VIRGIL'S HOSTESS.*

It is a pity that this and other light pieces of Virgil,[1] are omitted in the ordinary editions. A great man is worth listening to, let him say what he will; and nothing is more agreeable than his trifling. It flatters one's common humanity. It also makes us discover, that things trifling are not such trifling things, in one sense, as we took them for. To omit these little evidences of good-humour and fellowship is not only an injustice even to an epic poet, but helps to confirm a certain vulgar instinct in people, which leads them to draw a line between the sympathy with great things and the sympathy with small,—to the great ultimate detriment of both. He is in the healthiest condition of humanity, and best prepared to do it good, who has all his faculties ready for all the perceptions of which it is capable; who has sense at his fingers' ends to touch and feel every possible surface of life, and understanding to judge of its nature and common rights. The greatest genius, it has been said, resembles the trunk of the elephant, which can knock down a tiger and pick up a pin. We should give small things no more value than they are worth; but the end of the very greatest things, what is it but to increase the relish of less? Great rivers send their waters into our houses by means of pipes. The mightiest legislation terminates in making us all comfortable in our every day concerns, and affording us leisure to study and be grateful to mighty things in return. The Æneid[2] relishes

* Author: Leigh Hunt / Transcribed and annotated by Gilberta Golinelli.

our tea-tables and our evening walks. In short, a great genius encourages us to attend to him by attending to us. It would, undoubtedly, be injurious to the common cause, if a knowledge of a great poet in his lighter moments should do away a proper sense of him in his grave ones; but this is a mistake only liable to be fallen into by those idle men of the world, who in fact really know nothing at all, great or little.

The Battle of the Frogs and Mice[3] has not injured the fame of Homer.[4] We do not think less of Socrates,[5] when he uses his grandest arguments for the immortality of the soul, because he could chat pleasantly at other times. Aristophanes,[6] "a gay fellow about town," might have pretended to do so; and the Athenians might have fancied, for a day, that they agreed with him. But they would only have loved and honoured him the more afterwards; as they did. When we see a man, capable of a good-natured levity, laying so much stress upon things grave, we feel their gravity in proportion. We think they must be interesting indeed, and highly important to all of us, or he would be content with his laughing and seek no further; which on the contrary is the very refuge or vain endeavour of despair. Levity should be the smooth and harmonious buoyancy of things solid, like the lightness of the planets in the æther. To endeavour to shew that there are no things solid, and call that levity, is the madness of Atlas[7] attempting to disprove his burden.

But, whither are we wandering from our poet's invitation, —from mine hostess of the Tiber,[8]—from our ancient, but at the same time young, Mrs. Quickly,[9] when she lived two thousand years ago, and was a buxom little Syrian landlady, who kept a place of entertainment out of the gates of Rome, and danced for the amusement of her customers? There are more genealogies than are dreamt of in Rouge-Lion's philosophy,[10] and this is one of them. Why, here is Falstaff[11]

himself (only not witty) in the shape of a fat gentleman, an acquaintance of Virgil's, whom the commentators want to turn into his prototype Silenus.[12] It is as palpable as Sir William Curtis,[13] another "witless Falstaff," that he was an extremely fat gentleman from the Via Sacra,[14] who cut heavy jokes by riding on donkies, and otherwise imitating the Silenus whom he resembled. Virgil's Hostess, in short, is a good-humoured panegyric of the poet's upon a sort of ancient White-Conduit-House or Chalk-Farm,[15] not quite so "respectable" perhaps in one sense as those sub-urbanities of our beloved metropolis, but quite enough so for the manners of those days, and as good still as people expect in the South. The bread and wine, the gourds, the grapes, vine-leaves, and chesnuts, are the ordinary furniture of similar places of entertainment now existing in Italy; and if the hostesses are not musical or love-making by profession, they are generally amateurs, and the cause of much dancing and singing in others. We learn from ancient writers, that women of this profession were accustomed to be Syrians. They appear to have resembled the modern dancing-girls of the East. As to the opinion of some that Virgil was not the author of these verses, we do not think it worth our while to stop and consider it. The verses are good, the poet was good-natured; and that is enough for us. We shall only take this opportunity of observing, that Virgil was eminent in his private character for benignity and simplicity of manners. "Whiter souls," quoth Horace,[16] "do not exist, than Plotius,[17] Varius,[18] and Virgil, nor ones with whom I feel myself more closely bound."[19] He proceeds to tell us how delighted they all were to meet, on his journey to Brundusium;[20] and that there is nothing equal, in his opinion, to a pleasant friend:—

