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LITTELL'S LIVING AGE.

CONDUCTED BY E. LITTELL.

E PLURIBUS UNUM.

"These publications of the day should from time to time be winnowed, the wheat carefully preserved, and the chaff thrown away."

"Made up of every creature's best."

"Various, that the mind
Of desultory man, studious of change
And pleased with novelty, may be indulged."

THIRD SERIES, VOLUME I.
FROM THE BEGINNING, VOLUME LVII.

APRIL, MAY, JUNE,

1858.



LITTELL, SON AND COMPANY, BOSTON;
STANFORD AND DELISSER, NEW YORK.

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From Fraser's Magazine.

BURGER AND HIS TRANSLATORS.

Fiat experimentum in corpore vili. Alas for poets! how often they may grieve over their translators' neglect of the alchemist's maxim. Sometimes indeed their native lead is wonderfully commuted into sterling gold, but far more often is the nobler metal debased or exhaled, and nothing left but a *caput mortuum*. Upon their choicest *chefs-d'œuvre* the merest tyro in metre feels free to try his hand. The bald literal version, forced into rhyme and rhythm at the expense of order and idiom; the loose paraphrase, puerile or bombastic; the elegant imitation, smooth as ice, and as cold,—these are but a few of the disguises under which a poet may see vanish all the fire and life of his cherished ideal.

The principles of translation are laid down with masterly common sense by Johnson, in his brief comment upon Dryden's axiom—"Translation is not so loose as paraphrase, nor so close as metaphor." But it is very hard to hit the happy mean. The one quality indispensable to success is most frequently dispensed with. The translator must himself be a poet. He must possess the genius without which any knowledge of language, any ear for cadence, is merely wasted. His workmanship should never betray itself. The version should read like an original. It should be the poem which the translator would have written had he been inspired with the author's train of thought, and equally familiar with the local imagery incidental to the tale. Such, in fact, has partly become his actual position. He has the story, the characters, the scenery, the metaphors. He must preserve them unaltered. In all these things the author is greater than he. Offered to him also are probably a peculiar stanza, rhythm, and style. Upon these he must exercise a critical discretion, and before adopting the mode or cadence of any foreign language, he must carefully weigh both the powers and the needs of his own.

Thus, while the speech of most other countries is fruitful in double rhymes, in English they are comparatively rare. Musical and pathetic in some short pieces, and in the hands of a master like Moore, they fall upon the ear in longer compositions, and are apt to betray the writer into some affectation. They easily become grotesque, as in Hudibras, or vulgar, as in many a comic song. They lead to an effeminate use of participles, and to the coining of new and fantastic words. Worst of all, they continually tempt a laxity of rhyme positively offensive to the ear. Even in Wordsworth's short ballad of *Ellen Irwin*—written, we may observe, in the same stanza as Bürger's *Lenore*—there occur the

rhymes, travelling—javelin : Ellen—repelling ; incessant—crescent ; telling—Ellen ; and deface it—*hic jacet*. Our translators will be wise to forego in this respect the luxury of their originals.

In ballad poetry especially, the form of versification is a matter of much importance. Not only does its simplicity favor the use of idioms which can only be rendered by analogy, but beside this every people has its own style—we might call it tune—of ballad ; and by preserving the mode of one country in the language of another, we may easily deprive the song of all its distinctive character. We must set the words to our own air, or it will be no longer a ballad. Every one knows our old English strain :—

"The Percy out of Northumberland,
And a vow to God made he—"

a measure very simple in its requirements, yet susceptible of infinite modulation, and capable of expressing every variety of emotion. We much doubt whether it can be improved upon.

Bürger's *Lenore* has always been a favorite *pièce de résistance* with verse translators. The legend itself, so vividly conceived, so picturesquely told, would be sure to take root in the poetry of every country. The music which accompanies it throughout enchances its fascination. From first to last there is scarcely a stanza in which the sense is not echoed by the sound. The drums and welcome-shouts of the returning army ; the despairing moans of the forlorn maiden ; the tramp of her lover's horse ; the sounding gallop through the night ; the tolling bells and low dirges of the death-march ; the rush of the spectres from the place of doom ; the halloo of the ghostly rider ; the whirling dance and unearthly howls of the churchyard—all these sound upon the ear in a way that greatly assists the realization of the story. To feel the full effect of the ballad it must be recited aloud. No wonder that it should have attracted the genius of a musician, and inspired a symphony.

