In India Too There Lived An Uncle Remus

Ancient Tales of the Panchatantra Now Appear in English

THE PANCHATANTRA. Translated from the Sanskrit, by Arthur W. Ryder: The University of Chicago Press. 1925. $4.
GOLD'S GLOOM. Tales From the Panchatantra. $2.

By CHARLES JOHNSTON

LET us imagine the personages of Uncle Remus confirmed anthologists. We should have some such result as this:

"Ho!' on dar, Brer Rabbit," sez Brer Fox, sezee.

While the ploughman, near at hand,
Whistles o'er the furrow'd land,
And the milkmaid singeth blithe,
And the mower whets his scythe.

"I ain't got time, Brer Fox," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, sorter mendin' his licks:

Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back,
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid. . . . .

"I wanter have some confab wid you, Brer Rabbit," sez Brer Fox, sezee:

My never-failing friends are they,
With whom I converse day by day.
With them I take delight in weal
And seek relief in woe. . . .

All right, Brer Fox, but you better holler fum whar you stan':

Absence, hear thou this protestation
Against thy strength,
Distance and length. . . .

Let us further take the liberty of imagining Miss Sally's little boy as odd, perverse and splenetic as dog distraught, or monkey sick; and that the purpose of the benign old darky is not entertainment only but edification: to make of the little boy a gentleman, a scholar and something of a statesman. Further, let us think of the doings of the critters ranged in five groups illustrating large moral issues. Then we shall have a Panchatantra of the land of cotton. Some two millenniums back, or more, in the realm we call the Deccan, dwelt a king, Immortal-Power. The king had three sons. They were supreme blockheads. The king bethought him:

Of sons unborn, or dead, or fools,
Unborn or dead will do:
They cause a little grief, no doubt:
But fools, a long life through.

Some means must therefore be devised to awaken their intelligence.

One of the king's counselors said: "There is a Brahman here named Vishnusharman, with a reputation for competence in numerous sciences. Entrust the princes to him. He will certainly make them intelligent in a twinkling."

Vishnusharman had already divined, it seems, two millienniums back, or more, the principle which Signora Maria Montessori calls "L'autoeducazione"; he determined to apply education in relation to the imagination of the little child, or in the present case, little children, the three youthful blockheads aforesaid. So he took the boys and went home and set forth for them these five groups of tales. In six months' time their intelligence was awakened.

Whether by the Brahman Vishnusharman or another, the book of the Five Garlands of Fable came to be written down. For centuries it wrought its edifying work. Then, perhaps a thousand years ago, a certain Narayana read the book and fell in love with it. He liked it so well, indeed, that he rewrote it.

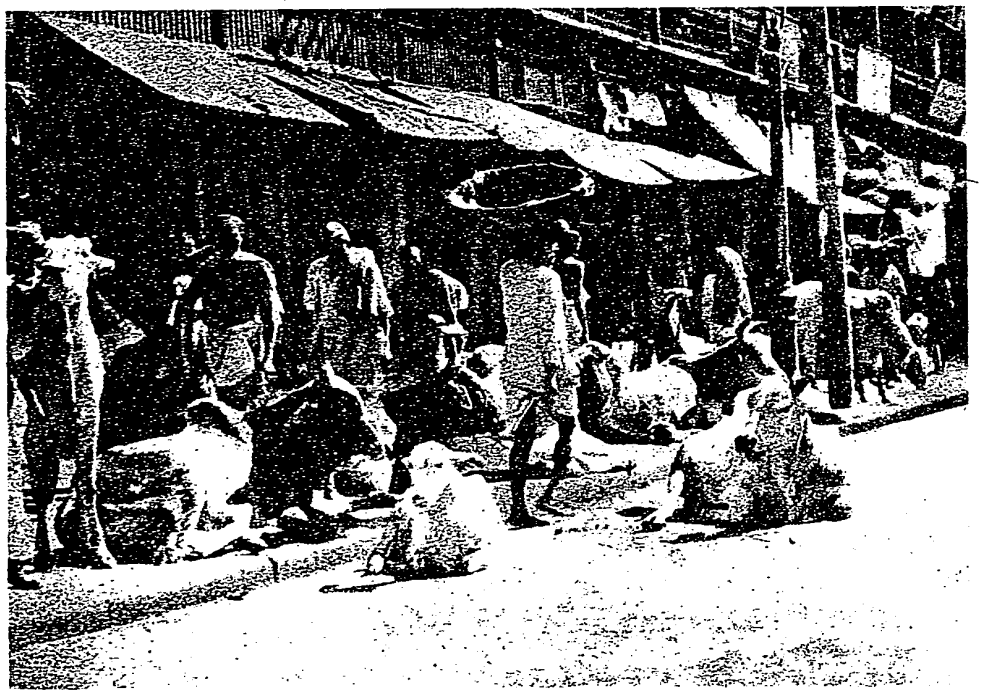
In much the same way Shakespeare the player adopted his friend Thomas Lodge's tale, "Rosalynde," and turned it into a poetical drama. In somewhat the same way Dryden and Pope undertook to rewrite some of the Canterbury Tales. Lodge's story is remembered only because his friend adopted it. The versions of Chaucer are neglected for the great original. In the Orient both versions have survived.

Narayana called his book "Hitopadesha, Friendly Instruction." He reshaped the Panchatantra, improved the architecture and added tales of his own, as that of the decrepit tiger, bereft of teeth and claws, who beguiled the traveler into the swamp by quoting hallowed sentences of the Bhagavad Gita. The end comes swiftly: the traveler, meditating on the false appearance of sanctity, was by the tiger slain and consumed.