——— animæ, quales neque candidiores
Terra tulit, neque queis me sit devinctior alter.
O qui complexus! et gaudia quanta fuerunt!
Nil ego contulerim jucundo sanus amico.[21]

From the accounts left us of Virgil, his person, manners, &c. and even the turn of his genius, with all due allowance of its superiority, we should guess that he had a good deal of resemblance to Thomson.[22] He was a heavy-looking man, of retired habits, very sincere and affectionate, and beloved by all who knew him.

Copa Syrisca, caput Graia redimita mitella,
Crispum sub crotalo docta movere latus,
Ebria fumosæ saltat lasciva taberna,
Ad cubitum raucos excutiens calamos.
Quid juvat æstivo defessum pulvere abesse,
Quam potius bibulo decubuisse toro?
Sunt cupœ, calices, cyathi, rosa, tibia, chordæ,
Et trichila umbriferis frigida arundinibus.
Est et Mænalis quæ garrit dulce sub antro,
Rustica pastoris fistula more sonans.
Est et vappa, cado nuper diffusa picato;
Est strepitans rauco murmure rivus aquæ:
Sunt etiam croceo violæ de flore corollæ;
Sertaque purpurea lutea mista rosa;
Et quæ virgineo libata Achelois ab amne
Lilia vimineis adtulit in calathis.
Sunt et caseoli, quos juncea fiscina siccat;
Sunt autumnali cerea pruna die;
Castaneœque nuces, et suave rubentia mala:
Est hic munda Ceres; est Amor, est Bromius:
Sunt et mora cruenta, et lentis uva racemis;

Est pendens junco cæruleus cucumis.
Est tuguri custos armatus falce saligna;
Sed non et vasto est inguine terribilis.
Huc, Alibida, veni: fessus jam sudat asellus:
Parce illi; vestrum delicium est asinus.
Nunc cantu crebro rumpunt arbusta cicadæ.
Nunc etiam in gelida sede lacerta latet.
Si sapis, æstivo recubans te prolue vitro;
Seu vis crystallo ferre novos calices.
Eia age pampinea fessus requiesce sub umbra;
Et gravidum roseo necte caput strophio;
Candida formosæ decerpes ora puellæ:
Ah! pereat, cui sunt prisca supercilia!
Quid cineri ingrato servas bene olentia serta?
Anne coronato vis lapide ista legi?
Pone merum et talos. Pereant, qui crastina curant.
Mors aurem vellens,—"Vivite," ait, "venio."[23]

Our little Syrian Hostess, the diadem'd, the fair,
Who crisply to the music moves her side with such an air,
Has dancing at her house to-day, and looks for all her friends
To see her shake her castanets, all at her fingers' ends.
What man on earth, I wish to know, would chuse to be
away,
Instead of going there to drink, on such a dusty day?
Instead of going there to drink, and lying on a bed,
With cups, and cans, and flutes, and flowers, and an arbour
for his head?
There's one that plays a pan-pipe within a pretty cave,
Just like a rustic shepherd;—I wonder what you'd have!
And there's a very pleasant wine, as neat as it can be;
And a proper brook, a hoarse one, to run respectably;

And there are garlands for your locks, of yellow mixed with blue,
Both violets and crocusses, and there are roses too:
And there are lilies such as those that drink the virgin stream,
Which osier-twisting nymphs collect in baskets of the same;
Cheeses that come in baskets too—I nearly had forgot 'em;
And prunes and other pretty meats, which people make in autumn.
Chesnuts of course, and apples, whose cheeks go reddening sweetly;
And bread and wine, and love besides, to relish all completely.
I needn't speak of heaps of grapes, nor mulberries blood-red;
And you may have a cucumber a hanging by your head.
Take notice—there's a scare-crow, just where the thickest shade is,
But he has nothing terrible, to frighten the young ladies.