But these merits vastly increase the difficulty of rendering it into another language. It is indeed true, as several translators have observed, that the similarity of English and German in some degree facilitates the task ; but this very similarity may become a source of error. What is poetical in one, may in the other be prosaic or puerile. Thus we are disposed to agree with an early translator, that the use of merely imitative sounds, such as "kling kling," may in our tongue be easily carried too far, so as to degrade a poem into a nursery jingle. Such a sound, says Mr. Spencer, is *vox et præterea nihil*. And again, the preservation of the original meas-

ure is very apt to be attained at the cost of the translator's idiom. Perhaps no version yet made is entirely free from one or other of these defects.

Eight published translations, and one in manuscript, are now lying before us, and there doubtless exist many others, buried in the volumes of ancient magazines or enshrined in their authors' scrutoires. The earliest we have met with appeared first in 1786, and was reprinted ten years later, with illustrations by the celebrated Blake. Mr. J. T. Stanley, the author, tells us in his preface that, disapproving "a supernatural interference inconsistent with our ideas of a just and benevolent Deity," he has ventured to alter the catastrophe of the story. Of course this disposes of Mr. J. T. Stanley. He has taken many other liberties. His William is made to bespeak the funeral procession in this mild and mellifluous fashion:—

"Sing on, that life is like a shade,
A tale that's told, or flowers that fade;
Such strains will yield delight."

And this is the new-fangled conclusion:—

"Wake, Leonora, wake to love!
For thee his choicest wreaths he wove;
Death vainly aimed his dart.
The past was all a dream; she woke:
He lives! 'twas William's self that spoke,
And clasped her to his heart."

And accordingly, in the vignette we see William, in pantaloons and pig-tail, rushing into her arms, while mamma looks on with maternal delight. But if this tailpiece is ludicrous, the frontispiece affords a good specimen of Blake's half crazy fancy. The horse of the legend is preternaturally elongated, with fire streaming from his hoofs and nostrils. Hideous fleshly forms are rolling up through the broken ground, and others equally ghastly are looming aloft in the air; one cluster of misshapen phantoms is dissolving into fire. Leonora's expression is that of terror passing into unconsciousness.

This year, 1796, was prolific in versions. To Stanley succeeded Pye, the laureat. Although making scarcely any attempt to give the wondrous refrains of the original, this translation is not devoid of spirit. A few detached stanzas will exhibit Mr. Pye's manner:—

"Léonore wakes from dreams of dread

At the rosy dawn of day—

'Art thou false, or art thou dead?

William, wherefore this delay?'

* * * * *

"Mother, what is endless bliss?

Endless pain what, mother, tell?

All my Heaven was William's kiss,

William's loss is all my Hell."

* * * * *

"Who shall tend thy nuptial bower?

Who thy nuptial couch shall spread?'

'Silent, cold, and small our bower;
Formed of planks our nuptial bed.'

* * * * *

"Fears my love! the moon shines clear!

Swift the course of death is sped!

Does my love the dead now fear?

'No, ah no! why name the dead?'

Little of Bürger is to be found in Pye, there is still less in the Hon. W. R. Spencer, the same gentleman, who, in the *Rejected Addresses*, sings the charms of "fair Lady Elizabeth Mugg." His stanzas are heavy and sluggish, and occasionally inelegant. As, for example:

"From visions of disastrous love,
Leonora starts at break of day—

'How long my Wilhelm, wilt thou rove?

Does death or falsehood cause thy stay?'

* * * * *

"Forward the obedient phantoms push,
(as if to the pit of the Opera)

Their trackless footsteps rustle near,

In sound like autumn winds that rush

Through withered oak or beech-tree sere.

With lightning's force their courser flies, &c."

