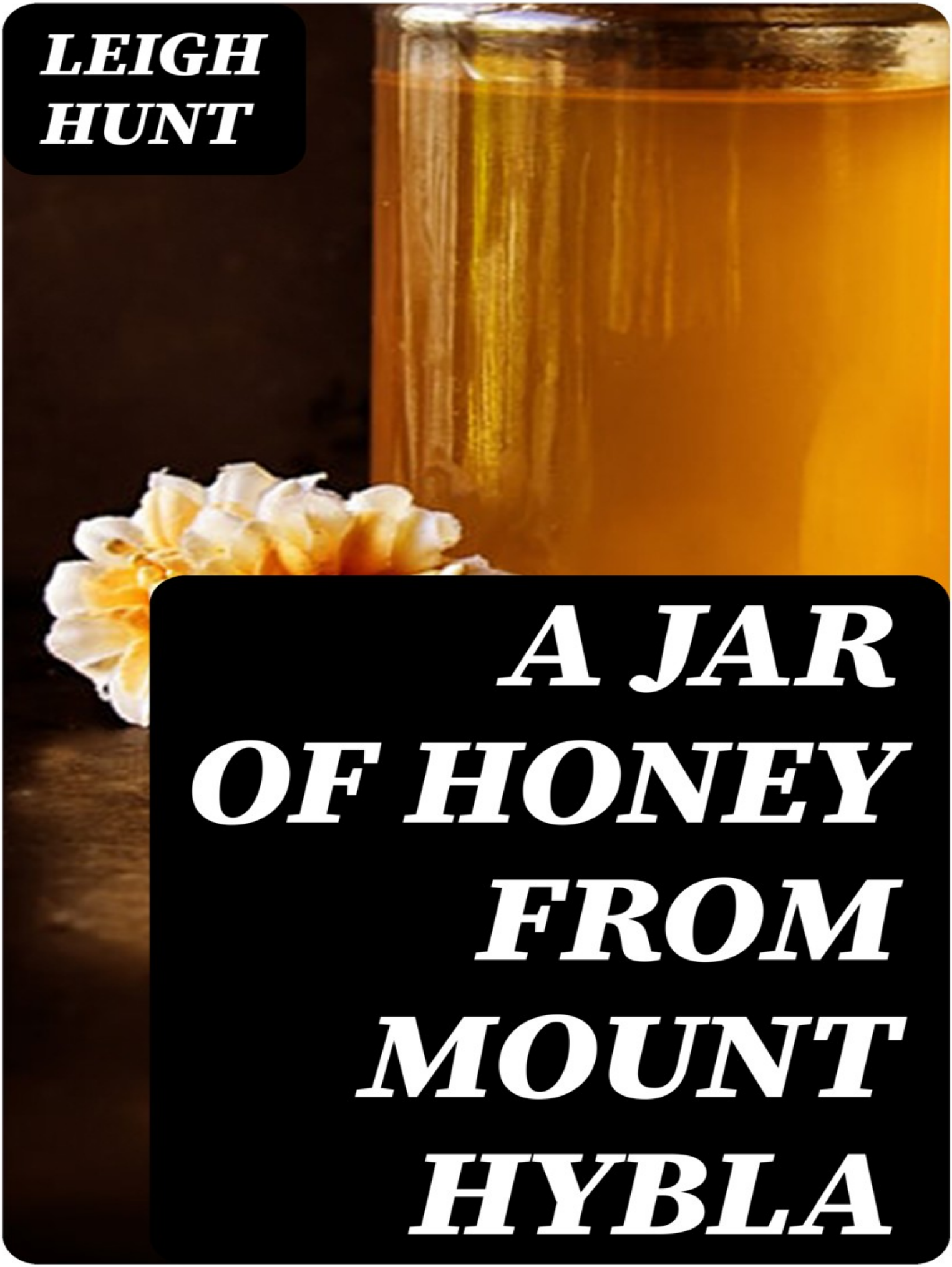
LEIGH HUNT



A JAR OF HONEY FROM MOUNT HYBLA

Leigh Hunt

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CHAPTER I.

