

TO GIVE BACK THE MARBLES

THOSE WHICH LORD ELGIN SECURED FOR ENGLAND.

ENGLAND'S TITLE "BASED ON WHAT WAS PRACTICALLY AN ACT OF THEFT"—FREDERIC HARRISON'S CONTENTION—BYRON'S ATTACK.

We are always glad to be able to agree with Mr. Frederic Harrison, observes a writer in the *London Daily Telegraph*, "and we heartily endorse his vigorous appeal, in the current number of the *Nineteenth Century*, to the British public to give back the Elgin marbles. They belong to Greece, for our title is based on what was practically an act of theft; they are being injured by the London climate, and they lose half their significance and beauty when torn from their architectural and sculptural context. These are the chief grounds on which Mr. Harrison bases his plea, and in our opinion they are amply sufficient to justify the conclusion that we should restore to Athens the decorations of a building which, even when shorn of its noblest ornaments, is still one of the wonders of the world. It is, however, quite possible to acquit Lord Elgin of anything like vandalism and yet to consider that the marbles which are connected with his name should now be sent back to Acropolis.

"When he took them these priceless examples of the art of Greece were in possession of a race whose creed encourages, if it does not actually enjoin, the destruction of every sculptured image of the human form. To this day the first impulse of a Mohammedan who has not been influenced by Western ideas is, when he sees a marble statue, to break or deface it. Any likeness of a man in stone is an idol which merits instant demolition. At the beginning of the century such fanaticism had full possession of the ordinary Turk, and it was only by a sort of accident that the frieze, the pediment, and the metopes of the Parthenon were allowed to remain more or less intact. At any moment an outburst of iconoclastic zeal might have doomed the work of Phidias to complete destruction.

"Byron, in summing up the history of the injuries done to the Temple of Athens, couples Alaric and Elgin as its chief enemies; but in this he was grossly unfair. The Scottish Ambassador cannot be rightly blamed for not having been able to foresee the regeneration of Greece. For putting the Thesus and the Panathenaic procession out of harm's way he deserves the gratitude of the whole civilized world: and but for him it is by no means improbable that the marbles now in the British Museum would be mere masses of shapeless stone. And not only can the original despoiling of the Parthenon be justified. As long as it was uncertain whether the Greeks would be able to free themselves permanently from Turkish rule, or prove themselves capable of founding a settled national government, England was right in refusing to give back possessions so precious as the Elgin marbles. We had become trustees for the world of the noblest extant examples of ancient sculpture, and we were bound not to resign our trust if there was any fear that injury might result from such action. It was necessary to obtain clear proof that the Greeks were capable of safeguarding so great a treasure before we abandoned our rights of guardianship.

"That proof has, however, been vouchsafed for some years, and it is impossible any longer to doubt that the Hellenic people are as capable of looking after the sculpture of the Parthenon as any nation in the world. In one sense, indeed, they must be pronounced to be more efficient protectors than ourselves. Whereas only a limited number of people in England—only those, that is, who are endowed with the artistic or the antiquarian sense—appreciate the value and importance of the works of Phidias, the whole Greek Nation, learned and unlearned, rich and poor, would regard them, were the custody theirs, as the most precious of national possessions. To put a test case. If London were in flames, the people of England would give their first thoughts to the saving of the Abbey and pay only a secondary attention to the British Museum.

"On the other hand, the Greeks, under like circumstances, would concentrate every effort upon saving the Parthenon and its statues. If the Elgin marbles are brought back to the Acropolis and placed in a museum close to the building from which they were taken, they will gain, rather than lose, as regards their safety. They will become, as it were, a first, instead of a third or fourth, charge upon a nation's attention. Whatever else may perish by accident at Athens, it will not be the statuary of Phidias. And as far as the safe custody of the marbles is concerned, Athens is preferable to London. The arguments based on the risk of destruction, which operated in the past to prevent the restoration to Greece of these marbles, can no longer be regarded as valid.

"It remains to be seen whether any other reasons can be adduced against taking a step which, *a priori*, must be declared to be the only one consistent with the national honor. In private life, if we were to carry off a beautiful picture out of a neighbor's house because the owner was for the time unable to prevent its destruction, we should restore it the moment that altered circumstances made him once more able to look after his treasure. Is there any ground for not acting on the same principle in public life? It is urged by some people that London is a far more accessible place than Athens, that many more artists can enjoy the marbles in Bloomsbury, and that, therefore, in the interests of the world at large, they ought not to be transferred to the Acropolis. This line of argument is directly challenged by Mr. Frederic Harrison, who, with his usual energy of phrase, denounces as sophistical the notion that 'in London the art student of the world can study these priceless works, while at Athens they would be buried.' Athens, he argues, is now a far more central archæological school than London, and the students would gain immensely 'if the ornaments of the Parthenon could be seen together, and beneath the shadow of the Parthenon.' The latter part of this contention is, we think, of special force.

"At present the marbles lose greatly by their complete dissociation from the spot where 'a glorious genius and a wonderful people placed them 2,000 years ago.' Sir Robert Smirke's cold and gloomy galleries are terribly potent non-conductors of sympathy, while the attic sunlight and 'the most pellucid air' of Greece would give to the pomp and majesty of the Panathenaic procession the very background, moral and material, that belongs to it.

"Yet another ground for restoring what Byron, in his well-meant if intemperate outburst described as the plunder of 'the Pictish Peer' must be noticed. It appears that in spite of all the precautions exercised by the learned and vigilant staff of the British Museum, the climate of London, so fatal to all stonework, is beginning to take effect upon the marbles. It is impossible, in any part of the metropolis, and least of all in Bloomsbury, to keep an insidious deposit of 'blacks' from forming upon and eating into every surface which has not received a high polish. The Pentelic marble, which in Greece will stand for twenty centuries in the open air, and yet show little or no trace of disintegration, quickly succumbs to the ravages of our smoke-laden atmosphere.

"After only eighty years or so of London the statues and bas-reliefs from the Parthenon have, according to Mr. Harrison, begun to show serious signs of injury, and, unless the process is arrested, still greater harm will be done. Instead, then, of the marbles being specially safe in London, they are exposed to at least one capital danger which would not be present at Athens. And the restoration of the marbles would give England yet another title to the gratitude of the Greek people. It was largely through English aid that Greece was enabled to throw off the yoke of the Turk, and throughout her history as a modern European nation we have endeavored to act toward her in a friendly and helpful spirit. If we were to restore the works of Phidias to Athens, the act would be not only a graceful and grateful one in itself, but would be recognized as a formal acknowledgment that Greece had taken her place as an equal among the civilized nations of Europe.

"We will only add, that if, as we believe they will, the British Nation decides to send back the Elgin marbles, we hope that the gift will not be marred by any attempt to make a bargain with the Greeks. What we give we should give freely and as a matter of right and duty. The Elgin Parthenon, it is true, bought the marbles from Lord Elgin, but that must not prevent our restoring them gratuitously. And we must take care that if the country and Parliament agree to restore the frieze of the Parthenon, the Treasury does not insist that the Hellenic people, if they want the statues, must send to Bloomsbury and fetch them. The marbles, packed in cases sufficiently buoyant to float them—we do not want a repetition of the disaster which overtook Lord Elgin's vessel—should be placed in charge of one of her Majesty's ships, and should by these means be conveyed to the Piræus. When the work of Phidias is given back to Athens it must be by a formal and impressive act of national courtesy, and our public departments must not be allowed to render the transaction ridiculous by any pedantic refusal to find the necessary funds."