But lady Diana Beauclerc's illustrations give a value to Mr. Spencer's volume which it could never have acquired from his poetry. In the first of her four designs, Wilhelm is looking down from horseback upon Leonora, and urging her to the fatal flight: there is a strange mournful pity in his countenance, in hers a mixture of wonder and trustfulness. In the second he is challenging the funeral train, while the maiden presses her head upon his shoulder in fear, but still looks into his eyes with the most confiding devotion. Then we have the horse at full gallop, with the spectres of the gibbet careering round, and Leonora clinging to her lover in the very agony of dread. In the last plate, terror has passed into apathy, and the maid is slipping from the horse into the open grave, while her companion, half changed into a skeleton, poises aloft his ruthless weapon. Each of the four designs seems to us to achieve the very difficult task of satisfying the imagination.

This is more than we can say of Retzsch, who appears to have been deserted by his usual inspiration in illustrating this ballad. His Leonora is insipid; his spectres are grotesque rather than terrible, reminding one of the stage properties for *Der Freyschutz*. An English version is attached to the plates, literal to baldness, but sadly devoid of Bürger's spirit. The translator adopts the original stanza. As thus:

"Ah, mother, mother, gone is gone,

The past shall ne'er return;

Sure death were now a welcome boon;

O! had I ne'er been born;

No more I'll bear the hateful light,

Sink, sink my soul in endless night!

Sure heaven no mercy knows;
Ah me! what endless woes!"

We now approach a very pretty volume, a recent translation by a lady, richly and heavily bound, printed in all the dignity of black-letter, and adorned by the pencil of MacIisle. But here again the illustrations scarcely reach the mark: Leonora is plain and affected; there is a coxcombry about her lover, especially in the funeral scene, which is painfully comic; and the phantoms excite no terror. In her preface, Miss Cameron expresses a laudable desire "not only to exhibit the spirit, but to follow, where possible, the very words of Bürger." Of certain others not unknown translators, she says that "Bürger is forgotten, while Scott and Taylor arrest the attention." And she declares that in a version which shall be really good, Bürger must be felt throughout. We concur, and turn hopefully to that offered by Miss Cameron. She begins, we are pleased to find, in our old English measure:

"Leonora from an anxious dream
Starts up at break of day—
'My William, art thou false or slain?
O William, why delay?'"

Literal enough so far, if also prosaic. But alas! our authoress soon forgets her own canons:

"The work of strife at last is done;
Praise God!" said many a bride;
'Welcome, loved comers from the war,
Parents and children cried."

Sweet, possibly, but not Bürger's.

"O, mother, mother, what is Heaven?
O, mother, what is Hell?
To be with William, that's my Heaven;
Without him that's my Hell."

"Come death, come death, I loathe my life,
My hope is in death's gloom:
My William's gone, what's left on earth?
Would I were in his tomb!"

The first stanza Miss Cameron considers the most touching expression of true love now extant. But we beg to absolve Bürger from the snappish *that's*. Of the second he is entirely innocent. On coming to the spectral ride, our authoress changes her measure, with, we fear, doubtful success. Way, then, for the funeral!

"Vanished the hearse and ceased the song,
And at his word they rush along;
With whirr, whirr, whirr, the funeral train,
Close in the track all panting strain."

"And still hurrah! tramp, tramp the horse,
Snorting pursues his fiery course;
With showers of sparks the shattered flint
Returns the horse-shoe's iron dint."

"Fast flew to left, fast flew to right,
Each object as it came in sight;

The mountains, bushes, hedges flew,
All mingled in the hurried view."

"Dost fear, sweet love? The moon shines
clear!

The dead they ride in full career!
Dost fear, my child?' 'O no,' she said,
'But why not leave in peace the dead?'"

"See here, see there, a ghostly sight,
But dimly seen by pale moonlight!
A felon to the wheel is bound,
An airy rabble dance around."

"Ho, rabble, here, with me advance!
Come dance for us the nuptial dance.
Close in our flying footsteps tread,
Till we do mount the bridal bed."

"And true enough. For hoosh, hoosh, hoosh,
As if a gust in hazel-bush,
Through withered leaves and branches blew,
Rustling was heard this airy crew."