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INTRODUCTORY.

A BLUE JAR FROM SICILY, AND A BRASS JAR FROM THE "ARABIAN NIGHTS;" AND WHAT CAME OUT OF EACH.

Passing one day by the shop of Messrs. Fortnum and Mason in Piccadilly, we beheld in the window a little blue jar, labelled, "Sicilian Honey."—It was a jar of very humble pretensions, if estimated according to its price in the market. Perhaps it might have been worth, as a piece of ware, about threepence; and, contents and all, its price did not exceed eighteenpence. People who condescend to look at nothing but what is costly, and who, being worth a vast deal of money at their bankers', are not aware that they are poor devils as men, would have infallibly despised it; or, at

the very utmost, they would have associated it in their minds with nothing but the confectioner or the store-room. On the other hand, it might have reminded a Cavendish or a Gower of his Titians and Correggios; and a Rogers would surely have looked twice at it, for the sake of his Stothard and his *Italy*. And the poet and the noble dukes would have been right, not only in the spirit of their recollections, but to the very letter; for the deep beautiful blue was the same identical blue, the result of the same mineral, by which such an effect is retained in old pictures; and the shape of the jar was as classical as that of many a vase from the antique. Antiquity, indeed, possessed an abundance of precisely such jars. Furthermore, when you held the jar in the sun, a spot of insufferable radiance came in the middle of its cheek, like a very laugh of light. Then it contained honey—a thing which strikes the dullest imaginations with a sense of sweetness and the flowers; and in addition to the word "honey" outside, was the word "Sicilian"—a very musical and meminiscent word.

Now in consequence of this word "Sicilian," by a certain magical process, not unlike that of the seal of the mighty Solomon, which could put an enormous quantity of spirit into a wonderfully small vessel, the inside of our blue jar (for be sure we bought it) became enriched, beyond its honey, to an extent which would appear incredible to any readers but such as we have the honour to address, doubtless the most intelligent of their race.

To introduce it, however, even to them, in a manner befitting their judgment, it is proper that we call to their recollection the history of a previous jar of their

acquaintance, to which the foregoing paragraph contains an allusion.

They will be pleased to call to mind that eighteen hundred years after the death of Solomon, and during the reign of the King of the Black Isles, who was (literally) half petrified by the conduct of his wife, a certain fisherman, after throwing his nets to no purpose, and beginning to be in despair, succeeded in catching a jar of brass. The brass, to be sure, seemed the only valuable thing about the jar; but the fisherman thought he could, at least, sell it for old metal. Finding, however, that it was very heavy, and furthermore closed with a seal, he wisely resolved to open it first, and see what could be got out of it.

He therefore took a knife—(we quote from Mr. Torrens's *Arabian Nights*, not out of disregard for that other interesting version by our excellent friend Mr. Lane, but we have lent his first volume, and Galland does not contain the whole passage; he seems to have thought it would frighten the ladies of his day)—the fisherman, therefore, "took a knife," says Mr. Torrens, and "worked at the tin cover till he had separated it from the jar; and he put it down by his side on the ground. Then he shook the jar, to tumble out whatever might be in it, and found in it not a thing. So he marvelled with extreme amazement. But presently there came out of the jar a vapour, and it rose up towards the heavens, and reached along the face of the earth; and after this, the vapour reached its height, and condensed, and became compact, and waved tremulously, and became an Ufreet (evil spirit), his head in the clouds, and his foot on the soil, *his head like a dome*, *his hand like a harrow*, his two

legs like pillars, his mouth like a pit, *his teeth like large stones*, and his nostrils like *basins*, and his eyes were two lamps, *austere and louring*. Now, when the fisherman *saw that Ufreet*, his muscles shivered, and his teeth chattered, *and his palate was dried up*, and he knew not where he was."

