A PROPHET OF JOY

By William Lyon Phelps

THE name Gamaliel Bradford is a combination of the Bible and the Pilgrim Fathers—good ancestry on both sides. The original Gamaliel, mentioned repeatedly in the Book of Numbers, was a chief of Manasseh, who was chosen to aid in taking the census in the wilderness; it was from this man that Mr. Bradford inherited his skill in making lists of American Worthies, and putting each in his proper place; the New Testament Gamaliel was a professor famed for his liberal views and human charity, whose influence may be discerned on every page of the present book. As for the Pilgrim Bradford, he would turn over in his grave at the picture of the prayer-meeting in the First Canto; but he bequeathed to our poet a rather unusual combination of learning and wisdom, and the courage that sometimes accompanies convictions.

This is a modern novel told in stanzas, "bright with bewildering audacities of rime", as someone said of "Hudibras". The measure chosen is Ottava Rima, a veritable wheelhorse in narrative poetry, which Byron made to dance like a thoroughbred. Novels are by no means confined to prose; there have been plenty of realistic, romantic, and burlesque novels told in verse; while the greatest living master of the short story in rhyme is John Masefield, every one of whose works you have to read twice, first to see what happens next, second to cull the flowers that fringe the smooth road. Masefield spins blood-and-thunder yarns with the high art that Stevenson spent on pirates.

In "Beppo", "The Vision of Judgment", and "Don Juan", Lord Byron showed the possibilities of Ottava Rima employed in narrative verse filled with surprises of wit, humor, sarcasm and irony, displaying a metrical facility commanded only by a great virtuoso. It would be unjust to compare "A Prophet of Joy" with "Don Juan"—though one cannot help thinking of the comparison—because Byron's technique had the mysterious addition of genius; but we can truthfully say that Mr. Bradford has skill and talent, which cannot be said of most writers. The fairest parallel in contemporary literature is with William Watson's "The Eloping Angels", an imaginative, ironical, burlesque poem written in the same metre. Mr. Bradford, I think, exhibits a command of the measure equal to that of the distinguished Englishman, and has the advantage of dealing with present-day people in present-day surroundings.

To a certain extent, the writer's aim is the same as Byron's, though the poem is quite free from the passages that shocked British sentiment a hundred years ago. When Byron had the first canto of "Don Juan" ready, he

wrote to John Murray: "I have finished the first Canto (a long one, of about one hundred and eighty octaves) of a poem in the style and manner of 'Beppo', encouraged by the good success of the same. It is called 'Don Juan', and is meant to be a little quietly facetious upon every thing."

"A Prophet of Joy" is divided into six books, averaging about one hundred stanzas for the first five, with sixty in the last. The hero's name is Smith, and the shock is strengthened by his first name, Percival. This anti-climax in names perhaps symbolizes the purposeful mixture of fancy and fact. Anyhow, the author delights in beginning the names of his characters with a flourish, and ending them with a jolt, bringing the reader up rudely, and possibly indicating also the rebellion of romance against actuality. For while parents cannot very well help the family names of their children, their sentimental yearnings are often shown—are they not?—in the Christian names they bestow. In this poem we have Theodora Perkins, Matthew Morgan, Aurelia McGoggin, Ezekiel Waters, Cecilia Braybrooke, Peter Scrimp.

Theodora is a charming and wealthy spinster of thirty-five, Matthew Morgan is a newspaper reporter, Aurelia is a blazing movie-star, Ezekiel is an anarchist agitator, Cecilia a young, sophisticated, somewhat artificial beauty, and Peter a cynical Wall Street magnate. In the last book we have a strife between two uncompromizing enemies, Scrimp and Waters—a scene reminding one of Galsworthy's famous play. Here as there, nothing is gained by the strife, but in the midst of it Percival Smith is killed by an automatic—the obvious lesson being that joy cannot live in strife, or, as Aurelia sums it all up in the last stanza,—

"Yet what he taught shall not be lost; for I
Will take the burden up, though far unfit.
His death has shown me violence must die,
Its hideous, tortured strength at last unknit.
The sullen hordes of greed and wrath must fly
And joy's pure torch shall at his heart be lit.
So love will make him live on earth again,
Star of immortal hope to mortal men."

The story is so interesting that one follows it eagerly for its own sake. We are taken to city and country, to scenes of revel and feasting, to Bolshevist gatherings, to picnics, to public restaurants, to a Christian Science church, to movie shows, to card games—but in all times, places, and gatherings, and no matter with what companions, whether with the unctuous Reverend James Nichols, or with the lively Widow McIvor, the Prophet of Joy is always the same—for the point is that he carries the essence of happiness in his own heart. He is like Donatello, human and yet more than human, who visits the earth as a meteor visits the sky.

Happiness is more than pleasure, for pleasure is an excitement; happiness is a state of mind. Thus, while all the other characters in the poem look upon Percival Smith as a crank, he is meant to be the only one who is truly sane. To them he seems eccentric, but to him they appear either futile or mad, in their rage over politics, money, social gossip, and games. Yet there is nothing irritating about him; he is not Pollyanna.

His actual quality is best described in the stanzas where Theodora's sentiments toward him are analyzed:

Did Theodora love the prophet then?
She never would herself have used the word,
Or owned the love that women feel for men.
In fact, she would have called it quite absurd.
You do not love a wandering sunbeam, when
It comforts all your life, or love a bird

Which in a summer morning sings away
The plague and discontent of yesterday.

The sprightliness and gayety of the whole poem make it seem as though it were purely spontaneous, so fresh and strong and bubbling is the current; yet I dare say the ingenuity of the rhymes is the fruit of much cogitation and correction. The frequent feminine and double rhymes put a ripple in the verse that is particularly charming.

What fun the author must have had composing all this! He has not only worked with his subject, he has played with it. He keeps up his own and the reader's courage, sometimes by whistling. It is one of the most original contributions to literature that I have seen, and I know nothing in American literature which it resembles. And it is written in the American, not the English language—witness the words that rhyme with "been", and "cemetery".

The book is beautifully printed, on dull paper with clear type, the volume being so light in weight that it is a pleasure to hold it in the hand.

A Prophet of Joy. By Gamaliel Bradford. Houghton Mifflin Co.