

VIRGIL

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Virgil by W. Lucas Collins

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W. LUCAS COLLINS

VIRGIL



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BY THE
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AUTHOR OF
'ETONIANA,' 'THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS,' ETC.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THIS volume of the Series was to have been undertaken by the late Mr Conington. None can be more sensible than the present writer of the loss which all readers have sustained in the substitution rendered necessary by his lamented death.

The Editor begs to acknowledge the courteous permission of Mr Conington's representatives and publishers to make full extracts from his admirable version of the *Æneid*.

INTRODUCTION.

VIRGIL has always been, for one reason or other, the most popular of all the old classical writers. His poems were a favourite study with his own countrymen, even in his own generation ; within fifty years of his death they were admitted to the very questionable honour, which they have retained ever since, of serving as a text-book for schoolboys. The little Romans studied their *Æneid*, from their master's dictation, as regularly, and probably with quite as much appreciation of its beauties, as the fourth form of an English public school, and wrote "declamations" of some kind upon its heroes. In the middle ages, when Greek literature had become almost a deserted field, and Homer in the original was a sealed book even to those who considered themselves and were considered scholars, Virgil was still the favourite with young and old. The monks in their chronicles, philosophers in their secular studies, enlivened their pages with quotations from the one author with whom no man of letters would venture to confess himself wholly unacquainted. The

works of Virgil had passed through above forty editions in Europe before the first printed edition of Homer appeared from the Florence press in 1448. He has been translated, imitated, and parodied in all the chief European languages. The fate of Dido, of Pallas, and of Euryalus, has drawn tears from successive generations of which the poet never dreamed.

In the middle ages his fame underwent a singular transformation. From the magic power of song the transition seems incongruous to the coarser material agency of the wizard. But so it was; Virgilius the poet became, in mediæval legends, Virgilius the magician. One of his Eclogues (the Eighth), in which are introduced the magical charms by which it is sought to reclaim a wandering lover, is supposed to have given the first impulse to this superstitious belief. All kinds of marvels were attributed to his agency. It was said that he built at Rome, for the Emperor Augustus, a wondrous tower, in which were set up emblematic figures of all the subject nations which acknowledged the imperial rule, each with a bell in its hand, which rang out whenever war or revolt broke out in that particular province, so that Rome knew at once in what direction to march her legions. In the same building—so the legend ran—he contrived a magic mirror, in which the enemies of the Empire could be seen when they appeared in arms; and another—surely the most terrible agency that was ever imagined in the way of domestic police—in which the guilt of any Roman citizen could be at once seen and detected. A fount of perpetual fire, and salt-springs of medicinal

virtue, were said to have been the gifts of the great enchanter to the Roman populace. At Naples the marvels which were attributed to his agency were scarcely less; and even now there is scarcely any useful or ornamental public work of early date, in the neighbourhood of that city, which is not in some way connected by vulgar tradition with the name of Virgil. The wondrous powers thus ascribed to him were, according to some legends, conferred upon him by Chiron the learned centaur—by whom the great Achilles, and the poet's own hero, Æneas, were said to have been educated; by others, with that blending of pagan belief with Christian which is so commonly found in mediæval writers, they were referred to direct communication with the Evil One.*

French scholars have always had the highest appreciation of the Augustan poet, and his popularity

* One story of this kind is perhaps curious enough for insertion. Virgil is said to have been startled one day by a voice calling to him out of a small hole in a cave. It proceeded from an Evil Spirit who had been conjured into that place of confinement, and who undertook to show Virgil certain books of necromancy on condition of his release. The bargain was made, and the condition fulfilled. "He stood before Virgil like a mighty man, whereof Virgil was afraid; and he marvelled greatly that so great a man might come out of so little a hole. Then said Virgil, 'Should ye well pass through the hole that ye came out of?' And he said, 'Yes.' 'I hold the best pledge that I have that ye cannot do it.' The devill said, 'I consent thereto.' And then the devill wrang himself into the little hole again. And when he was in, then Virgil closed him there again, so that he had no power to come out again, but there abideth still."—['Of the Lyfe of Virgilius and his deth, and the many marvayles that he dyd.']