When the gentlemen of the East India Company were discovering Sanskrit for the Western world, the version of Narayana held the field. Sir William Jones came upon it, and "in an elegant discourse delivered by him the 26th of February, 1786," announced his discovery to the world. Charles Wilkins, who made the earliest English version of the Bhagavad Gita, brought a manuscript of the Hitopadesha with him to England, translated it "during a temporary residence at Bath" and published it in November, 1787. The book became a favorite. It was printed in Sanskrit at Calcutta; it was printed again, with some revision, in London, in the year 1810, the first Sanskrit book printed in Europe. The purpose was to provide a manual for the young gentlemen of Haileybury College, who were preparing themselves to govern India. It has enlightened them ever since. Other English versions followed, including one by Edwin Arnold, in 1861, and the "Book of Good Counsels," as he called it, became a classic.

But, for all this modern vogue, the original author had stolen a march on Narayana; nay, a series of marches. In the words of the learned Fraser, quoted by Wilkins,

> about the time of Mahommed's birth, or the latter end of the sixth century, Noishervan the Just, who then reigned in Persia, discovered a great inclination to see that book; for which purpose one Burzuvia, a physician, who had a surprising talent in learning several languages, particularly the Sanskrit, was introduced to him as the properest person to be employed to get a copy thereof. He went to India, where, after some years' stay and great trouble, he procured it. It was translated into the Pehluvi language by him and Buzrjumehr, the Vizier. Noishervan ever after, and all his successors, the Persian Kings, held this book in high esteem, and took the greatest care to keep it secret. At last Abu Jaffer Mansour zu Nikky, who was the second Khaliff of the Abassi reign, by great search got a copy thereof in the Pehluvi language, and ordered Iman Hossan Abdal Mokaffa, who was the most learned of the age, to translate it into Arabic. This Prince ever after made it his guide, and not only in affairs of the Government, but in private life also.



Sacred Cows in a Street in India.

From "Pageants of the Seven Seas; a Pictorial of World Travel." Assembled and Arranged by Clarence L. Welsh.

This was the beginning. The book was launched. Thereafter it was rendered into Syriac and Hebrew, Greek and Latin and the modern Romance, Slavonic and Teutonic tongues. Sir Thomas North, to whose Plutarch Shakespeare is under obligations, turned it from Italian into English. No early book except the Bible was translated into so many idioms.

It was also rendered into the modern tongues of India, both those akin to Sanskrit and the Dravidian languages, like Tamil, Telugu and Kanarese. From these last the Abbé Dubois turned it into French in 1826, nearly forty years after the Hitopadesha had been translated into English.

The Panchatantra was beginning to catch up. A year later, in 1827, H. H. Wilson published an account of it, "illustrated with occasional translations" directly from the Sanskrit text. This text was printed at Bonn in 1848 and at Leipsic in 1859.

Of recent years the Panchatantra has been adopted by America. An edition of the Sanskrit text was printed in the Harvard Oriental Series in 1915. In 1919 William Norman Brown published at New Haven a scholarly study, "The Panchatantra in Modern Indian Folklore," showing that these wise and witty tales have found their way even to the hearts of such aboriginal tribes as the Santalis, who have excellent stories of their own. In 1924 Franklin Edgerton, Assistant Professor of Sanskrit in the University of Pennsylvania, gave the world his able and profound study, "The Panchatantra Reconstructed." The sum of his essay is that "the original Panchatantra turns out to have been a finer work, artistically, than any of its descendants."

And now we have Arthur Ryder's close, yet flexible, translation, following the alternating prose and verse of the original, which brings the University of Chicago also under the ancient spell. From this latest and most faithful version, fitting successor of the work of Burzuvia the physician, the chips and sawdust have been carefully dusted, but much muscle and sinew went into the work, especially, doubtless, into the translation of the verses, where Mr. Ryder has imposed on himself the added handicap of rhyme. Thus one of the Jackals says:

In sensuous coil
And heartless toil,
In sinuous course
And armored force,
In savage harms
That yield to charms
In all these things
Are snakes like kings.

Uneven, rough,
And high enough—
Yet low folk roam
Their flanks as home,
And wild things haunt
Them, hungry, gaunt—
In all these things
Are hills like kings.

Both skill and determination go to the making of verse like this.

In the shorter book, "Gold's Gloom," Mr. Ryder has followed in the steps of Narayana; he has taken the Panchatantra and rearranged it to suit himself, having in view a version for children. The selections of fables for this lesser work is good, but the architecture of the original has disappeared.

Mr. Ryder has done more than give us a close yet fluent version of the Sanskrit text. He has added, in the Translator's Introduction, an admirable view of Vishnusharman's philosophy of conduct; a brief and luminous study of the book as a Niti Shastra; what Sir William Jones calls a System of Ethics. Mr. Ryder has happily fallen into Vishnusharman's mode, illustrating each point of ethics with an appropriate verse, taken from the original. His summary is, "the harmonious development of the powers of man, a life in which security, prosperity, resolute action, friendship and good learning are so combined as to produce joy. It is a noble ideal, shaming many tawdry ambitions, many vulgar catchwords of our day."

So the Panchatantra has gone full circle. Noting that the translator writes from Berkeley, one may suggest for his book this epigraph:

Facing west from California's shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity, the land of migration, look afar.
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled;
For starting westward from Hindustan, from the Vale of Kashmere,
From Asia, from the north, from the God, the sage, and the hero,
From the south, from the flowery peninsulas and the Spice Islands.
Long having wander'd since, round the world having wander'd,
Now I face home again, very pleased and joyous,
(But where is what I started for so long ago,
And why is it yet unfound?)