

## PROF. GOLDWIN SMITH'S "BAY LEAVES."\*

IT was on a Commencement Day, years ago, that the present learned Chancellor of Toronto University presented a classical medal with the remark that, "for some good reason or other it is generally regarded as the highest distinction of the graduating year." The quick response of his audience proved that the remark was a happy one, and that it had touched the academic heart. But, after all, Mr. Blake, who is himself a classical medallist, was only handing down an old tradition of University life. In the world of the collegian, the microcosm of caps and gowns, and in the busy world beyond his cloistered halls, classical scholarship has always, rightly or wrongly, held a first place. It has long since won the meed of fine ability and high culture, and it still keeps what it has won. To the English student who has worshipped at the shrine of the ancients, and drunk deep at the "wells, pure and undefiled," of his own mother tongue, the Greek and Latin classics can never fail to be attractive, and at times most inspiring. They are, and will remain, literary models and patterns, despite all the famous controversies in which their right to reign has been challenged or denied.

Prof. Goldwin Smith, who writes English as few men in our day can, and who has given his best to Canada, has recently shown this in the production of a charming little volume of translations from the Latin poets. This volume, entitled "Bay Leaves," which is a unique exhibit of the "art preservative" and most creditable to the press from which it issued, was printed for private circulation, but private, in the unpretentious sense implied by its author, it cannot and should not be. It well deserves the widest public recognition and the warmest praise. No criticism, even did we presume to criticize, can do more than partial justice to the brilliant merits of the little book, which is replete with classical flavour, chaste and elegant diction, and delicacy of touch in almost every line. The writer is withal very modest about his work: "If to print this little collection," he says, "even for private circulation, was presumptuous, some of my friends must share the blame." The authors are not arranged in any particular order. Perhaps, if the truth were told, it would be that the easiest are put first. It was with profound misgiving that I undertook to render such art as that of Horace, and such poetry as that of Lucretius. The translations are free, and it is hardly possible that anything but a free translation can be an equivalent for the poetry of the original. A literal translation, as a rule, can only be a fetter-dance. The general thought, the tone, and choice expressions are all that a translator can usually hope to reproduce. This rule, so to speak, which Mr. Smith has gracefully followed, is in the wake of illustrious precedents, and has received a very liberal interpretation. John Dryden—"glorious John"—was a great translator of Roman poetry, though not alike successful in all that he undertook. His manner of translation was equally remote from verbal fidelity and from mere imitation. In fact he lays this down as a sort of canon in the requisite equipment of a translator. There are traces amongst the "Bay Leaves" of Dryden's best manner, while there are none of his worst. The uncertain limits of a free translation are nowhere more noticeable than in the different renditions which he and the Oxford scholar give of some of the Horatian odes. The versions of the stanzas in the twenty-ninth ode of the third book addressed to Maecenas, in which occurs the well-known paraphrase by Dryden of the lines *resigno quae dedit*, etc., may be glanced at in passing.

We quote the original text followed by the English of the respective translators:—

Fortuna, saevo laeta negotio et  
Ludum insolentem ludere peritiam,  
Transmutat incertos honores,  
Nunc mihi, nunc alii benigna.

Laudo manentem; si celeres quatit  
Pennas, resigno quae dedit, et mea  
Virtute me involvo, probamque  
Pauperiem sine dote quaero.

Dryden's version, which is a kind of Pindaric, is considered one of his finest:—

Fortune, that with malicious joy  
Does man, her slave, oppress,  
Proud of her office to destroy,  
Is seldom pleased to bless:

Still various and unconstant still,  
But with an inclination to be ill,  
Promotes, degrades, delights in strife,  
And makes a lottery of life.  
I can enjoy her while she's kind;  
But when she dances in the wind,  
And shakes the wings and will not stay,  
I puff the prostitute away:  
The little or the much she gave is quietly resigned;  
Content with poverty my soul I arm,  
And virtue, though in rags, will keep me warm.

There is no attempt at the Pindaric in Mr. Smith's, which is simply a concise, felicitous exposition of the text in an equal number of lines:—

Fortune exulting in her cruel trade,  
Sporting with hearts, mocking her victim's sighs,  
Smiles on us all in turn, a fickle jade,  
Bestows on each in turn her fleeting prize.

While she is mine 'tis well; but if her wing  
She wave, with all her gifts I lightly part;  
The mantle of my virtue round me fling,  
And clasp undowered honour to my heart.

