CHAPTER XL

THE HOUSE OF THE TRAGIC POET

In the "Last Days of Pompeii" the house of the Tragic Poet is presented to us as the home of Glaucus. Though not large, it was among the most attractive in the city. It received its present form and decoration not many years before the eruption, apparently after the earthquake of 63, and well illustrates the arrangements of the Pompeian house of the last years.

The house received its name at the time of excavation, in consequence of a curious misinterpretation of a painting—now in the Naples Museum—which was found in the tablinum. The subject is the delivery to Admetus of the oracle which declared that he must die unless some one should voluntarily meet death in his place. On one side sits Admetus, with his devoted queen Alcestis; opposite them is the messenger who is
reading the oracle from a roll of papyrus. The excavators thought that the scene represented a poet reciting his verses; and since they found, in the floor of the tablinum, a mosaic picture in which an actor is seen making preparations for the stage, they concluded that the figure with the papyrus in the wall painting must be a tragic poet.

The plan (Fig. 152) presents slight irregularities; yet in essential points the arrangement of rooms does not differ materially from that which we have found in the houses of the pre-Roman time. As our section (Fig. 154) shows, all the parts of the house are comparatively low; the ceiling of the atrium and of the large dining room at the rear (15) were only a few feet higher than the colonnade of the peristyle. The entrances of the ala—here there is but one—and of the tablinum are not adorned with pilasters; plain wooden casings were used instead. The second story rooms are not an afterthought but a part of the architect’s design; the stairways (4) leading to them are symmetrically placed at the sides of the atrium. There was no upper floor, however, over the fauces, the atrium, or the tablinum. To a modern visitor this dwelling would have seemed more homelike and comfortable than the monumental houses of the earlier time.

The large shops (2) are both connected with the house by doors opening into the fauces (1). They were doubtless the proprietor’s place of business. In one of them gold ornaments were found, but we should scarcely be warranted in assuming from this fact that the master of the house was a goldsmith.

In the floor of the fauces, immediately behind the double front door, is a dog, attached to a chain, outlined in black and white mosaic, with the inscription, cave canem, ‘Beware of the dog!’ The picture was for many years in the Naples Museum. The black and white mosaic is well preserved in the atrium, the tablinum (Fig. 153), and the dining room opening on the peristyle, as well as in the fauces.

The purpose of the various rooms is in most cases easy to determine. The first at the left of the atrium (5) was the room of the porter, atrium doors. The three rooms marked 6 were sleeping rooms, as were also 12 and 14 opening on the peristyle; 67 was a storeroom, 13 the kitchen. There was a colonnade on three sides of the peristyle; against the wall at the rear stands the shrine of the household gods (seen in Fig. 153) in which was found a marble statuette of a satyr carrying fruits in the fold of a skin hanging in front of him.

The decoration of the large dining room (15) is especially effective. In the front of the room is a broad door opening into the colonnade of the peristyle; each of the three sides contains three panels, in the midst of a light but carefully finished architectural framework. In the central panels are large paintings: at r, a young couple looking at a nest of Cupids; at q, Theseus going on board ship, leaving behind him the beautiful Ariadne; and at p a composition in which Artemis is the principal figure. In four of the smaller panels are the Seasons, represented as graceful female figures hovering in the air; the
others present youthful warriors with helmet, shield, sword, and spear, all well conceived and executed with much delicacy.

The atrium, unlike most of those at Pompeii, was rich in wall paintings. Six panels, more than four feet high, presented a series of scenes from the story of the Trojan war, as told in the "Iliad." These were united with the decorative framework in such a way as to make a harmonious and pleasing whole; the main divisions of the right wall of the atrium, as well as of the fauces and tablinum, are indicated in Fig. 154.

In arranging the pictures, the decorators had little regard for the order of events. The subjects were the Nuptials of Zeus and Hera (at a on the plan); the judgment of Paris (b)—though this is doubtful, as the picture is now entirely obliterated; the delivery of Briseis to the messenger of Agamemnon (c); the departure of Chryseis (d), and seemingly Thetis bringing arms across the sea to Achilles (f). Of the painting at e only a fragment remained, too small to make it possible to recognize the subject. The fragment at f, in which were seen a Triton, two figures riding on a sea horse, and a Cupid on a dolphin, is now entirely faded. Half of the painting in which Chryseis appears was already ruined at the time of excavation; the other half was transferred to the Naples Museum, together with the paintings that were best preserved, the Nuptials of Zeus and Hera, and the sending away of Briseis.

