Studying the Classics by means of translations.

THE question of the study of the classics through translations is one which scholars can no longer ignore. It is forced upon them by the educational conditions of an age which imperatively demands the culture of Greek literature but has no room for philological niceties on the programmes of its secondary schools. If Greek scholars will not show the public how to use the translations, the University Extension lecturer and the Hegelian allegorist will, and the last state of the "college fetich" will be worse than the first. In recognition of this demand, Mr. Walter Leaf, favorably known to Homer students as the author of the best edition of the Iliad, has prepared under the title of "A Companion to the Iliad" (Macmillan) a selection of exegetic notes which will enable the English reader to study his "Lang, Leaf, and Myer" with something of the critical attention which the scholar bestows on the original. The notes are mainly devoted to the elucidation of the plot and structure of the Iliad, and illustrations of the life and manners depicted in the Homeric poems. The archæological notes are admirably succinct and simple, and are brought down to date by frequent references to Schuchhardt's Schliemann, Helbig, Miss Agnes Clerke's "Familiar Studies in Homer," and other recent aids. But we think that too much space has been given to the critical discussion of the plot. Matthew Arnold wisely advises the translator of Homer to have nothing to do with the "Homeric question" which has been discussed with learning, with acumen, with genius even, but labors under the insuperable difficulty that there really exist no data for deciding it. This advice may well be extended to the readers of translations of Homer. Mr. Leaf is confident that he can distinguish three "Strata" in the Iliad and demonstrate the conditions under which each was—deposited. But he has not convinced Andrew Lang or the Provost of Oriel, who are quite as good Homerids as himself. He urges that a working theory of the plot will in any case stimulate interest in the study of the poem. This is unfortunately only too true. But it is the wrong kind of interest—an interest like that awakened by reconstructions of Macbeth as a Greek play, for example. It will not help the English reader to a joyous appreciation of the supreme poetic beauty of the Iliad, to the emotional uplifting which Keats, himself a student of translations, felt and compared to the thrill that stirs the watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken. Mr. Leaf, like many other scholars, believes that this cannot be taught, and somewhat inconsistently argues that it is an insult to the reader's intelligence to point out to him beauties which he can discern for himself. But this is a serious error. The majority of us in our unregenerate state, with the natural man's taste for bathos still strong within us, are almost wholly wanting in the sense for distinctive literary beauty. But the development of this sense can be fostered by the right kind of teaching and interpretation of a great classic, as it can be checked and suppressed by the wrong. A companion to the Iliad should omit the Homeric question and fill up the space so gained with poetry.