Everyone to his taste in these things. Still, it will always be a marvel to many lovers of Horace, both in his Latin and English dress, why Dryden's version of these

stanzas, and especially of these lines, should be so often quoted as a specimen translation. This it plainly is not. There is only the faintest resemblance to the professed original. The whole ode seems rather to suggest to the great master of English verse a moral lyric, which is perhaps unsurpassed in force of thought, richness of diction, and harmony of numbers, but which is stamped throughout with the imprint, not of Horace's genius, but of Dryden's. The versions of some of these Horatian odes by the Oxford scholar, who offers to his friends his bouquet of verses so timorously and with no pretensions to the statelier rhythm of others, will find equal favour with their's, if we mistake not in the eyes of many readers. There is no "fetter-dance" in any of them, but much grace and vigour; certain peculiarities of the poet are less magnified and accentuated; while there is none of the excessively Horatian quality which, however delectable to some tastes, is not alike palatable to all.

For this and much more of the same sort of "blame," which has been justly laid on the Professor's friends, the reading public will some day be thankful. His literary friends are legion, but the responsibility of his "Leaves" being thus quietly scattered will be gladly shared by a wider and ever-widening constituency. The selections, which are, of course, on divers subjects and in varied measures, are characterized by excellent judgment and exquisite taste. There is not one of them we would willingly part with. The poetic beauty of the versification, which distinguishes them throughout, is the more marked considering the different characters of the authors and the different gifts required in the poetical translator. There is a simplicity, too, that might not be expected, occasionally at least, in the places where it is found—a simplicity that a child can feel (we know some children who do), and that is always more or less attractive to the reader of English verse. A difficulty that one who has not studied the original text experiences—and it is felt even in a plain prose translation—is the constant allusion to persons, places and events celebrated in Roman song and story. "Rome," it has been said, "was great in arms, in government, in law. This combination was the talisman of her august fortunes." Her poets abound in references to all these, as well as to names famous in the public, domestic and social life of her people. A great deal of this is a sealed book to one unversed in her literature. He misses the subtle pleasure, the bright surprises that come to the student, who, having long since put aside his Horace or his Ovid, takes it up again to find in those allusions, smothered up by the carking cares of life, a host of old-time memories. But there are stanzas and snatches of verse—many of them in fact—in this booklet that have the simple classic thought and sentiment, simply but none the less poetically expressed, that any one may enjoy. Take the following random quotations. The first is on "The True Business of Life" from one of Martial's epigrams:—

O could both thou and I, my friend,  
From care and trouble freed,  
Our quiet days at pleasure spend  
And taste of life indeed.

We'd bid farewell to marble halls,  
The sad abodes of state,  
The law, with all its dismal brawls,  
The trappings of the great;

We'd seek the book, the cheerful talk,  
At noonday in the shade,  
The bath, the ride, the pleasant walk  
In the cool colonnade.

Dead to our better selves we see  
The golden hours take flight,  
Still scored against us as they flee.  
Then haste to live aright.

The tribute by Claudian to an overarching Providence is a reminder of the well-known Addisonian hymn—

The spacious firmament on high,  
With all the blue ethereal sky,  
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,  
Their great Original proclaim;

Claudian's faith, it seems, had been shaken by the successful career of Rufinus, an infamous court favourite, and he expresses his doubts in these lines:—

Ofttimes had doubt distraught my mind,  
 Did Heaven look down on human kind,  
 Or was the Guiding Power a dream,  
 And chance o'er men's affairs supreme?  
 When I surveyed great Nature's law,  
 The ordered tides and seasons saw,  
 Day following night, night following day,  
 All seemed to own an Author's sway,  
 Whose fiat ruled the starry choir,  
 Who robbed the glorious sun with fire,  
 Bade the moon shine with borrowed light  
 And earth yield all her fruits aright;  
 Poised the round world and taught the wave  
 Within its bounding shore to rave.  
 But when I turned to man's estate  
 And saw how dark the ways of fate—  
 Saw vice victorious, mounting high,  
 And suffering worth neglected lie,  
 Doubt triumphed and my faith grew cold.  
 Sadly I turned to those who hold  
 That all is born of atoms blind,  
 Whirled through the void, without a mind,  
 And that the gods, if gods there be,  
 Are careless of humanity.

But the career of the wicked favourite comes to an end, and the poet's faith is restored:—

But now my soul her faith regains,  
 Rufinus falls, Heaven's justice reigns:  
 The bad are raised only to show  
 Heaven's justice in their overthrow.

