

# In Lighter Vein

## HOMER AND HUMBUG

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I DO not mind confessing that for a long time past I have been very skeptical about the classics. I was myself trained as a classical scholar. It seemed the only thing to do with me. I acquired such a singular facility in handling Latin and Greek that I could take a page of either of them, distinguish which it was by glancing at it, and, with the help of a dictionary and a compass, whip off a translation of it in less than three hours.

But I never got any pleasure from it. I lied about the pleasure of it. At first, perhaps, I lied through vanity. Any scholar will understand the feeling. Later on I lied through habit; later still because, after all,

the classics were all that I had and so I valued them. I have seen a deceived dog thus value a pup with a broken leg, and a pauper child nurse a dead doll with the sawdust out of it. So I nursed my dead Homer and my broken Demosthenes though I knew that there was more sawdust in the stomach of one modern author than in the whole lot of them. Observe, I do not say which it is that has it full of it.

So, I say, I began to lie about the classics. I said to people who knew no Greek that there was a sublimity, a majesty about Homer which they could never hope to grasp. I said it was like the sound of the sea beating against the granite cliffs of the

Ionian Esophagus; or words to that effect. As for the truth of it, I might as well have said that it was like the sound of a rum distillery running a night shift on half-time. At any rate this is what I said about Homer, and when I spoke of Pindar,—the dainty grace of his strophes,—and Aristophanes, the delicious sallies of his wit, sally after sally, each sally explained in a note, calling it a sally, I managed to suffuse my face with a coruscation of appreciative animation which made it almost beautiful.

I admitted of course that Vergil, in spite of his genius, had a hardness and a cold glitter which resembled rather the brilliance of a cut diamond than the soft grace of a flower. Certainly I admitted this: the mere admission of it would knock the breath out of any one who was arguing.

From such talks my friends went away saddened. The conclusion was too cruel. It had all the cold logic of a syllogism (like that almost brutal form of argument so much admired in the Paraphernalia of Socrates). For if:—

Vergil and Homer and Pindar had all  
this grace, and pith, and these sallies,  
And if I read Vergil and Homer and  
Pindar,  
And if they only read Mrs. Wharton  
and Mrs. Humphry Ward,  
Then where were they?

So, continued lying brought its own reward in the sense of superiority, and I lied some more.

When I reflect that I have openly expressed regret, as a personal matter, even in the presence of women, for the missing books of Tacitus, and the entire loss of the *Abracadabra* of Polyphemus of Syracuse, I can find no words in which to beg for pardon. In reality I was just as much worried over the loss of the ichthyosaurus. More, indeed: I 'd like to have seen it; but if the books Tacitus *did* lose were like those he did n't, I would n't.

I believe all scholars lie like this. An ancient friend of mine, a clergyman, tells me that in Hesiod he finds a peculiar grace that he does n't find elsewhere. He 's a liar. That 's all. Another man, in politics and in the legislature, tells me that every night before going to bed he reads over a page or two of Thucydides to keep his mind fresh. Either he never goes to bed or *he 's* a liar. Doubly so; no one

could read Greek at that frantic rate; and, anyway, his mind is n't fresh. How could it be?—he 's in the legislature. I don't object to his talking freely of the classics, but he ought to keep it for the voters. My own opinion is that before he goes to bed he takes whisky; why call it Thucydides?

I know there are solid arguments advanced in favor of the classics. I often hear them from my colleagues. My friend



THE ICHTHYOSAURUS DEVOURING TWO OF  
THE LOST BOOKS OF TACITUS

the Professor of Greek tells me that he truly believes the classics have made him what he is. This is a very grave statement, if well founded. Indeed, I have heard the same argument from a great many Latin and Greek scholars. They all claim, with some heat, that Latin and Greek have practically made them what they are. This damaging charge against the classics should not be too readily accepted. In my opinion some of these men would be what they are, no matter what they were.

Be this as it may, I for my part bitterly regret the lies I have told about my appreciation of Latin and Greek literature. I am anxious to do what I can to set things right. I am therefore engaged on, indeed have nearly completed, a work which will enable all readers to judge the matter for themselves. What I have done is a translation of all the great classics, not in the usual literal way but on a design that brings them into harmony with modern life.

The translation is intended to be within reach of everybody. It is so designed that the entire set of volumes can go on a shelf twenty-seven feet long, or even longer. The first edition will be an *édition de luxe* bound in vellum, or perhaps in buckskin, and sold at five hundred dollars. It will be limited to five hundred copies, and, of course, sold only to the feeble-minded. The next edition will be the Literary Edition, sold to artists, authors, and actors.

