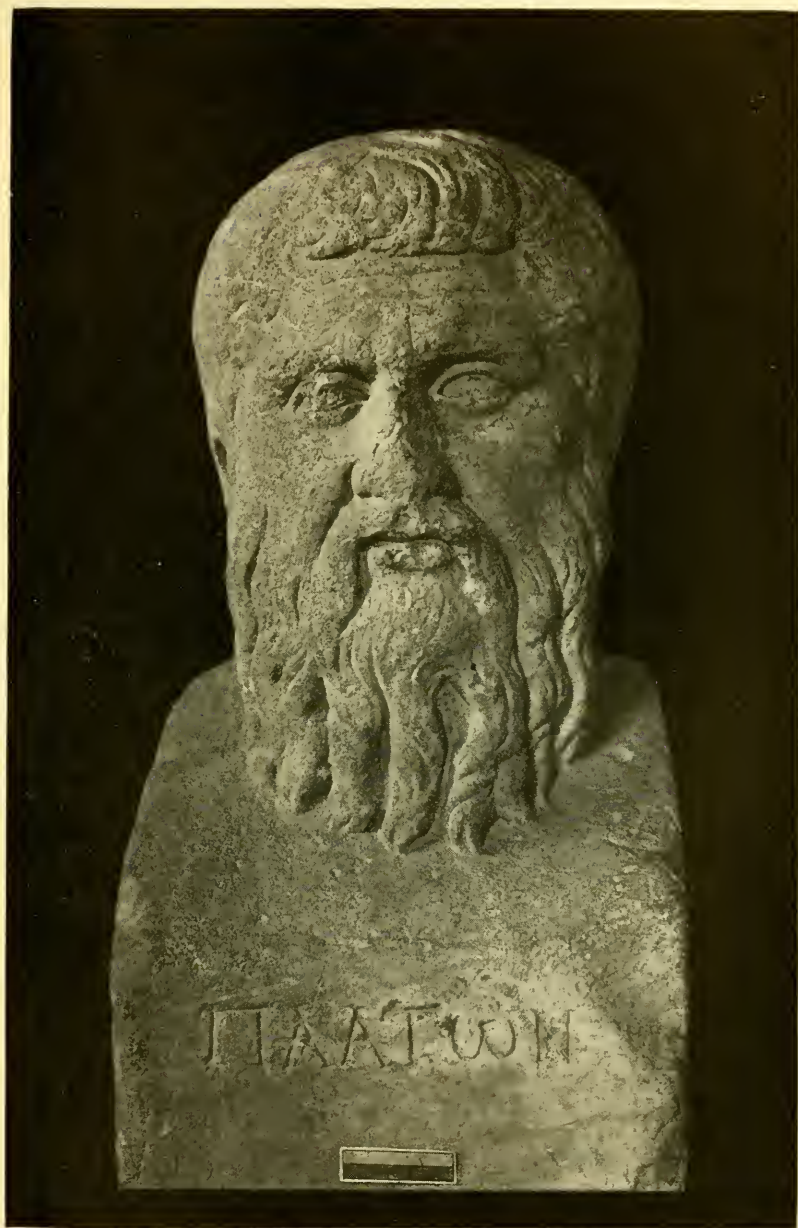
"Justum et tenacem propositi virum
Non civium ardor prava jubentium,
Non vultus instantis tyranni
Mente quatit solida"....

III.

Such data from military and civil chronicle nobly expand our conception of the versatile energies of Socrates, and by easily intelligible and concrete illustration bind him for our imagination close to the city of his birth and death. Yet they are but supplementary to the activities of the indefatigable intellect and tongue which for over a generation puzzled, amused, inspired, or irritated his fellow-citizens by services far different and altogether unparalleled. The distinctive chapter in his biography must report on the gad-fly of the Athenians.

"Socrates ever lived in the public eye; at early morning he was to be seen betaking himself to one of the promenades, or wrestling grounds; at noon he would appear with the gathering crowds in the market-place; and as day declined, wherever the largest throng might be encountered, talking for the most part, while any one who chose might stop and listen." So Xenophon (*Memorabilia*, I, 1). "Talking"—and, we may add on good grounds, asking various odd and new questions about the old familiar things.

Just when Socrates laid down his chisel to become the cross-questioner of mankind is uncertain. According to Plato's *Apology* the whole impulse came from the Delphic oracle. Socrates's friend Chaerephon had inquired who was the wisest of men, and had received there the answer we all know. Socrates was puzzled, and began questioning around among the masters of trades and arts only to find them as ignorant of the meaning of their own business as they were wise in their own conceit. Socrates then reflected, "The oracle must have named me the wisest, because I am wise enough to know myself as knowing nothing." This old story is of some symbolic truth; as sober biography it is absurd. Its symbolism,



PLATO.