This, by the way, is a fine horrible picture, and very like an Ufreet; as anybody must know, who is intimate with that delicate generation. We are acquainted with nothing that beats it in its way, except the description of another in the *Bahar Danush*, who, while sleeping on the ground, draws the pebbles towards him with his breath, and sends them back again as it goes forth; though a little further on, in the *Arabian Nights*, is an Ufreet of a most accomplished ugliness —namely, "*the lord of all that is detestable to look at*!" What a jurisdiction! And the "lord" too! Fancy a viscount of that description.

The fright and astonishment conceived by the fisherman at the taste thus given him of this highly concentrated spirit of *Jinn* (for such is the generic Eastern term for the order to which the Ufreet belongs) were not, however, the only things he got out of his jar. An incarceration of eighteen hundred years at the bottom of the ocean, under the seal of the mighty Solomon, had taught its prisoner a little more respect for that kind of detainder than he had been wont to exhibit; the fisherman exacted from him an oath of good treatment in the event of his being set free; and the consequence was, that after the adventures of the coloured fish, of the appearance of the lady out of the wall, and of the semi-petrifaction of the King of the Black Islands with his

lonely voice, our piscatory friend is put in possession of his majesty’s throne. So here is an Ufreet as high as the clouds, fish that would have delighted Titian, (they were blue, white, yellow, and red,) a lady, full-dressed, issuing out of a kitchen wall, a king half-turned to stone by his wife, a throne given to a fisherman, and half-a-dozen other phenomena, *all resulting from one poor brazen jar*, into which when the fisherman first looked, he saw nothing in it.

> A brass jar by the ocean’s brim,
> A yellow brass jar was to him,
> And it was nothing more.

Now we might have expected as little from our earthen jar, as the future monarch did from his jar of metal, had not some circumstances in our life made us acquainted with the philosophy and occult properties of jars; but such having been the case, no lover of the *Arabian Nights* (which is another term for a reader with a tendency to the universal) will be surprised at the quantity and magnitude of the things that arose before our eyes out of the little blue jar in the window of Messrs. Fortnum and Mason.

“Sicilian Honey.”—We had no sooner read those words, than Theocritus rose before us, with all his poetry.

Then Sicily arose—the whole island—particularly Mount Ætna. Then Mount Hybla, with its bees.

Then Rucellai (the Italian poet of the bees) and his predecessor Virgil, and Acis and Galatea, and Polyphemus, a pagan Ufreet, but mild—mitigated by love, as Theocritus has painted him.

Then the *Odyssey*, with the giant in his fiercer days, before he had sown his wild rocks; and the Sirens; and Scylla and Charybdis; and Ovid; and Alpheus and Arethusa; and Proserpina, and the Vale of Enna—names, which bring before us whatever is blue in skies, and beautiful in flowers or in fiction.

Then Pindar, and Plato; and Archimedes (who made enchantments real), and Cicero (who discovered his tomb), and the Arabs with their architecture, and the Normans with their gentlemen who were to found a sovereignty, and the beautiful story of King Robert and the Angel, and the Sicilian Vespers (horribly so called), and the true Sicilian Vespers, the gentle "*Ave Maria*," closing every evening, as it does still, in peace instead of blood, and ascending from blue seas into blue heavens out of white-sailed boats.

Item, Bellini, and his Neapolitan neighbour Paesiello.

Item, the modern Theocritus, not undeservedly so called; to wit, the Abate Giovanni Meli, possibly of Grecian stock himself—for his name is the Greek as well as Sicilian for honey.

Then, every other sort of pastoral poetry, Italian and English, and Scotch—Tasso, and Guarini, and Fletcher, and Jonson, and William Brown, and Pope, and Allan Ramsay.

