

THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

"ULUG BEG"

Reviewed by Gamaliel Bradford

"AUTOLYCUS" has done a big, strong piece of work, worthy to be remembered, and the easy, self contented, frivolous piping of a horde of petty songsters is swept into insignificance by the rude, crude, substantial humanity of this wayward epic.

Let me get rid of a few minor defects, before I expand upon the ample, admirable merits. To begin with, the poem is oriental. To some readers this may not be a defect. Personally I detest the Orient, whether Burton's or Kipling's or "Autolycus's", with its tinsel, its filth, its lechery, its lies. All the same, it is the region of tales *par excellence* and "Ulug Beg" is a tale, and an absorbing one—rough, vigorous, dirty, with a dazzling profusion of incident, but with a constant hurry and change which keep the reader breathless, and always with an anxious query as to what may be coming next. Another weakness lies in the personality of the hero. This is of course deliberate. It was the author's intention to get a profound depth of comic effect by taking a perfectly commonplace figure and having him swept into prominence and eminence by the mere masterful power of events and the dominant control of stronger minds who yet were obliged, through the strange working of fate, to subject their larger destinies to his. The result is no doubt picturesque and

impressive; but a commonplace hero is, after all, a danger, and one gets at times from the bewildering whirl something of the suggestion of a tornado with a vacuum in the centre. Also, there appears to me to be unnecessary harshness in the execution. Comic sweep and a dashing gallop in your lines are all very well. Yet in a narrative poem, above all others, a verse should read itself, should not require reperusal; and too many of these verses require to be gone over twice, or even thrice, before one catches the swing the author meant to impart to them.

But this point of form brings us right to one of the many excellences. For telling his story "Autolycus" has resuscitated the octave stanza from a long and undeserved oblivion. As is well known, this is the standard medium of almost all the narrative poetry of the Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese literatures, and the dazzling octaves of Ariosto take full advantage of the rhyming facilities of his mother tongue. The seventeenth century English poets used the ottava rima to some extent, and both Keats and Shelley employed it delightfully. Then Byron, following Frere, turned to it as the vehicle for telling a vast comic story in the scintillating cantos of "Don Juan", and since that time it has been regarded as so completely Byronic property that few poets have cared to meddle with it. For serious

purposes there is no doubt that such a complicated rhyme form is distracting and disintegrating, and even the genius of Tasso and Camoens was not adequate to telling heroic legends in it with entire success. But for a somewhat rambling, gay, picturesque, highly colored comic narrative, the octave is absolutely unequalled. The rhyme may be made so piquant, varied, and diverting. The final couplet gives such a delightful opportunity for epigram that smacks and lashes like the snap of a whip. The whole movement is so sinuous, so supple, so elaborate, yet so swift and easy to follow. The light dancing stanzas involve and enfold passion and thought and laughter with a garment of grace and gaiety which is endlessly alluring and which, just as you feel that it is about to grow monotonous, develops new resources of variety and ease. Of almost all these resources the author of "Ulug Beg" is splendidly master. The charm of dainty and sinuous grace, as one finds it for instance in Shelley's exquisite "Hymn to Mercury", is perhaps a little lacking. The rough lines I above alluded to are a symptom of this. But the speed of the octave, its sinewy force, its endless possibility of adaptation to any theme, its richness of surprise, all these "Autolycus" has at his command, and he uses them with lavish facility and skill.

The matter of the poem is as rich and varied as the form. I have said the story is oriental. So it is, and I wish it were not. But, after all, humanity is a good deal the same in the Orient as elsewhere. "Autolycus" is perfectly aware of this, and perhaps he bothers himself with Achmets and Zuleikas and Golubyofs merely that he may laugh at the dwellers on Main Street with more security. At

any rate, it is evident that when his turbaned personages quarrel and fight and swear and sin and love and hate, he feels that they are doing exactly what the men and women and children who are about him daily are doing in the same monstrous, tempestuous, commonplace way, and with the same futile result. And the angle from which he chooses to survey it all is the comic angle. Either point of view is possible enough, God knows. You may enter into the passion and the horror of men's struggles till your heart is torn to bits. Or you may stand aside and smile at the vast insignificance of it all under the aspect of eternity. There is always the old saying of Horace Walpole: "The world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel." "Autolycus" prefers to confine himself, or to have us believe that he confines himself, to the thinking aspect of the matter, to rank himself with those who have interpreted the universe in terms of laughter rather than of tears. And he can point to a magnificent company behind him: Aristophanes, Plautus, Rabelais, Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, and certainly a large element of Shakespeare. Only, the comparison with the attitude of Sterne or Shakespeare shows most a certain weakness in the attitude of "Autolycus". His comedy is too bitter, has too much the flavor of satire about it. No one could smile more deeply or more subtly at the follies of men than Shakespeare or Cervantes did; yet the smile always has tenderness at the back of it, always has a large quality of radiance, of sunshine, which dissolves acidity and drives cruelty away.

But I feel sure that another ten years will develop this richness of sunshine in the work of "Autolycus",

and above all I hope that he will transfer his keen observation, his broad understanding of the human heart, and his glittering octaves from that disgusting Orient right to the United States, to New York or Illinois or California. Never, never was a richer or more fertile world waiting, crying out for treatment by a great comic spirit, than here about us today. The vagaries of our politics, the freaks of our religion, the desperate, commendable gestures of our would be philanthropists, the pranks of money, the frolics of sport, the audacities of journalism, all demand interpretation, not by the slow triviality of a realistic novelist, but by the quick, light, eager touch of one who has the full command of the tinkling lyre of laughter. Above all, there is the American woman. The world has never imagined anything like her, because the world has never before dreamed of giving woman any such opportunity

to make herself conspicuous, or ridiculous, and always interesting. And woman is the natural property of the comic poet. Ah, let "Autolycus" leave his Yasmeens and Zuleikas and come over here and make his octaves sparkle with flappers and philanthropists and politicians and shopgirls and all the other gay birds that flaunt and glitter through the hundred cities of this strange, complicated, roaring, rushing, fascinating aggregation of States.

Only let him sign "Touchstone" or "Feste", instead of "Autolycus", for there is more of the Shakespearian sunshine in "As You Like It" than in "A Winter's Tale". Perhaps, indeed, like the other obsessed fanatics, we may peep under the Shakespearian signature altogether and detect or decipher a little bit of Bacon.

Ulug Beg, An Epic Poem, Comic in Intention, in VII Cantos. By "Autolycus".
Alfred A. Knopf.