Not only the spirit but the very words of Bürger! This passage may be considered the touchstone of translators. In the version here quoted we have italicised the most flagrant departures from the original, but no variety of type could express the total absence of its spirit. We now pass on to certain *Verse Translations from the German* published in 1847, among which is included one of this celebrated poem. Here, again, the author's preface raised our expectations. No translation, he observes, can satisfy us which does not present all the original contains, and no more, in similar style and similar measure. We wish we could congratulate him upon his English equivalents for the sonorous cadences of Bürger.

"And hark, without 'tis trot, trot, trot,
A horse-hoof clatters there;
And rattling off the horsemen got,
Just at the outer stair.
And hark, and hark, the entrance bell
Rings ting, ting, ting, she knows it well,
And through the door's thick boards
Come clear and plain the words:

"Holla! Holla! my love undo."

* * * * *
'But say, where is thy chamber, say,
And what is the make of thy bed?'
'Small, still, and cool, far, far away,
Six boards, and a foot and a head."

But we go on to the gallop:

"Stilled was the song, the bier was gone,
And round the black train wheels;
And all came hurrying, hurrying on,
Close to the horse's heels.
And away, and away, with tramp and clang,
In headlong gallop they onward sprang;
And horse and rider flew,
And stones and splinters flew."

"On the left and right to the dazzled sight,
Flew hill and dale and flood;
Flew right and left, and left and right,
Village and town and wood."

'Dost fear, my dear? The moon shines bright!

Hurrah! the dead ride fast by night!

Dost fear the dead? *Not thou!*

'Ah, name them gently now!'"

"But see, see there, 'tis the place of doom,

And around the grisly wheel

A rabble rout in the moonlight loom,

And in airy circles reel

'Thou rabble rout that there I see,

Come wheel about and follow me;

Dance us a dance at our wedding,

When we come to the place of the bedding.'"

There is more of Bürger's spirit in these lines, though they are still marred by several grotesque solecisms. But we should scarcely have troubled ourselves either with them or with Miss Cameron's, but for the patronizing air with which both writers speak of Taylor and Scott. Now true it is that the latter have intentionally altered Bürger; they have moved the scene of war to the Holy Land, and they have changed the order of the stanzas. Yet their versions give a far better idea of the original than any we have hitherto quoted. Scott's *William and Helen* is too widely known to need citation; from Taylor we again give the midnight ride:—

"The bier is gone, the dirges hush,

His bidding all obey,

And headlong rush through briar and bush

Beside his speedy way.

"Halloo! halloo! how swift they go,

Unheeding wet or dry!

And horse and rider snort and blow,

And sparkling pebbles fly.

"How swift the hill, how swift the dale,

Aright, aleft, are gone!

By hedge and tree, by thorp and town,

They gallop, gallop on.

"Tramp, tramp, across the land they go,

Splash, splash, across the sea:

'Hurrah! the dead can ride apace;

Dost fear to ride with me?'

"Look up, look up, an airy crew,

In roundel dances reel;

The moon is bright and blue the night,

Mayst dimly see them wheel.

"Come to, come to, ye ghastly crew,

Come to, and follow me;

And dance for us a wedding dance,

When we in bed shall be.'

"And brush, brush, brush, the ghostly crew

Came whirling o'er their heads,

All rustling like the withered leaves

That wide the whirlwind spreads."

Leaving our readers to compare these verses with those which we quoted previously we will now invite criticism ourselves, by closing our review with some extracts from that manuscript translation to which we alluded in opening. It was the work of a gentleman of rare accomplishments, whose un-

timely death in a distant land, about fifteen years ago, was mourned by a host of friends, and whose name would revive many a pleasant and affectionate memory. We make no apology for the length of the following extracts, which will indeed afford the authors we have been criticising a fair opportunity of retaliation. And we will freely admit that there are some blemishes in our friend's version, arising chiefly from neglect in preserving the English idiom. But we confidently appeal to the reader's ear. Thus the ballad begins:—

"Lenora woke from dreams of fear

At ruddy dawn of day:—

'Art false or dead, my Wilhelm dear?

How long wilt thou delay?'

For he was with King Frederic's train,

Encamped on Praga's battle-plain,

And had not writ to tell

If he were sick or well.