Item, earthquakes, vines, convents, palm-trees, mulberries, pomegranates, aloes, citrons, rocks, gardens, banditti, pirates, furnaces under the sea, the most romantic landscapes and vegetation above it, guitars, lovers, serenades, and the never-to-be-too-often-mentioned blue skies and blue waters, whose azure (on the concentrating

Solomon-seal principle) appeared to be specially represented by our little blue jar.

Lastly, the sweetness, the melancholy, the birth, the life, the death, the fugitive evil, the constant good, the threatening Ætna making every moment of life precious, and the moment of life so precious, and breathing such a pure atmosphere, as to enable fear itself to laugh at, nay, to love the threatening Ætna, and play with it as with a great planetary lion to which it has become used.

From all this heap of things, or any portion of them, or anything which they may suggest, we propose, as from so many different flowers, to furnish our Jar of Honey, careless whether the flower be sweet or bitter, provided the result (with the help of his good-will) be not un-sweet to the reader. For honey itself is not gathered from sweet flowers only; neither can much of it be eaten without a qualification of its dulcitude with some plainer food. It can hardly be supposed to be as sweet to the bees themselves, as it is to us. Evil is so made to wait upon good in this world—to quicken it by alarm, to brighten it by contrast, and render it sympathetic by suffering—that although there is quite enough superabundance of it to incite us to its diminution (Nature herself impelling us to do so), yet tears have their delight, as well as laughter; and laughter itself is admonished by tears and pain not to be too excessive. Laughter has occasioned death:—tears have saved more than life. The readers, therefore, will not suppose that we intend (supposing even that we were able) to *cloy* them with sweets. We hope that they will occasionally look very grave

over their honey. We should not be disconcerted, if some bright eyes even shed tears over it.

CHAPTER II.

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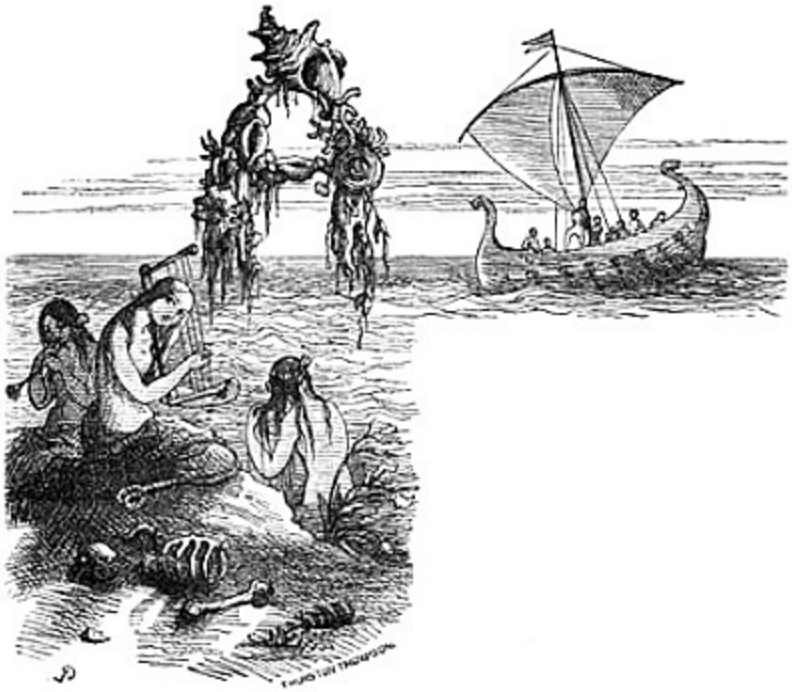
SICILY, AND ITS MYTHOLOGY.

ISLAND OF SICILY, AND MOUNT ÆTNA.—STORIES OF TYPHŒUS, POLYPHEMUS, SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS, GLAUCUS AND SCYLLA, ALPHEUS AND ARETHUSA, THE SIRENS, AND THE RAPE OF PROSERPINE.