Come, Alibida, my fat friend, who lovest watering-places,
You and your donkey, both of you, come rest, and wipe your faces.
The grasshoppers all sing so loud, they burst the bushes, man,
And the lizards run and get, you see, in the coldest nooks they can.
Come, if you're wise, and give a loose to laughter and your stays*.
A flask or bottle? You know best the *most genteelest* ways.

* Before the reader condemns this apparently modern interpolation, let him consult those who have written on the fashions of the ancient world.

Come rest yourself, and take your couch beneath this leafy vine,
And renovate with roses that heavy head of thine;
Still better flowers are here to pluck,—a pretty mouth and kisses;
Ah! perish those who 'd bring old frowns to such a place as this is.
Why should we keep our odorous flowers to give the thankless dead?
Will any tombstone feel for us, for all its crowned head?
The wine! The dice! Tomorrow's turn is but a chance dominion;
"Live, for I come," says Death himself; and I'm of Death's opinion.

The reader should be acquainted, by all means, with another minor poem of Virgil, The Cubex,[24] and with Spenser's[25] translation of it. It contains some of the most delicate specimens in existence of what may be called (for want of a better term) the gentle mock-heroic;—mock-heroic, in which the subject is trifling but the treatment of it in a certain mixed style of pretended solemnity and real tenderness, as if we were hand-

He will be surprised at the classical authority which there is for most of our modern habiliments,—breeches perhaps excepted, which did not come up till the lower empire, unless he chuses[26] to go for them to the Persians and Goths.[27] His pantaloons are undoubtedly Oriental. Boots belong to the heroic ages; and wigs, as Gibbon[28] would say, lose themselves in the clouds of antiquity. The Goth and Vandal[29] Princes on Trajan's column,[30] with wigs prophetic of the 18th century, look no older than the grandfathers of their worthy descendants of Austria and Prussia: but this is nothing. Monuments are brought to light in Persia, upon which the antient kings and heroes have as regular formal-curled caxons as any old stock-jobber or coachman extant.

ling a butterfly. The text is much corrupted, and in some places very obscure; but this did not hinder Spenser from making a most beautiful translation, which Jortin[31] has criticised like a pedant, and Heyne[32] like a man of taste. Jortin is angry that any man should think of translating passages which a critic could not make out. Heyne says, that this is a happy privilege, and envies the poet for being able to forego the trammels of the commentator. "*Patris sermone*," says he, "*octonis versibus in strophas coëuntibus redditum est hoc carmen a Spensero, poëta nobili Britano* (Virgil's Gnat), *in ejus Opp. Nec sine voluptate illud facile perlegas. Adeo mihi vel hoc exemplo patuit, quanto expeditius esset poëtam carmine vernaculo reddere, quam verba subtiliter interpretari. Nihil enim vetabat sententias integras summatim effere, ejusve partes in quemcunque placeret sensum deflectere, aut verba corrupta aptis et idoneis permutare.*"[33]

What a delightful edition, by the bye, is Heyne's Virgil altogether, and how every gentleman ought to have it! It is a work of true love on the part of the critic, and hung with gems and intaglios and all that he could bestow upon it; and yet he had sense enough to know that Virgil, in pastoral, was not so good as Theocritus.[34] His own life, more delightful than all, ought to be translated into Latin, and put at the beginning. Heyne rose from a state of the humblest poverty,—from a boyhood of almost absolute starvation, and became one of the most learned and celebrated, as well as most amiable, of men. His extreme penury, his invincible industry and benevolence, his love of letters, his other love,—are all delicious to read of, seeing that the evil went away and the good remained.

EDITORIAL NOTES

[1] Publius Vergilius Maro (70-19 BCE), also known as Virgil, Roman poet under the Augustan Empire.