The two pictures last mentioned are among the best known of the Pompeian paintings, and have often been reproduced. In one (Fig. 273) we see Zeus sitting at the right, while Hypnos presents to him Hera, whose left wrist he gently grasps in his right hand as if to draw her to him. Hera seems half reluctant, and her face, which the artist, in order to enhance the effect, has directed toward the beholder rather than toward Zeus, is queenly in its majesty and power. The scene is located on Mt. Ida. In the background stands a pillar, on which are three small figures of lions; below at the side are two pipes, cymbals, and a tambourine, all sacred to the potent divinity of Mt. Ida, Cybele. Three youths, crowned with garlands, appear in the lower right hand corner of the picture; they are perhaps the Dactyls, demons skilled in the working of metals who followed in the train of Cybele.

A higher degree of dramatic interest is manifested in the other painting, which we present in outline (Fig. 155). In the
foreground at the right, Patroclus leads forward the weeping Briseis. In the middle Achilles, seated, looks toward Patroclus with an expression of anger, and with an impatient gesture of the right hand directs him to deliver up the beautiful captive to the messenger of Agamemnon, who stands at the left waiting to receive her. Behind Achilles is Phoenix, his faithful companion, who tries to soften his anger with comforting words. Further back the helmeted heads of warriors are seen, and at the rear the tent of Achilles.

The scene is well conceived. Yet in both this picture and the one previously described, the composition seems to lack depth and perspective. The artist is remarkably skilful in portraying facial expression, and foreground details; his limitations are apparent in the handling of groups. We have the feeling that the first designs were not made freely with brush or pencil, but that the artist was here translating into painting designs which he found already worked out in reliefs. The original paintings, of which these are copies, very likely go back to the fourth century B.C.

Another painting worthy of more than passing mention was found on a wall of the peristyle (at o), and removed to the Naples Museum. The subject is the sacrifice of Iphigenia, who was to be offered up to Artemis that a favorable departure from Aulis might be granted to the Greek fleet assembled for the expedition against Troy (Fig. 156).

At the right stands Calchas, deeply troubled, his sheath in his left hand, his unsheathed sword in his right, his finger upon his lips. The hapless maid with arms outstretched in supplication is held by two men, one of whom is perhaps Ulysses. At the left is Agamemnon, with face averted and veiled head, overcome with grief. Beside him leans his sceptre, and on a pillar near by we see an archaic statue of Artemis with a torch in each hand, a dog on either side. Just as the girl is to be slain, Artemis appears in the sky at the right, and from the clouds opposite a nymph emerges bringing a deer, which the goddess accepts as a substitute.

In this painting, also, though the style is entirely different from that of the others, we perceive the limitations of the artist in the treatment of the background. Nevertheless the boldness of the conception, and the skill manifested in the handling of several of the figures, seem to point to an original of more than ordinary merit.

Not far from 400 B.C. the sacrifice of Iphigenia was made the subject of a painting by Timanthes, in which the maiden was represented as standing beside the altar. We are told that the artist painted Calchas sorrowful, Ulysses more sorrowful, Ajax lamenting, and Menelaus in sorrow so deep that deeper sorrow could not be expressed; finding it impossible to portray the grief of the father, Agamemnon, Timanthes represented him with veiled head.
The veiled Agamemnon appears in our painting, and the figure of Calchas perhaps reflects the conception of Timanthes. For the rest, it is difficult to establish a relation between the two pictures; even if we did not know that Iphigenia, in the painting of Timanthes, stood beside an altar, we could scarcely believe that a great painter would have represented her thus awkwardly carried. Undoubtedly the Pompeian painting, or its original, is indebted to the masterpiece of the Greek artist; but the decorative painter has adapted this to suit his purpose, omitting the figures, the facial expression of which was most difficult to reproduce, and at the same time attempting to heighten the effect by making more prominent the helplessness and terror of the victim.