"But now the empress and the king,

Grown tired of quarrels past,

Aside their ancient discord fling

And strike a truce at last.

Then every regiment marched along,

With roll of drum, and shout, and song;

And decked with waving boughs

Came each man to his house.

"And all around and all about,

On every road and street,

Both young and old, for joy they shout,

The coming host to greet.

'Thank God!' each child and mother cried,

And 'welcome' murmured many a bride.

For poor Lenora alone

Kind greeting there was none.

"She asked the army up and down,

She asked them name by name,

But news to bring her there was none

Of all the host that came.

So when the train had passed before,

Her raven hair she wildly tore,

And cast her in the path

In agony and wrath."

We pass on to the close of the somewhat protracted scene between the despairing maiden and her mother. The latter is still urging her fruitless remonstrances:—

"'Help! go not into judgment, Lord,
With my poor suffering child;

She knows not that she speaks the word,

Not hers a sin so wild.

Daughter, forget thine earthly love,

And think of Paradise above;

So shall thy bosom burn

No more for his return.'

"O mother, what is Paradise?

O mother, what is Hell?

With him, with him, is Paradise;

Without my Wilhelm, Hell.

Out, out, for ever out, my light!

Sink down, sink down in gloom and night!

Ah woe, ah woe is me!

God hath no sympathy!"

"Through brain and blood thus hotly ran
The fire of her despair;
So wildly and loudly she began
God's Providence to dare.
She wrung her hands and beat her breast,
Until the sun had sunk to rest,
And o'er the ethereal arch
The stars began their march."

Reluctantly omitting the dialogue between the maiden and her lover, which is rendered with great spirit and truth, we proceed to the rencontre with the funeral procession:—

"What sounded yon with mournful tone,
What snuffs the carrion bird?
Lo! church-bells toll and dirges moan!
The dead must be interred.
And nearer came the sable train
With coffined corse and funeral wain;
Their chant was low and harsh,
As croaks some swarming marsh.

"To-morrow bury ye your dead
With ding-dong revelry,
But now we seek our bridal bed—
Come join our company.
Ho, sexton, bring thy crew along,
And mutter forth a nuptial song!
Ho, priest, let grace be said
Above our marriage-bed."

"The chant is hushed, the bier is gone,
And at the rider's will,
The sable mourners race and run
Behind his charger's heel.
And hurry, hurry, fast, fast, fast,
The sounding gallop onward past,
While snorted horse and rider,
And stones and sparks flew wider.

"How swift to left, how swift to right,
Were hill and valley flown!
How swift to right, and left, and right,
Flew village, tower, and town.
'Dost shudder, love? The moon shines
bright!
Hurrah! the dead ride fast and light!

Dost shudder at the dead?'
'Ah, leave in peace the dead!'

"See, there, beneath the gallows-tree,
Around the wheel they dance,
An unsubstantial company,
Beneath the moonlight's glance.
'Hillo, hillo, whoe'er ye be,
Away, companions, follow me!
Your merriest steps come tread
Around our bridal bed.'

"That shadowy troop, oh hush and hush,
Came rushing fast behind,
As through the leafless hazel-bush
Rushes the winter's wind.
And hurry, hurry, fast, fast, fast,
The sounding gallop onward past—
Loud snorted horse and rider,
And stones and sparks flew wider.

Few readers, we think, can fail to feel the spirit and dash of this almost literal rendering of Bürger. We now close at once our extracts and our essay, with the concluding stanzas of the ballad. The churchyard is reached, and the ghostly rider has shaken off his earthly weeds:—

"Reared high the steed, and wildly neighed,
And scattered fire around;
Then thundering sank beneath the maid,
And vanished through the ground.
Wild hideous howls rung round the sky,
Wailed from the tomb a moaning cry,
And poor Lenora's breath
Strove hard 'twixt life and death.

"And round beneath the moonlight's glance
Those ghastly phantoms hung,
And fast they whirled the circling dance,
And loud they howled and sung:
'Endure, endure! Though heart should
break,
Of God in Heaven with meekness speak!
In life thou art no more—
Heaven rest thy soul, Lenore!'"

W. D. W.