As it is good to have a plan and system in everything, whatever may be the miscellaneousness of its nature, we shall treat of our subjects in chronological order, beginning with the mythological times of Sicily, and ending with its latest modern poet.

Sicily is an island in the Mediterranean Sea, at the foot of Italy, about half the size of England, and inhabited by a population a fifth less than that of London. Its shape is so regularly three-cornered, that Triangle or Triple-point

(Trinacria) was one of its ancient names. Mount Ætna stands on the east, in one of these angles. The coast is very rocky and romantic; the interior is a combination of rugged mountains and the loveliest plains; and the soil is so fertile in corn as well as other productions, that Sicily has been called the granary of Europe. The inhabitants are badly governed, and there is great poverty among them; but movements have taken place of late years that indicate advancement; and the Sicilians, meantime, have all those helps to endurance (perhaps too many) which result from sprightliness of character, united with complexional indolence. They are good-natured but irritable; have more independence of spirit than their neighbours the Neapolitans; and are still a pastoral people as of old, making the most of their valleys and their Mount Ætna; not by activity, but by pipe and song, and superstition.

With this link of their newest and their oldest history we shall begin our Sicilian memories from the beginning.

Did Ætna exist before the human race? Was it, for ages, a great lonely earth-monster, sitting by the sea with his rugged woody shoulders and ghastly crown; now silent and quiet for centuries, like a basking giant; now roaring to the antediluvian skies; vomiting forth fire and smoke; drivelling with lava; then silent again as before; alternately destroying and nourishing the transitory races of analogous gigantic creatures, mammoths, and mastodons, which preceded nobler humanity? Was it produced all at once by some tremendous burst of earth and ocean?—some convulsion, of which the like has never since been known,—perhaps with all Sicily hanging at its root: or did it grow, like other earthly

productions, by its own energies and the accumulations of time? In whatever way it originated, and however the huge wonder may have behaved itself at any period, quietly or tremendously, nobody can doubt that the creature is a benevolent creature,—one of the securities of the peaceful and profitable existence of the far greater and more mysterious creature rolling in the shape of an orb round the sun in midst of its countless like, and carrying us all along with it in our respective busy inattentions. We do not presume to inquire how the necessity for any such evil mode of good arose. Suffice for us, that the evil itself works to a good purpose; that the earth, apparently, could not exist without it; that Nature has adorned it with beauty which is another good, with fertility which is another, with grandeur which is another, elevating the mind; and that if human beings prefer risking its neighbourhood with all its occasional calamities, to going and living elsewhere, those calamities are not of its own willing, nor of any unavoidable necessity, nor perhaps will exist always. Suppose Ætna should some day again be left to its solitude, and people resolve to be burnt and buried alive no longer? What a pilgrimage would the mountain be then! What a thought for the poet and the philosopher! What a visit for those who take delight in the borders of fear and terror, and who would love to interrogate Nature the more for the loneliness of her sanctuary!

The first modes of organized life which make their appearance in these remotest ages of Sicily, are of course fabulous modes,—fabulous, but like all fables, symbolical of truth; and what is better than mere truth, of truths poetical.

The mythic portion of the history of Sicily is like its region—small, rich, lovely, and terrible. It may be said to consist wholly of the stories of Typhœus, of Polyphemus and the Cyclopes, of Scylla and Charybdis, of the Sirens, of the Rape of Proserpine, of Alpheus and Arethusa, of Acis and Galatea—names, which have become music in the ears of mankind.

What! is Typhœus a musical name? and Polyphemus and the Cyclopes? Yes, of the grander sort organ-like; the bass for the treble of the Sirens; the gloom and terror, along which floats away, through vine and almond, the lovely murmur of Alpheus and Arethusa.