Very different from this, but possessed of the poetic qualities we have indicated, are some lines from Ovid's

"Amores" on the "Death of a Parrot." After telling how "the talking parrot brought from farthest Ind is dead," and bidding the birds "the obsequies attend," he continues this play on the ceremonies of a Roman funeral with an easy versification that closes in the "Birds' Paradise":—

In the blest realm beneath a hill is seen  
A dusky grove, with grass for ever green;  
There—the belief to piety is dear—  
Dwell sainted birds, while no ill fowl comes near.  
In white-plumed innocence swans float around,  
The matchless Phoenix haunts the holy ground;  
The Peacock spreads his glories, and the Dove,  
Billing her mate, renews her earthly love.  
There, our lost Parrot, welcomed in the bower,  
Draws feathered tribes to marvel at his power.  
A narrow tomb the little bones will hold;  
And two brief lines the story will unfold:  
"I pleased the fair. So much this stone doth tell;  
What more? I talked and for a bird talked well."

Mr. Goldwin Smith has done much in many ways for Canadian literature, and, we have often thought, has received scant credit for it. Any one, who has been so fearless and formidable a journalist in a country where party spirit runs so high, can scarce reap due credit while his powerful pen has still free play. Yet even journalism, whose tone he has admittedly improved and elevated, and whose amenities, both in the local and metropolitan press, he has inculcated with effect by always leading the way, owes him a debt that it can never wholly discharge. There are times and occasions, and this is one of them, when the "slangwhangers" as Washington Irving irreverently calls the party writers, can forget that Mr. Smith is in the front line of journalism, and generously remember his many valued services to Canadian letters. His versatile and accomplished pen has, like Thackeray's, in the dialogue with the album, "written many a line and page." Yet nothing has come from it, during all the years of its master's literary life, that is not well worth reading and preserving, both from the sentiments expressed and the perfect style of expression and treatment, while much will bear reading many times over. If this be true of his prose, it is equally true, in the judgment of many competent critics, of his verse, fugitive though this may have been. He has always disclaimed any pretensions as a poet, though better entitled to wear the chaplet and adorn it than many who are thus honoured in the "glorious guild of singers." Be this as it may, his "Bay Leaves" will make every one who reads it think more and better—however much and highly he may have thought before—of the singers of ancient Rome, and especially of the galaxy of worthies whose beautiful thoughts he has in those pages so beautifully reproduced in English verse for the benefit and delight alike of every student and scholar.

But who, it may be asked, are the worthies that look out upon us from these pages with so winsome an English visage? Let the author tell us in his own words. In a brief scholarly introduction, from which we have already quoted, and which will bear quoting freely, he runs them rapidly over and hits off each with a few graphic touches that are in themselves an individual portrait of "the poet, the mirror of his age." "It is hardly necessary," we are told, "to say anything about names so well known as these. Familiar to all who would take up anything classical are Martial, the creator of the Epigram, the mirror of the social habits of Imperial Rome, amidst whose heaps of rubbish and ordure are some better things and some pleasant pictures of Roman character and life; Lucan, through whose early death, which left his work crude as well as incomplete, we have perhaps missed a great political epic, and who, in his best passages, rivals the writer of 'Absalom and Achitophel'; the marvellous resurrection of Roman poetry in Claudian; Seneca, seeking under the Neronian Reign of Terror to make for himself an asylum of stoicism and suicide; Catullus, with his Byronic mixture of sensibility and blackguardism; Horace, whom, for some occult reason, one loves the better the older one grows; Propertius, whose crabbed style and sad addiction to frigid mythology are sometimes relieved by passages of wonderful tenderness and beauty; Ovid, whose marvellous facility, vivacity and—to use the word in its eighteenth century sense—wit, too often misemployed, appear in all his works, and who, though, like Pope, he had no real feeling, shows in the epistle to Dido to Aeneas that he could, like the writer of 'Eloise to Abelard,' get up a fine tempest of literary passion; Tibullus, famed in his day like Shenstone and Tickell, about their fair equivalent, and the offspring of the same fashion of dallying with verse; and most interesting of all, Lucretius, the real didactic poet, who used his poetry as 'honey on the rim' of the cup out of which a generation distracted with mad ambition and civil war was to drink the medicinal draught of the Epicurean philosophy, and be at once beguiled of its woes and set free from the dark thralldom of superstition. A translator can only hope that he has not done great wrong to their shades."

The translator in this case has certainly not. He has caught the life and spirit of the old Roman as presented by the authors at different periods and under varying circumstances. By some sins of omission, here and there, he has made us respect and venerate where otherwise we might be shocked or scandalized. Sins of commission he has also to answer for, but, when tried by a just canon, he has a good defence on the merits. Any liberty he has taken with a line or a stanza is freely admitted and freely forgiven. In the last line but two, for example, of the ninth Horatian ode in the third book, the words *levior cortice*,\* if literally rendered, would be weak and ineffective.

\* Bay Leaves: Translations from the Latin Poets. Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson.

\* In the two or three verses that follow, the similitude is even more striking.

\* *Levier cortice*, literally *lighter than cork*, i.e., lighter (=more fickle) in mind than cork is in weight, which is the idea expressed.