FOREIGN NOTES AND COMMENT

Working on the Dead

THE first book printed in this country was a translation. Now familiarly known as "The Bay Psalm Book" (1640), the exact title of the publication that has come to be referred to in this way consisted of thirty-seven words, the first ten of which were as follows: "The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre." Moreover, this translation was the third bit of printing of any kind done within what is at present the United States, the two preceding jobs having been "The Freeman's Oath" (1639), and the "Almanack" got out for the uplifting of New England in the same year as the translation of the Psalms. The press on which this printing was done is still intact in the Vermont Historical Society's Museum at Montpelier. If we have another relic from Colonial days that is more deserving of pious veneration it is quite impossible for me to fancy what it might be.

The four volumes selected for consideration from this month's huge wealth of translations contain, consequently, in themselves a lesson in our spiritual history which only the most obtuse can fail to grasp, only the hopelessly austere fail to appreciate. The Dane pours out his merciless and yet merciful satire on the happenings within a small kingdom, one of the outstanding features of which is a State Church. The Russian expresses his inability, because of his small faith, to see how God Himself could be satisfied with the conduct of his hero, the sentry who accepted two hundred lashes for doing a noble though unmilitary deed, while a night prowler in the form of an officer lies without limit and has a medal of honor pinned to his breast by the authorities. The Frenchman writes a story of intriguing charm the net result of which is that when the bandits, smugglers, and tough hearted athletes find themselves within the lime washed walls of the convent to which they have gone with the idea of abducting a nun, they are so impressed by the sanctity of the place that they slink away, like thieves in the night. They are unable to raise a hand toward the execution of their plans and altogether ashamed of themselves for ever having cherished the thought that they could win against the impelling power of the religion in which they had been reared. And the Italian, the greatest poet of his age, reveals himself as one who never abandoned the idea of "Mankind" as the "anti-Christ". That is, man in the mass, man the product of civilized society as opposed to the individual person, is, he felt, a dogmatic character such as the founder of the Christian religion never was.

If these four foreigners, and especially the last three, had merely chanced, by accident, to touch on religious faith, there would be no point in emphasizing the spiritual feature of their creations; for from the beginning of time, faith and poetry have been inseparable. The Greek writers, for example, with the exception of Aristophanes, based everything they wrote on their religion. This applies even to Sappho, however far removed her lines may seem to be from what we

would now call religious lyrics. But these men go out of their way to bring religion in. The Dane smiles, the Russian is disturbed, the Frenchman is utterly orthodox, the Italian displays an unrelieved skepticism toward things as they are, and presents an ingenious picture of things as they might be.

It was a Dane, Jonas Bronck, who founded, if he did not actually discover, the Bronx. The extent to which he thereby added to the merriment of life can be determined only with difficulty. It is now another Dane, Gustav Wied, who depicts the manœuvres of those who know that all they do is done for the nation. Our debt to Denmark, great since the year Jonas Bronck cast his lot among us (and he did so in virtually the same year that our first book was printed), is therefore growing. For there is a gigantic amount of affectation and insincerity in what passes as patriotism, particularly when this willingness to sacrifice all for the good of the home country is manifested by office holders. This unctuous striving to save the country, this fatuous faith in existing institutions, a faith in which "men of principle" wallow, when it pays, impressed Gustav Wied in Denmark, and he has dramatized his impressions with an artistry which makes for smiles instead of irritation, and causes, after all, two rays of hope to shine forth where there was formerly but one. For there is a wholesome humor in the man's dissection of human motives such as can emanate only from an unselfish soul.

We have struck the keynote: unselfishness. An unselfish patriot is a statesman; a selfish one is a politician. Paul Abel, Gustav Wied's hero, is an "author and schoolteacher". Married to Esther Hamann whose father is a petty government official, he has every thinkable chance to see how the "men of principle" — the original title of the comedy was "Men of Will-Power" — connive to live on rather than for the Fatherland. He reaches the point, partly as the result of a "radical" book he has written, where his wife says she loves him though she does not like him. She and her people care in truth about as much for him as a highly paid chef cares for toadstools. He is placed in jail, because of his "dangerous" teachings. He has a few weeks of unreserved revivification while in the institution. He receives an offer from Mrs. Kluver to become editor in chief of "The Conservative" at a salary of way over 5,000 Danish crowns per annum. Father-in-law Hamann sneaks into his cell to patch up affairs between him and Esther. Naturally: the "radical" now receives a pay envelope every Saturday. With the last curtain, Paul and Esther march off ensemble while a messenger brings in a basket of flowers for Paul from Miss Lustig, a lady of the demimonde. Paul will fit into a scheme of imbecile pretense when "$2 \times 2 = 5$".