My plan is to transpose the classical writers so as to give, not the literal translation word for word, but what is really the modern equivalent. Let me give an odd sample or two to show what I mean. Take the passage in the First Book of Homer that describes Ajax, the Greek, dashing into the battle in front of Troy. Here is the way it runs (as nearly as I remember) in the usual word for word translation of the classroom, as done by the very best professor, his spectacles glittering with the literary rapture of it.

Then he too Ajax on the one hand leaped (or possibly jumped) into the fight wearing on the other hand yes certainly a steel corselet (or possibly a bronze under tunic) and on his head of course yes without doubt he had a helmet with a tossing plume taken from the mane (or perhaps extracted from the tail) of some horse which once fed along the banks of the Scamander (and it sees the herd and raises its head and paws the ground) and in his hand a shield worth a hundred oxen and on his knees two especially in particular greaves made by some cunning artificer (or perhaps blacksmith) and he blows the fire and it is hot.

Thus Ajax leaped (or, better, was propelled from behind) into the fight.



AJAX, "PROPELLED FROM BEHIND"

Now that's grand stuff. There is no doubt of it. There's a wonderful movement and force to it. You can almost see it move, it goes so fast. But the modern reader can't get it. It won't mean to him what it meant to the early Greek. The setting, the costume, the scene have all got to be changed in order to let the modern reader have a real equivalent so as to judge for himself just how good the Greek verse is. In my translation I alter the original just a little, not much but just enough to give the passage a form that reproduces for us the proper literary value of the verses, without losing anything of

their majesty. It describes, I may say, the Directors of the American Industrial Stocks plunging into the Balkan War Cloud:

Then there came rushing to the shock of war

Mr. McNicoll of the C. P. R.

He wore suspenders and about his throat  
High rose the collar of a sealskin coat.  
He had on gaiters and he wore a tie,  
He had his trousers buttoned good and high;  
About his waist a woollen undervest  
Bought from a sad-eyed farmer of the West.  
(And every time he clips a sheep he sees  
Some bloated plutocrat who ought to freeze.)  
Thus in the Stock Exchange he burst to view,  
Leaped to the post, and shouted,  
"Ninety-two!"

There! That's Homer, the real thing!  
Just exactly as it sounded to the rude  
crowd of Greek peasants who sat in a ring  
and guffawed at the rhymes and watched  
the minstrel stamp it out into "feet" as he  
recited it!

Let me take another example, this time from the so-called Catalogue of the Ships, which fills up nearly an entire book of Homer. This famous passage names all the ships, one by one, and names the chiefs who sailed on them, and names the particular town, or hill, or valley that each came from. It has been much admired. It has that same majesty of style that has been brought to an even loftier pitch in the New York Business Directory and the City Telephone Book. It runs along, as I recall it, something after this fashion:

And first indeed oh, yes, was the ship of Homistogetes, the Spartan, long and swift, having both its masts covered with cowhide and two banks of oars. And he, Homistogetes, was born of Hermogenes and Ophthalmia, and was at home in Syncope beside the fast-flowing Paresis. And after him came the ship of Preposterus, the Eurasian, son of Oasis and Hysteria,

—and so on, endlessly.

Instead of this I substitute, with the permission of the New York Central Railway, a more modern example, the official catalogue of their locomotives, taken almost word for word from the list compiled by their Chief Superintendent of Rolling

Stock and rendered into Homeric verse. I admit that he wrote it in hot weather.

Out in the yard and steaming in the sun  
 Stands locomotive engine number forty-one;  
 Seated beside the windows of its cab  
 Are Pat McGraw and Peter James McNab.  
 Pat comes from Troy and Peter  
 from Cohoes,  
 And when they pull the throttle,  
 off she goes;  
 And as she vanishes there comes  
 to view  
 Steam locomotive engine number  
 forty-two.

Observe her mighty wheels, her  
 easy roll,  
 With William J. McArthur in  
 control.

They say her engineer some time ago  
 Lived on a farm outside of Buffalo,  
 Whereas her fireman, Henry Edward Foy,  
 Attended school in Springfield, Illinois.  
 Thus does the race of men decay and rot—

**SOME MEN CAN HOLD THEIR  
 JOBS AND SOME CAN NOT.**

Please observe that if Homer had actually

written that last line, it would have been quoted for nearly three thousand years as one of the deepest sayings ever said. Orators would still be rounding out their speeches with the majestic phrase (in Greek), "Some men can hold their jobs"; essayists would open their most scholarly dissertations with the words, "It has been finely said by Homer that some men can hold their jobs"; and the clergy in the mid-pathos of a funeral sermon would lift an eye skyward and echo, "and some can not."

This is what I should like to do; I'd like to take a large stone and write on it—



*"The classics are only primitive literature. They belong in the same class as primitive machinery, primitive music, and primitive medicine."*

—and then throw it through the windows of a UNIVERSITY and hide behind a fence to see the professors buzz!