We shall not explain away these beautiful fables into allegory, physics, or any other kind of ungrateful and half-witted prose. They may have had the dullest sources, for aught we know to the contrary, as beautiful streams may have their fountains in the dullest places, or delightful children unaccountably issue from the dullest progenitors; but there they were of old, in Sicily; and here they are among us to this day; in poets' books; in painters' colours; among the delights of every cultivated mind; true as anything else that is known by its effects; spiritual creatures, living and breathing in the enchanted regions of the imagination. The poets took them in hand from infancy, and made them the real and immortal things they are. We shall not deny their analogy with beautiful or grand operations in Nature, as long as the mystery and poetry of those operations are kept in mind. Typhœus, or Typhon, for instance, may, if the etymologist pleases, be the *Tifoon*, or Dreadful Wind, of the Eastern seas; or he may be the *smoking* of Mount Ætna (from τύφω to smoke); or he may

comprehend both meanings in one word, derived from some primitive root; for as long as his cause remains a secret, and his effect is poetical, so long the spirit of the mystery may be embodied as imagination pleases. Suffice for us, that the thing is there, somehow. All that we object to in the natural or supernatural historians of such persons, is their stopping at mechanical and prosaical causes, and thinking they settle anything.

This said personage Typhœus is, it must be owned, a tremendous fellow to begin stories with of beautiful Sicily; to put at the head of creations containing so much loveliness. He was a monster of monsters, brought forward by Earth as a last desperate resource in the quarrel of her Giants with the Gods. His stature reached the sky; he had a hundred dragons' heads, vomiting flames; and when it pleased him to express his dissatisfaction, there issued from these heads the roaring and shrieking of a hundred different animals! Jupiter had as hard a task to conquer him as Amadis had with the Endriago.[1] A good report of the fight is to be found in Hesiod. Heaven trembled, and earth groaned, and ocean flashed with a ghastly radiance, as they lightened and thundered at one another. The king of the gods at length collected all his deity for one tremendous effort, and leaping upon his antagonist with his whole armoury of thunders, made his foaming mouth hiss in the blaze; the mountain hollows flashed fainter where he lay smitten; the rocks dropped about him like melted lead; and Jupiter tore up the whole island of Sicily, and flung it upon him, by way of detainer for ever. One promontory acted as a presser on one hand; another on another; a third on his legs; and the crater

of Mount Ætna was left him for a spiracle. There he lay in the time of Ovid, making the cities tremble as he turned; and there he lies still, for all that Brydone, or Smyth, or even Monsieur Gourbillon has proved to the contrary; though scepticism has attained to such a pitch in that quarter, that the only danger in earthquakes is now attributed to people's not being quick enough with displaying the veil of Saint Agatha.

Compared with this cloud-capped enormity, our old friend Polyphemus (*Many-voice*), the ogre or Fee-Faw-Fum of antiquity, becomes a human being. He and his one-eyed Cyclopes (*Round-eyes*), are the primitive inhabitants of Sicily, before men ploughed and reaped. They kept sheep and goats, and had an eye to business in the cannibal line; though what it was that gave them their name, is not determined; nor is it necessary to trouble the reader with the controversies on that point. Very huge fellows they were, beating Brobdingnagians to nothing. Homer describes Polyphemus as looking like a "woody hill." He kept Ulysses and his companions in his cave to eat them, just as his Oriental counterpart did Sinbad, or as the giants of our childhood proposed to feast on Jack; and when Ulysses put out the eye of roaring *Many-voice* with a firebrand, and got off to sea, the blind monster sent some rocks after the ship, which remain stuck on the coast to this day.

And yet, by the magic of love and sympathy, even Polyphemus has been rendered pathetic. Theocritus made him so with his poetry; and Handel did as much for him in his musical version of the story, especially in those exquisite caressing passages between Acis and Galatea, ("The flocks

shall leave the mountains," &c.,) which might fill the most amiable rival with torment. Acis (*Acuteness*) and Galatea (*Milky*)—(we like this fairy-tale restitution of the meanings of ancient names, the example of which was at first set, we believe, by Mr. Keightley)—forgot themselves, however, too far, when they made love before the very eyes of the rival; —not the only instance, we fear, of similar provocation given by the vanity of happy lovers. We regret this ill-breeding the more on account of the monster's hopelessness; and considering the little patience that was to be expected of him, almost pardon the rock which he sent on their ecstatic heads.