From first to last it is a charming slice of dramatic life — kindly, sprightly, captivating as a play of wits and reassuring in its teachings. It is one of those plays that will keep the audience in a constant ripple of laughter rather than cause it to alternate between spells of tedium and outbursts of guffaws. There is amusement even in the stage directions: "The action takes place in Copenhagen before the present time; nowadays people are, of course, entirely different." The translation is good.

It is a pity that this cannot be said of the translation of "The Sentry and Other Stories", for this is the first of

Nicolai Semyonovitch Lyeskov to have been done into English. But even so, the titular story I regard as a remarkable portrayal of life in Russia under the Czars, just as the three stories that follow reveal a psychology that is beyond the control of American short story writers as I know them.

Only the other day, Hilaire Belloc brought out a good volume entitled "The Pyrenees". It is intended as a guide and nothing more. Now comes this marvelous "Tale of the Pyrenees" by the late Loti. He who has read them both knows those mountains that separate France from Spain. Pierre Loti has written a love story of infinite charm at the same time that he has given a picture of the Pyreneans that draws the reader on and lifts him up.

Ramuntcho, the hero, illegitimate son of the deserted Franchita, smuggler and tennis champion, would marry Gracieuse, daughter of Dolores, foe of Franchita. During his three years of service with the marines, Dolores thrusts her lovely daughter into the convent in order to save her from Ramuntcho. The plan is a success. Its execution, however, put an abrupt end to a romance such as only a genius of Loti's quality could conceive. It gave him, too, an opportunity to reveal once more his matchless skill in colors. "A Tale of the Pyrenees" is a beautiful one and it has been beautifully translated.

This is not the place to enter into a formal discussion of Professor Bickersteth's "Leopardi". The work is too great for brief comment. For the "writers" of today, however, it contains a lesson of vast import: this translation brings out the basic and tremendous difference between the highest type of academic work, and all other types of work high, higher, and highest. If one of our scribacious champions of the younger generation were to be approached with the request to do a piece of work of this nature he would admit, in the first place, if honest, that he could not do it, and decline to undertake it in the second place, if honest, on the ground that it would entail too much work: 134 big pages of scholarly introduction, 117 pages of excellent metrical translation, 117 pages of Italian text, and 176 pages of erudite and illuminating notes. In the time required to do this piece of sound scholarship, published in a single volume, one of our most gifted youngsters could turn out at least ten volumes!

But oh the immortal glory that attaches to a work like this! Leopardi was the junior of Byron by ten, of Shelley by six, and of Keats by three years. In the year of his birth, 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge published their "Lyrical Ballads". He himself was the greatest Italian poet of his time, and if there have been greater at any time it was due, in a measure, to external and contemporaneous causes. Moreover, Leopardi himself was a philologist of unquestioned repute, and one of the most brilliant translators known to the world since the days of the late Mediæval Humanists. He calls for treatment at once scholarly and sympathetic, thorough without pedantry, complete without repetition. This he has received at the hands of Geoffrey L. Bickersteth. His is literally a "finished" work. So far as the translation of verse is concerned, this is easily the book of the season.

Lyeskov opens his story entitled "The Toupee Artist" with a confession: He confesses that it was "the celebrated American author, Bret

Harte", who called his attention to the fact that there are artists "who work on the dead; they impart to the faces of the deceased various consoling expressions that testify to the more or less happy state of their departed souls."

In this there is infinite suggestiveness: Who would have believed that the Russian Lyeskov, born in 1831, had been influenced by Bret Harte? But so it goes — this interplay of minds, this transfusion of fancy — when and if the translator, the least esteemed of all men who write, is allowed, to say nothing of being encouraged, to ply his humble trade.

Lyeskov remarks that, according to Bret Harte, an artist could give an expression of "calmness", or of "exalted contemplation", or of "the beatitude of the direct intercourse with God". It is even so with the impressions made by foreign writers. There radiates, somehow, an unmistakable calm from Lyeskov despite his social agitation; there is exalted contemplation in Pierre Loti; and there is evidence of direct intercourse with God in Leopardi with all his ill health, passion, distrust, unrest, death — and genius. Indeed even Gustav Wied makes faces over: he makes them appear in their true light. And he does it with a smile that is contagious.

ALLEN W. PORTERFIELD

$2 \times 2 = 5$. A Comedy in Four Acts. By Gustav Wied. Authorized translation by Ernest Boyd and Holger Koppel. Nicholas L. Brown.

The Sentry and Other Stories. By Nicolai Lyeskov. Translated by A. E. Chamot. With an Introduction by Edward Garnett. Alfred A. Knopf.

A Tale of the Pyrenees. By Pierre Loti. Translated from the French by W. P. Baines. Frederick A. Stokes.

The Poems of Leopardi. Edited with Introduction and Notes and a Verse-Translation in the Metres of the Original by Geoffrey L. Bickersteth. The Macmillan Co.