[2] *Aeneid*, one of Virgil's most famous epic poems, which tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas and his journeys from Troy to Italy.

[3] *The Battle of Frogs and Mice*, otherwise known as *Batrachomyomachia*, is a parody of the *Iliad* starring animals instead of human beings.

[4] Homer (8th century BCE), Greek poet and presumed author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

[5] Socrates (c. 470-399 BCE), Greek philosopher.

[6] Aristophanes (c. 466-386 BCE), Athenian comic playwright. Amongst his plays: *The Clouds*, *The Wasps*, and *The Frogs*.

[7] In Greek mythology, Atlas is a Titan condemned to hold up the sky for eternity due to his rebellion against the gods.

[8] Tiber, second longest Italian river that flows through the city of Rome.

[9] Mistress Quickly, Shakespearean character.

[10] Adaptation of Hamlet's remark "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, | than are dreamt of in your philosophy", Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.iii.165-66.

[11] John Falstaff, Shakespearean character.

[12] Silenus, tutor of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine.

[13] Sir William Curtis (1752-1829), Tory Member of Parliament and Lord Mayor of London from 1795 to 1796. Known for his banquets and his jovial attitude.

[14] Via Sacra, one of the main streets in ancient Rome, leading from Capitoline Hill to the Colosseum. The street was used by merchants to reach the Forum, the main centre of Roman trade.

[15] Historic locations in London known in the seventeenth and eighteenth century as popular venues for leisure and social gatherings away from the city centre.

[16] Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65-8 BCE), Roman satirist and poet during the reign of Octavian.

[17] Plotius Tucca (probably lived after 19 BCE), Roman poet, philologist and one of Virgil's friends.

[18] Lucius Varius Rufus (c. 74-14 BCE), Roman poet and one of Virgil's friends.

[19] "*Whiter souls … closely bound.*": translation of an extract from Horace's *Satires* (bk. 1, Satire 5).

[20] Ancient Latin name for the Italian city of Brindisi.

[21] Extract from Horace's *Satires* (bk. 1, Satire 5): "whitest souls earth ever bore, to whom none can be more deeply attached than I. O the embracing! O the rejoicing! Nothing, so long as I am in my senses, would I match with the joy a friend may bring." (Horace 1926, 67).

[22] James Thomson (1700-48), Scottish poet, known for the poem *The Seasons* and for the lyrics of the patriotic song "Rule, Britannia!".

[23] Extract from the poem *Copa* contained in the *Appendix Vergiliana*, a collection of Latin poems traditionally considered to be Virgil's earliest poetry. However, it is likely that many of these poems are spurious.

[24] Misspelling of "Culex". The *Culex* is another minor poem attributed to Virgil, included in the *Appendix Vergiliana*.

[25] Edmund Spenser (1553-99), English poet, famous for his epic poem dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I, *The Faerie Queene*. In 1591 he translated Virgil's in English and entitled it *Virgil's Gnat*.

[26] *chuses*: Old English variant of 'chooses'.

[27] Goths, barbarians who threatened the Roman Empire contributing to its fall.

[28] Edward Gibbon (1737-94), English historian and politician.

[29] Vandals, barbarians who sacked Rome in 455.

[30] Trajan's column, historical monument in Rome, completed in 113 CE to celebrate the victory of Emperor Trajan in the Dacian wars.

[31] John Jortin (1698-1770), English historian.

[32] Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812), German archaeologist and director of the Göttingen State and University Library.

[33] Trans.: "In the Author's text, this poem (Virgil's Gnat) was translated by Spenser, a noble British poet, in eighty verses written in strophe, in his Opp. Neither can you easily read it without pleasure. It became clear to me in this example, how much easier it would be to translate the poet's work in vulgar, instead of translating the words accurately. In fact, nothing stopped him from summarizing entire sentences, or to change them however he liked, or to switch wrong terms with apt and suitable words."

[34] Theocritus (300-260 BCE), Greek poet, famous for his pastoral poetry.