Gay's verses on this occasion would not have been unworthy of Theocritus:—

ACIS AND GALATEA. [*Duet.*]
The flocks shall leave the mountains,
The woods the turtle-dove,
The nymphs forsake the fountains,
Ere I forsake my love.

POLYPHEMUS. [*Solo.*]
Torture! fury! rage! despair!
I cannot, cannot, cannot bear.

ACIS AND GALATEA.
Not showers to larks so pleasing,
Nor sunshine to the bee;
Not sleep to toil so easing,
As those dear smiles to me.

POLYPHEMUS HURLS THE ROCK.

Fly swift, thou massy ruin, fly:
Die, presumptuous Acis, die.

Scylla and Charybdis, or Scylla and Glaucus rather, is a far more appalling story of jealousy. Scylla properly belongs to the opposite coast of Naples; but as she and her fellow-monster Charybdis are usually named together, and the latter tenanted the Sicilian coast, and the strait between them was very narrow, she is not to be omitted in Sicilian fable. Charybdis (quasi Chalybdis, *Hiding*? though some derive it from two words signifying to "gape" and "absorb") was a personage of a very unique sort, to wit, a female freebooter; who, having stolen the oxen of Hercules, was condemned to be a whirlpool, and suck ships into its gulf. Nevertheless she was a horror not to be compared with Scylla, though the latter was thought less dangerous. Mr. Keightley has so well told this story out of Homer, that we must repeat it in his words:—

"Having escaped the Sirens, and shunned the Wandering Rocks, which Circe told him lay beyond the mead of these songsters, Odysseus (Ulysses) came to the terrific Scylla and Charybdis, between which the goddess had informed him his course lay. She said he would come to two lofty cliffs opposite each other, between which he must pass. One of these cliffs towers to such a height, that its summit is for ever enveloped in clouds; and no man, even if he had twenty hands and as many feet, could ascend it. In the middle of this cliff, she says, is a cave facing the west, but so high, that a man in a ship passing under it could not shoot up to it with a bow. In this den dwells Scylla (*Bitch*),

whose voice sounds like that of a young whelp: she had twelve feet *and six long necks, with a terrific head, and three rows of close-set teeth on each*. Evermore she *stretches out these necks* and catches the porpoises, sea-dogs, and other large animals of the sea, which swim by, and out of every ship that passes *each mouth takes a man*.

"The opposite rock, the goddess informs him, is much lower, for a man could shoot over it. A wild fig-tree grows on it, stretching his branches down to the water: but beneath, 'divine Charybdis' three times each day absorbs and regorges the dark water. It is much more dangerous, she adds, to pass Charybdis than Scylla.

"As Odysseus sailed by, Scylla took *six of his crew*; and when, after he had lost his ship and companions, he was carried by wind and wave, as he floated on a part of the wreck, between the monsters, the mast by which he supported himself was sucked in by Charybdis. He held by the fig-tree, till it was thrown out again, and resumed his voyage."—*Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy.* Sec. edit., p. 271.

It has been thought by some, that by the word Scylla is meant the bitch of the sea-dog, or seal—a creature often found on this coast. Be this as it may (and the seal having a more human look than the dog, might suggest a more frightful image, to say nothing of its being more appropriate to the water), who was Scylla? and how came she to be this tremendous monster? From the jealousy of Circe. Scylla was originally a beautiful maiden, fond of the company of the sea-nymphs; and Glaucus (*Sea-green*), a god of the sea, was in love with her. She did not like him; and Glaucus applied to

Circe for help, from her skill in magic. Circe fell in love with the lover, and being enraged with the attractions that made him refuse her, poisoned the water in which Scylla bathed. The result was the conversion of the beauty's lower limbs into a set of barking dogs. The dogs became part of her; and when in her horror she thought to drive them back, she found herself "hauling" them along—one creature, says Ovid, hauling many:

> Quos fugit, attrahit una.—*Metam.* xiv. v. 63.