Bust in the Berlin Museum.

whether intended or not, lies chiefly in the facts that Socrates understood, as no other Greek, the motto on the portal of the Delphic temple, "Know Thyself," and that Socrates was preeminently the priest dedicated to Apollo, god of light. Its absurdity lies partly in the arch naïveté of its actors; but more especially in its self-contradiction, as it implies that Socrates was already famous for the peculiar quality and activity which, however, the oracular word is here accredited with having first awakened.

I have already suggested that the friendship with Alcibiades at Potidaea points to a discipleship before that time at Athens; nor would such a clever and well-to-do young aspirant of the gentility have allied himself to any teacher, least of all when he hoped to get training serviceable for his own career among men, unless that teacher were already a recognized authority. Critias, too, must have been in the master's company as a youth, many years before his open hostility to Socrates as leader of the Thirty. Plato is presumably nearer the historic situation in those dialogues representing him as a fairly young man in the analytic conversation of a trained thinker and teacher with wise heads who we know died long before Socrates. Moreover, the *daimonion*, Socrates's warning voice, which is so intimately related to his teaching and his thought as to call for particular examination in a later chapter, is said to have manifested itself in his early years. But he was still in his intellectual and moral prime at seventy, eagerly attended by younger spirits, such as Xenophon, Antisthenes, Aristippus, Euclides, and Plato, of the Socratic circle, who were all destined in one way or another to perpetuate his influence. We may safely assume that his most vital work began in the period of the Peloponnesian wars somewhat after the death of Pericles; and this, to recall some items of section II of the present chapter, lends peculiar unselfishness and dignity to the military service of a middle-aged man naturally so devoted to the quiet ways of wisdom.

A credible report represents him as acquainted with all sorts of people: philosophers, military leaders, the gilded or callow youth, free beauties, artists, artisans, and tradesfolk and shopkeepers, teaching or learning from all. Nor did he always wait for them to appear in the public places; he would look in at a shop to chat with some poor cobbler, or knock at the door of some wealthy friend who, he had just heard, was entertaining some good talker from abroad. Plato and Xenophon are here surely true at least to the democratic spirit of his conduct and the diverse classes to whom he was welcome.

His mode of life and personal appearance have been proverbial from the first. The bare feet and sordid mantle of Potidaea are



PERICLES.

here, as nonchalantly mocking the bright painted marbles of the Acropolis and all the golden spoils of the doomed imperial city, as

they had mocked the simple soldiery of the northern campaign. The broad mouth with its thick lips swallows over the shaggy beard the humblest fare, having more important work on hand than the chewing of dainties. The bulging eyes that see so far aslant envy no man his chariots or merchandise. The wide nostrils of that broad nose never twitch with anxious suspense for the fate of argosies overdue. The ungainly arms that picked up the wounded comrade are never extended for pay. Antiphon, the sophist, advises him to dub himself professor of the art of wretchedness (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, 6). Aristophanes in the *Birds* has his fling at this "unwashed guide of souls." Alcibiades, in that wonderful eulogy in Plato's *Symposium* calls him Silenus-face, working out the analogy into a spiritual loveliness. And the Socrates of Xenophon's *Symposium* subjects his own physiognomy to ironic examination which leads to the conclusion that, if beauty be in adaptation to ends, then his own capacious mouth and nose and eyes render him the most beautiful of mankind. Without some such genial reflection as this, it must remain an outstanding paradox of Greek life that the race which so identified goodness and beauty as to fuse the very words into a single noun should have furnished the most glorious example of the quite comfortable existence of the one in separation from the other.