This is very dreadful. Yet Homer's creature is more so. Scylla's proceedings, in the *Odyssey*, exactly resemble the accounts which mariners have given of a huge sea-polypus —a cousin of the kraken, or sea-serpent—who thrusts its gigantic feelers over the deck of an unsuspecting ship, and carries off seamen. There is a picture of it in one of the editions of Buffon. But the dog-like barking, and the terrific head and teeth, to which the imagination gives something of a human aspect, leave the advantage of the horrible still on the side of the poet.

An old English poet, Lodge, at a time when our earliest dramatists, who were university men, had set the example of a love of classical fable, wrote a poem on *Glaucus and Scylla*, in which there are passages of the loveliest beauty; though it was spoilt, as a whole, with conceits. In describing the nymph's yellow hair, he makes use of a Sicilian image, very fit for our Blue Jar:—

> Her hair, not truss'd, but scatter'd on her brow,
> Surpassing Hybla's honey.

We are to suppose it lying in sunny flakes. Lodge, though he was an Oxford man, or perhaps for that reason, has curiously mixed up Paganism and Christianity in Glaucus's complaint of his mistress: but the second verse is fine, and the last truly lover-like and touching:—

> Alas, sweet nymphs, my godhead's all in vain;
> For why? *this breast includes immortal pain*.
>
> Scylla hath eyes, but two sweet eyes hath Scylla;
> Scylla hath hands, fair hands, but coy in touching:
> Scylla in wit surpasseth grave Sibylla:
>
> (This is the Sibyl of Æneas)
>
> Scylla hath words, but words well-stored with grutching;
> Scylla, a saint in look, no saint in scorning,
> *Look saint-like, Scylla, lest I die with mourning*.

The modulation and antithetical turn of these verses will remind the reader not only of Lodge's friends, Peele and Greene, who had both a fine ear for music, but of Shakspeare's first production, *Venus and Adonis*, in which he exhibited that fondness for classical fable which never forsook him. It is remarkable indeed, that the old English poets, and those true successors of theirs whom we have seen in our own time, have been almost more Greek in this respect than the Greeks themselves. Spenser was half made up of it; Milton could not help introducing it in *Paradise Lost*; and it was rescued from the degradation it underwent in the French school of poetry, with its cant about the "Paphian

bower,” and its identifications of Venus and Chloe, by the inspired Muse of Keats. The young English poet has told the present story in his *Endymion*, though not in his best manner, except where he speaks of Circe; of the inflictions of whose sorcery he gives a scene of the finest and most appalling description:—

> *A sight too fearful for the feel of fear*:—
> In thicket hid—

(It is Glaucus who is speaking, and whom the poet represents as having been beguiled into Circe’s love)—

> In thicket hid I curs’d *the haggard scene*—
> The banquet of my arms, my arbour queen,
> Seated upon an uptorn forest root,
> And all around her shapes, wizard and brute,
> *Laughing and wailing*, grovelling, serpenting.
> Fierce, wan,
> *And tyrannizing was the lady’s look*,
> As over them a gnarled staff she shook.

The look of a sorceress, full of bad passions, was never painted more strongly than in the meeting of those epithets, “wan and tyrannizing;” and the word “lady” makes the fierceness more shocking.

But Keats had not the heart to make the love-part of the story end unhappily, much less to endure the brutification of the lovely limbs of Scylla. He revived her to be put into a Lovers’ Elysium. So, in telling the story of Alpheus and Arethusa, he will not let Arethusa reject Alpheus willingly. He makes her lament the necessity as one of the train of Diana;