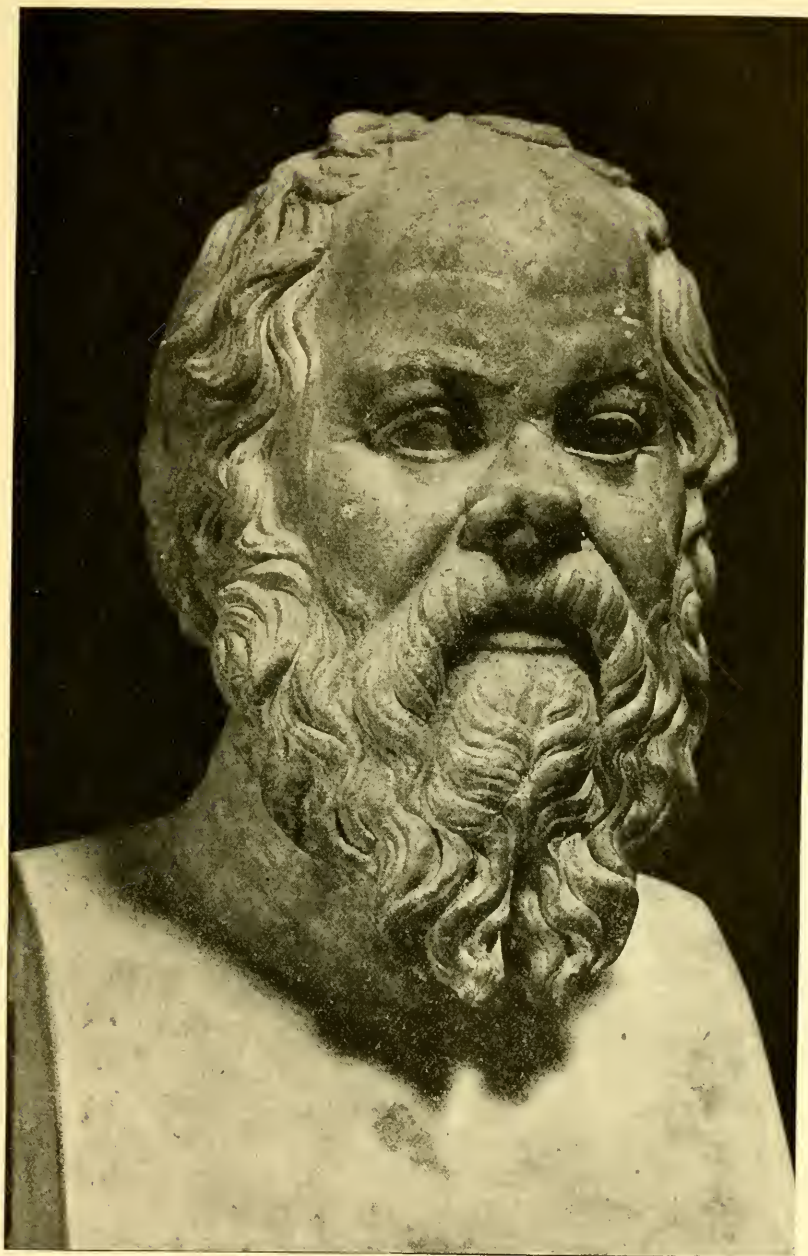
His habit of going barefoot is said to have been imitated by his younger followers, Aristodemus and Chaerephon. Who it was that chiselled the kindly bust, familiar in the modern school-rooms of all the lands, we do not know, but the artist seems to have wrought honestly and well.

Socrates, however, could enjoy the creature comforts when they came in the beaten way of friendship, and, if the banquet of Plato's brush betrays indeed the wine and wisdom of the artist's own imaginings and the philosopher's own intuitions, its interest lies also in what it suggests of a very possible reality—for, as Emerson put it, to the bewilderment of a village audience, Plato was in the habit of grinding his friends into paint. At such times surely they such clusters had as made them nobly wild not mad, and yet as surely each word

"of thine

Outdid the meat, outdid the frolic wine."

In his own little dwelling outside of the town, things did not always go so merrily. Socrates's domestic affliction is one of the jests of time, and Xanthippe is a proverb. The sage took her shrew-



SOCRATES.

ish temper like a sage; and, if she flung the dirty water on his head, that was, he remarked, but the rain which must follow the thunder; and he would whisper to his friends that he had married her as a matter of self-discipline. She must, however, have come late into his life, since Aristophanes, who would scarcely have lost such an opportunity for burlesque, makes no mention of her and since she is represented as visiting her condemned husband in the prison, accompanied by two children only half-grown. But though the hopelessly unromantic case of the tempestuous and screaming Xanthippe certainly bears not the stamp of poetic legend, it suggests precisely that kind of contrast which makes capital anecdote for literature; and may well be an exaggeration of the uncomfortable, but not necessarily grotesque, circumstance, where a wife and mother finds her humble convenience too often unconsidered and her unreflecting patience tried by an abstracted companion supporting the home out of a small inheritance from his father and gifts from his friends, spending his rich leisure in the market-place, or bringing his philosophic cronies unexpectedly in to dinner.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]